

Seditious Whispers

This is all her fault! The thought echoed in his mind. Make her pay. She's a manipulative worm. A mere woman. Not worth anything. Keeping things from you. Your rightful property. The buzzing subsided somewhat. Focused on his paperwork, the sheriff tried to ignore the white noise in his skull. He found himself talking out loud conversationally to the spear that sat alone in its corner.

“I’ll make her pay, alright,” he told it. “She won’t get you back either. You’re mine now.” The sheriff laughed and shook his pen at the inanimate object.

Sheriff Wilson imagined it laughing. *Good. She doesn’t deserve the power here.*

“Power alright. I’ve got the power, and she’s in a cell,” Sheriff Wilson replied to his imaginary friend, the spear.

The buzzing grew louder again so that he clamped his hands over both of his ears at the volume of inaudible static that no one could hear but him. *There’s so much MORE!* The voice practically roared.

Creeping fear rose in his gut. The sheriff looked at the spear with watering eyes. Insidious, seditious, and corrupt, it continued to speak to him. *You can have, can be so much more, it wheedled. Wealth beyond your wildest dreams. Control. Admiration. Control armies. Be a God!*

“What ARE you?” he whispered back. He slowly stood up behind his desk. His eyes were wide. He found himself shaking.

The means to an end. World domination. Together we will kill man, gods, and beasts of the earth. In his mind’s eye, he saw fields running with blood as swords and maces rose and fell. Horses lay crippled and bellowing. Camels were cut to pieces by missiles. Atomic bombs fell, and people everywhere burned. Even giants walked the battlefield, and they died with the rest. The smoke scorched his nostrils, and he saw himself walking untouched with the spear held high in his hand. *Victorious,* the voice said and went silent.

Sheriff Wilson tasted bile. He struggled not to heave with sickness at the sight of so much blood and viscera. “It’s all in my head!” he said desperately. “It’s not real! No! I don’t want any of this! I just want to retire rich where nobody is going to bother me. Leave me alone. LEAVE ME ALONE!” he practically sobbed.

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SPEAR
OF
DESTINY

-*FINDING BUCEPHALUS*-
Inspired by a True Story

Annals of Aeturnum
Book 2

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Credits:

Thank you from the bottom of my heart to those who helped make the publication of this book possible. I did not do it alone.

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Kenneth DeVault

Dedication:

This book is dedicated to Ken and all the original Shadow Angels who inspired the story in its beginning. The secrets we kept. You guys rock!

Also dedicated to my daughter Jade and my son Marcus. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you can't.

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INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY LESSON

ALEXANDER OF MACEDONIA (ALEXANDER THE GREAT) AND HIS WARHORSE BUCEPHALUS



Alexander (The Great) of Macedonia was a Greek/Macedonian king born on or about July 20, 356 B.C. The day of his birth was, in fact, the same day that the famed Temple of Artemis at Ephesus burned.

Alexander ruled Macedonia for about 13 years. He ruled Egypt as Pharaoh for nine years, as King of Asia for eight years, and King of Persia (modern Iraq) for seven years. He died on June 10/11, 323 B.C., at age 32 in Alexandria, Babylonia, of a sudden fever.

King Alexander received tutoring from the Greek philosopher Aristotle and was highly educated. The young king firmly established Greek rule throughout the territories he conquered. Alexander did not see the results in his lifetime. However, his influence ushered in an age of enlightenment that still lingers today in the region through the religious and cultural heritage of its various tribal people.

Later, envious Romans set their sights on Alexander's conquests. Some thought so highly of him that they affected mannerisms and dress to emulate the Macedonian King. Some sources believe that Caligula even went so far as to rob Alexander's grave to wear his breastplate.

Alexander ascended the throne of Macedonia at about the age of 20 when his father, Phillip, was assassinated. Alexander then cut a swath across the landscape that united civilized and tribal areas. He took Egypt and Libya to the south. Macedonian forces claimed all lands surrounding the eastern Mediterranean Sea, then further east into Assyria, Babylonia/Persia (Iran/Iraq) before Alexander cut north as far as Bactria (the southern nomadic steppe country of Russia). Lastly, Alexander and his men pushed southeast into lands covering present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. His military tactics are still studied in modern warfare because King Alexander of Macedonia is one of history's most successful military commanders and administrators.

As a young man, he showed a fondness for intellectual and scientific pursuits. He studied the medical arts. In addition, he

supported the performing arts and music and was known to enjoy running, hunting and cudgel-play.

Early in his life, Alexander was said to have temperance of the body and moderation. He was also said to be addicted to drinking, quick to anger, and was ruthless to his enemies although generous in victory. Later in life, the king became more prone to excess. However, according to the historian Plutarch, Alexander never settled for the mere enjoyment of wealth and luxury but instead preferred action and glory rather than to have an inactive life.

The young king was a brilliant tactician with the ability to think on his feet and a habit of repeatedly snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. However, Alexander's success in battle was greatly attributed to his warhorse Bucephalus. Alexander loved the horse more than any man or woman, and the big stallion was Alexander's best friend. However, as ruthless as Alexander was known to be, Bucephalus was hated by everyone. The horse was vicious and unpredictable, known not only for his ability to be Alexander's extra weapon in battle, kicking and biting enemy soldiers to death, he was also dangerous to his handlers. Bucephalus was known to kill careless grooms or anyone except Alexander, who came too close. Even Alexander's warriors were terrified of him, and some called him a 'demon horse' and 'man-eater.' Guards were posted on Bucephalus at all times, not only to protect the horse but to protect anyone who came near.

Bucephalus was said to be very beautiful. He was taller than other Macedonian horses. He was also well built, with a large head and bloodlines of the very best mix of Thessalian racing stock and Oriental (Arabian) horses. These were originally gifted to the Macedonians by King Xerxes to improve their racehorses. In color, he was black with a red cast to his coat (probably a black bay judging from frescoes) with a large white star. Like Alexander himself, Bucephalus had one blue eye and one brown eye.

There is some disagreement as to why Alexander called him Bucephalus (Bukefal, in Macedonian), which means 'ox-head.' Some writers think it was his stubborn nature. Still, others think it was descriptive of his head shape (likely due to Arabian breeding) and large white face mark or perhaps the breeder's ox-shaped brand, which identified his breeding origin.

The horse's legend grew with his successes. For 16 years, Bucephalus faithfully carried Alexander through battle after battle from Macedonia to India. According to most historical accounts, the horse fought in numerous campaigns and eventually died of old

Spear of Destiny

age and battle wounds at age 30. Alexander would re-mount his soldiers on fresh horses when urgency and speed were required but keep Bucephalus for his superior speed, stamina, and fighting ability. They once went 400 miles in 11 days in rugged, difficult terrain with a hard-running battle at the end of the journey (The Anabasis of Alexander by Arrian). It's no wonder that Bucephalus gained a reputation for being unnatural!

Within this book, I chose seldom-revealed portions of the history of Alexander and his horse to tell. I decided, as Plutarch did, to focus on the character of Alexander and Bucephalus. This method is to explain the nature of their bond. I believe this to be more fun for the reader than a dry conversation about their battles and exploits. It puts actual history in the context of the people who were there.

How did they feel, what did they think, what made them tick? What relevance do they have now, and what can they teach us today? While history is truly in the past, it makes us who we are. It keeps humanity's success and failures alive in our memory for new times and new lives.

This book is OUR story from historical accounts and as I remember it.

1

THE SUMMERLAND

355 BC EARTH TIME, ASTRAL
PLANE:

The sun shone brilliantly white across the varied and bejeweled landscape below the flier. Isa's wings held firm on the rising thermal despite her single missing primary feather. She circled lazily, enjoying the peace and the beauty around her.

If she were to look up, she would have seen countless points of light as if they were stars visible in the daytime, gates to other worlds, with numerous peoples dotting the skies over the Summerland. Here all touched and merged into one eternal realm. The wind shifted and carried her swiftly. Her thoughts turned from lazy contemplation to focus on her search for one single soul in the vast universe.

The view changed suddenly. Isa soared over an empty gray, barren landscape with her wings spread to the maximum for speed. A sour taste lingered in the back of her throat. The new terrain represented all that remained of a dead land, its inhabitants gone. Its Watcher angel was fallen and imprisoned. She knew her quarry would not be there since her best friend and sister-in-spirit liked the dead place even less than Isa. Long ago in other lifetimes, it had been Khebechet's homeland.

"A pity," Isa whispered in the stillness. She continued toward a riot of color on the horizon, eager to cross the remnant of the lost world of man. Her speed soon brought her to the new area.

The touch of each of the living realms here was much more welcoming. Relief filled Isa as she inhaled the sweet scent of the

Summerland rising from the living world below. Tantalizing aromas of fresh pine, cedar, and catmint permeated the air. This area was rich in blue, green, red, and purple. The purple color below led Isa to cross the dead space to gain height over Dionysus' lake of wine.

Isa ignored the nearby pearl white and gold city in the clouds in favor of raking her gaze around the edges of the lake. She could see the eels from above for which she sometimes flew low and tried to snare without getting purple stains on her white-gold wings.

Another thermal over the lake sent her spiraling upwards. Isa knew Khebechet, daughter of Anubis, liked to lurk in the taller vegetation growing around the lake in this part of the Summerland realm.

Her gaze sharpened on movement below. "Aha! Gotcha!" Isa grinned. Suddenly the flier banked her wings and plunged headfirst toward what she couldn't fully see but knew was there. The angel's long blue-black hair blew back over her shoulders, and satisfaction lit her dark brown, gold-flecked eyes. Isa laughed at the squeal below as Khebechet saw that she was discovered too late.

"Wait! Wait! Wait! I was going to make it grow back!" Khebechet protested as Isa rose with powerful wing beats while firmly carrying her prey. Khebechet started in desert cat form and tried shifting to a dragon in Isa's clutches, but before Khebechet's wings could manifest, Isa unceremoniously dumped her in the lake of wine.

Luminous green eyes were the last thing Isa saw of her sister before she submerged. Laughing, Isa dodged the purple splatters and clapped her hands as Khebechet rose to the surface, sputtering and spitting wine.

"You! Ugh! Ewww!"

The sight of a disgruntled dragon clumsily climbing out of the lake with wings dripping rivulets of wine made Isa laugh even harder. "I told you what I was going to do the last time you tried to pounce me for a feather!" Isa told her, giggling. "You can't say I didn't warn you."

The dragon glared at her and blew a puff of smoke in her direction. "Don't you dare breathe fire at *me!*" Isa glared back. "You asked for it!" She lifted her wing to show the missing primary.

Khebechet shifted to a humanoid form. "But now I'm PUCE!" she protested. "Do you have any idea how long it takes the stains to fade?"

"Yes, and you're not puce. It's purple!" Isa pointed out.

"Puce!" Khebechet objected.

"Purple!" Isa insisted, "I'm sure the color will suit you for a long, long, long time. Purple is a great color for a goddess after all." Isa dodged as Khebechet flung purple droplets as far as she could after her friend. "It's better than green!" Isa laughed and took to the skies while her friend glared after her.

"I needed that feather!" Khebechet shouted at her sister's disappearing form. For a moment, the daughter of Anubis thought about shifting back into a winged shape to follow, but instead, she settled for rolling in the grass. Not much of the stain came off. She only managed to dry her fur or skin variously. She knew that she would be stuck with it for months. Snorting, she muttered, "See if I make something for you then."

Sorrow gripped her as she remembered her sister's impending departure. She did not think Isa was yet aware of it. "Perhaps I should give her my going away gift anyway. It's going to be a while before we see each other again," Khebechet said aloud.

When Anubis' daughter was somewhat dry, she retrieved the project she had been working on before Isa found her by the lakeside. She'd thought she would have enough time to sing her work to completion before being discovered, though this particular gift was not for Isa. One of Isa's magic feathers was perfect for Khebechet's purpose. With satisfaction, she caressed the feather and hummed, imbuing the last bit of magic into it that it needed. Khebechet wrapped it in a broad, green leaf for protection and bound it with magic and thread.

Going to the edge of the lake Khebechet gently slid her claws through the fabric of reality and encouraged a Gate to form. When she stepped through, the Gate closed behind her and disappeared. On the other end of her destination, she emerged in the outer chamber of her sire's temple.

Anubis was bent over a table examining a stack of maps. Although he had not yet acknowledged her presence, Khebechet knew he'd noted her entrance. Quietly she padded past him to another figure in the room who muttered with dismay over a massive shelf of books and inscribed clay tablets.

"Tehuti... Thoth?" Khebechet said behind him anxiously. "I brought you a present."

Thoth's feathers rose along the back of his neck, and his beak opened in surprise when he turned and saw her disheveled state. "Oh, my," was all he could choke out at first. He blinked at her,

turning his head first to one side and then the other. “You are purple,” he observed. “How is this a gift to me? Will it right the bound tomes you turned around and upside down that I still must right?”

“Um. Well... No,” Khebechet stammered. “But, I brought you something to make up for it.” She avoided dripping wine on what she held. She then carefully presented the packet, which came unwrapped over her hand with a light touch. The crystalline writing quill caught the light and glowed softly white and gold.

“It will write what you wish it to in the Akashic Record without you touching it,” Khebechet said with a sheepish smile when Thoth took her gift. “It was the best apology I could think of.”

“My thanks,” Thoth told her as he grasped another book, slid it out, flipped the writing in it over, then placed it back. “I do suppose this is not as bad as when you tangled Fate’s loom,” Thoth scolded. “Skuld will never likely allow you near her loom again, and it’s not looking good for you accessing my library either.”

“I was bored,” Khebechet said defensively. She shrank under Thoth’s stern look. Given that he was mainly in bird form, his withering gaze was effective. “I like string... and books,” she trailed off.

“And, what apology do you owe Isa for taking one of her feathers?” Anubis’ commanding voice was tinged with amusement. “Or shall I take it this is why you appear here dripping purple on my floor?”

“She got me back,” Khebechet admitted. “It’s not purple. It’s puce,” she grumped.

“Well then, I shall count the score even,” Anubis said dryly.

“Can you get this stuff off me, milord father?” Khebechet asked.

“Considering that the retaliation was earned? I deem it a fitting consequence,” Anubis told her. “We do not suspend the rules of karma, even for you.”

“This is not the way I prefer to drink my wine,” Khebechet grumbled plaintively. “Besides, Blue Shadowflower wine tastes much better.”

Anubis turned back to the table of maps. “Perhaps we could get to the matter at hand if you are finished playing, my daughter?” he inquired.

“Here, here, and here,” Anubis tapped a clawed finger on the map in each location. “Tears are occurring in the Astral Veil from demonic activity. After we finish here, I want you to go to these places and heal these rifts,” he told her. “Incursions have occurred

in two of these places. You will need to hunt down the daemoni responsible. The astral paths must stay open and safe for the mortal dreamers who cross realms.”

“Ahyi, my lord father,” Khebechet said formally. “It has been some time since I have gone hunting. This task I shall complete for you.”

“Make it done,” Anubis replied. “But first, we have another matter to attend. Bring me the Lethe if you would.”

Khebechet heaved a sigh. “It is time then, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Anubis said simply. He turned around, walked two steps, and looked up with his head tilted as if he were listening and looking for something. He reached his hand out and gently touched something invisible in midair. “Come, my Priestess.”

“I am going to miss her,” Khebechet told him sadly.

“I will watch over her, even though I cannot make things any more pleasant for her. Athena and Zeus have also, before the Upper Court of the Lord God our Elohim, agreed to watch over them while they are on the business of Greece and Macedonia,” Anubis assured his daughter. “As Seer, you are strong in your gifts but do not reveal her path. She must live her life as she wills. The world needs her strength for what is ahead, and Ha-Set will need her by his side. She is a warrior who will give her last breath for him. They will both do their duty.”

“At least they can be together,” Khebechet whispered. Her eyes were downcast. “Though this does not fulfill my promise to Ha-Set.” Khebechet looked up into Anubis’ gold eyes. “All I have told Isa is that she will live her next incarnation as a horse. I have said nothing more. She will fly with wings on her feet and have a new name.”

“Well enough.” Anubis nodded. Khebechet left to retrieve the cup of forgetting water for the lord of the dead.

355 BC, EARTH TIME, TEMPLE OF ANUBIS IN THE SUMMERLAND

When the summons came, Isa was interrupted as she collected crystalline water droplets in a lazy fly-by past the city in the clouds. The beautiful music of a winged harper had captured her attention briefly, but at the summons, she launched herself upwards, saluting with her wings in thanks. The other angel

waved, smiling in response. By the time Isa reached Anubis' temple, her feathers, and brief garments were mostly dried. She stopped in the courtyard and mantled her wings to shake them of any remaining wetness. She folded them and entered the vast temple complex.

The Temple of Anubis was deceptively humble to an observer, but the temple's interior opened up into a massive space. It was all angles. The floors, ceiling, and walls revealed the appearance of the sky outside at night. The floors and columns were black but reflected light. Braziers burned on other columns that were half height. With plenty of light, yet no light, it gave the impression of walking within space itself with millions of brilliant stars all around.

Isa felt small entering the vastness of its halls yet eager to meet with her Netjer. Anubis, lord of the dead, patron of warriors and shamans, protector of all roads leading to Heaven, scourge of the Abyss, principle of protection, and the weigher of hearts, waited for her. He marked her passage into the center of his sacred space.

Isa's heart was full of hope. Had there been a change? Was something finally happening that Lord Set, first protector of the Light, patron of warriors, would change his mind and allow her to be with her soul-bonded finally? Up until now, Set had been unyielding, which greatly saddened and frustrated Isa. She could not understand Ha-Set's choice to push her away cruelly. It was almost as if he considered their separation somehow her fault.

Anubis would only tell her that his brother Set would not bend regarding his most elite warrior and what was a necessity for his 'own.' It was not time yet for her to understand, they said. Even her tearful appeal to Bast resulted in a gentle admonishment to be patient. She knew that Khebechet's primary reason for constantly teasing her was to take Isa's mind from the feeling that half her heart was ripped away.

Isa quickened her step. The door to her final destination glowed silver as if it were a gate to the beyond.

"My Lord, you wished to see me?" She stopped just outside the door.

"Indeed. We must discuss the matter of your return to Earth. There are changes afoot, and you are needed," Anubis' voice rumbled forth from past the door.

"Am I called to Khemet?" Isa's tall, athletic feminine figure entered the room.

Isa, with her light sun-bronzed skin, raven black hair, and dark eyes contrasted by the full twenty-foot sweep of white-gold wings, made an impressive presence. Light shone brightly about her. She stopped in respect before she reached the dais. “What about Ha-Set? I still have not been allowed to see him.”

“No. It will not be directly to Khemet. That will not change, for now at least,” Anubis turned to her and answered both questions. “My brother Set will not bend on this at this time. As Archon, Set protects the warriors who fight under his command just as I do mine. Ha-Set has his concerns that are nothing to do with you.”

Isa dropped to her knees on the floor and allowed her wings to droop. Her head bowed in disappointment. “It’s not fair,” she whispered with tears in her eyes. “I never asked for this.”

Anubis approached her. He gently reached a clawed hand out to tilt her chin up so that he could look directly into her dark gold-flecked eyes, encouraging her also to her feet. “No, it is not your fault. No, you did not ask for this. After your untimely death, Egypt was brought to its knees and is now only the shadow of a once-grand empire. Ha-Set and Khebechet were also tragically lost. These actions were considered blasphemy by many.”

Anubis released her face but came closer. “The murder of a God-touched priestess of Anubis and a priestess of Bast carries serious repercussions that will take a long time to correct. That is on the conscience of all of the people whom the land of Khemet bore forth.

“Your lifeblood still cries upon the earth for what was taken from you. That, however, does not help your case with Ha-Set. He made his decisions of his own free will. Isa, your solution must be found where it originated, however long it takes. You may not have justice, but you have love and that you will never lose,” Anubis told her.

“The rest will be revealed later as there is much you do not understand. Hundreds of cycles of time on Earth have already passed, and your home is not what it once was. Power is rising elsewhere. You and Ha-Set must do your part in the plan of the Greater Divine. Our Lord Father, the Prime Creator, has need of you.” Anubis waved his hand over the pool once more. The image changed. He smiled a toothy grin at her indrawn breath. “The world needs its elite warriors once again. You must go help the humans.”

“I can be with him? I thought Set refused to let me see Ha-Set?” Isa asked plaintively.

"Under one condition, Set agrees," Anubis told her sternly. "Your soul-bonded may *not* know you. Set is adamant about this. It will not be time, but you can serve him still."

Isa mantled her wings with her feathers down her back raised in response to her anger. She struggled to damp it back down with the tears that again threatened. "Why? It should not be so complicated!"

"You would be a distraction, and there is too much trauma," Anubis said. "He will not want to know you as a woman, but only as your friend. He has a job to do. You will go first. He will follow you. You will not be allowed to interfere. You may not speak to him, and you will receive Lethe water for the blessing of forgetting to bring you peace. In exchange for your sacrifice, you will be at his side. He will need you. You will remember enough to know him when it is time, but no more than that. The world will be at your feet, and you will fight many battles."

Isa sighed. "Where will I be going if I accept?"

"Macedonia," Anubis waved his taloned hand over the surface of his gazing pool. He showed her the images of a great city-state, "Greece, Egypt, Persia, India," he said. "You will liberate Khemet, which has become Egypt, but you will not stay."

"Ka'Ali told me this was a possibility." Isa bowed her head. "She says I will be a horse."

"My daughter Khebechet speaks truly, as always," Anubis acknowledged.

"Anubis, for him and me, I accept. I will guard his life unto death, even if neither of us is whole." Isa folded her wings tightly into herself and her countenance blurred to brilliant light as she took the stone goblet of Lethe water from Anubis and swallowed cautiously. The water's sweetness also carried a mineral tang. It tingled on her tongue.

"The pathway is open to you. You may pass safely into the world," Anubis told her. He reached his hand out and drew the Astral Veil aside as if parting a curtain in the fabric of reality.

Moisture carried by a cool breeze brushed Isa's cheek. Suddenly they stood on a dark path, and Isa looked down on a dimly lit landscape.

Rain lightly pattered down on a herd of peacefully grazing horses. She could smell the wet grass and hear the subdued whispering of tree leaves in the wind. Mares moved about in the early stillness of the first light of morning, and a stallion bugled somewhere nearby.

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Isa opened her senses and followed her feelings to a black mare. The horse stood boldly with her neck arched and her tail up. Like a queen, she nickered eagerly to her herd mates. This mare was taller than the others and stood slightly apart from them. She was beautiful, sleek, with a look of speed and good breeding. On her hip, the faint outline of an ox-head-shaped brand showed.

A heavily muscled red stallion covered the mare, and the bright spark of Isa's spirit joined with the life force growing inside the horse as she mated her king of stallions. Isa's prior identity and most of her memories were left behind.

2

THE THEFT OF BUCEPHALUS

330 BC, CENTRAL HYRKANIA (MODERN-DAY NORTHERN IRAN)

Prelude: Catching up with Alexander...

With Greece and Egypt already under his control for the two years prior, the army of Alexander of Macedonia then marched relentlessly after King Darius III of Persia. Darius fled the battlefield in panic in 331 B.C. at Gaugamela (120 km west of Arbil in modern-day Iraq). Alexander gained a decisive victory against the Persian army, five times larger than Macedonia's well-trained and disciplined force. This defeat left Darius' followers demoralized and in disarray, with Alexander determined to have the king of the mighty Persian Empire bend his knee and surrender to him in person, thus ceding the throne of Persia to Alexander.

From Gaugamela, southeast to Arbela, south to Opis, then Babylon, Alexander's forces turned southeast to Susa, went through the Uxian Mountains, and besieged Persepolis. (traveling from Iraq into Iran) They then marched north to Ecbatana before turning east along the southern base of the Elburz Mountains that lie east/west along the south edge of the Caspian Sea. The journey took several months with a forced winter layover in Susa. Short provisions forced this stop in the thinly settled areas, and ice within the passes of the Uxian Mountains caused further delay.

King Darius III hatched a plan to head further east and raise a new army to face Alexander. However, in 330 B.C. Darius' plan was thwarted. Once King Darius had fled into the Elburz Mountains with Alexander a few days away from catching up to him, King Darius III was arrested and held prisoner by three of his traitorous generals: Bessus, Viceroy of Bactria, Barsaentes, Viceroy of

Arachotia, and Nebarzanes who was the commander of Darius' cavalry.

When stragglers from the Persian army informed Alexander of King Darius' arrest and Bessus' claim to the crown of Persia, he pushed ahead to attempt to catch Bessus before harm could befall King Darius. After Nebarzanes and Barsaentes murdered Darius, Bessus fled east to Bactria while Nebarzanes went North into Hyrkania. Alexander chose to follow Nebarzanes, thus leaving the pursuit of Bessus for later.

He turned east along the base of the mountains from Hecatompyleos (near modern Qusheh, Iran) with all of his forces, and then at Dhamagan, he split his forces into three columns. Alexander personally took the most challenging and least traveled route through the mountain passes. He went slightly west of the village of Tak toward the capital of Hyrcania at Zadracarta (the town of modern-day Gorgan, Iran) with his lightest fastest cavalry, skirmishing along the way. The king sent Craterus with some archers and cavalry into Tapuria. He sent the main body of his forces with the baggage train and camp followers 38 miles further east to Shahrud, where they turned north on the main road through the mountains to Zadracarta. (Some of these towns have now changed names on the modern map in Iran but are still populated. The source material is the Anabasis of Alexander by Arrian compared to current maps).

Alexander eased his way through a barren mountain pass where saltwater oozed from the sheer facing cliff walls to either side of the snake-ridden narrow track. They encamped on a plain where Nebarzanes arrived and surrendered himself to the Macedonian king. The army stayed for four days to gather supplies and rest the horses. Some stragglers joined them and together prepared to continue to Zadracarta. Alexander called for his horse to be brought to him, having heard the countryside ahead were peopled by hostile tribesmen.



Alexander ran his hands down his horse's legs. The king stopped to pick up the left front hoof and shook his head. Bucephalus reached down and nibbled his hair while Alexander examined the sole of his foot. "Bring me another horse," he told the man who brought his horse to him.

“Is something wrong?” the groom inquired nervously. He eyed Bucephalus and fought the urge to step away from him. With Alexander’s hands on him, the horse was acting placid. The horse’s groom was not fooled in the least. He’d seen personally what those wicked teeth and hooves could do. He wrinkled his nose and remembered what people whispered of this horse around the campfire.

‘Night Death’ was what they called Alexander’s warhorse. Some believed him to be a demon because he seemingly could not be killed. Some who fought beside Alexander said no. Bucephalus was just loyal to Alexander and very lucky. Regardless of what else they said, no one doubted either the horse’s intelligence or his viciousness.

“His leg has some heat,” Alexander replied. “He can be brought up with the remounts. With more fighting ahead, we can’t risk him going lame. I will rest him further and ride one of the mares we confiscated from the Persian army. I’ll leave him in our camp when we go into Zadracarta so he can be rested up when I need him.”

“Which one do you want, Milord?”

“Bring me that red mare with the blaze,” Alexander ordered, and the relieved groom hurried off.

Alexander rose and caressed Bucephalus’ neck, feeling the hardness of the muscles. “You’re going to have to sit this one out,” Alexander whispered to his horse regretfully. “You need to take it easy on that leg, so you don’t end up with a bowed tendon.”

The black horse turned his single blue eye on his rider and blew softly with a disapproving look. He stretched out, lowering his back for Alexander to mount.

“Not today.” Alexander patted him with finality and turned away. “We will ride together another time,” he told Bucephalus. He looked up to see that a groom had carried out his orders. “Ah yes, this will do.”

The groom presented the red mare to the king. She was sturdy but sleek, with a fine coat and good bone. Alexander had his back turned to his stallion and did not see what the men standing in front of him saw when the king picked up his lightweight saddle pad and placed it on the mare’s back. The shouted warning came too late.

Bucephalus, realizing that another horse was to carry his beloved Alexander, spun in place with his ears flattened in anger. The stallion bared his teeth and flattened his ears against his head. He avoided hitting Alexander with his hooves as he reared with the fury of an avenging god.

The squealing stallion grabbed the mare's throat in his teeth and bore her to the ground. Men and horses scattered to distance themselves from Alexander's angry warhorse.

Alexander stood still without fear and watched thoughtfully. Not wanting to waste a good mare, he stepped forward while Bucephalus held onto the other horse's throat until her eyes started rolling back in her head. The red mare was helpless. She gasped desperately for breath.

"Bukefal!" Alexander shouted his horse's name in the Macedonian language. "Let go!" he commanded in a tone that had often made men jump and stand at attention in fright.

Bucephalus merely cocked an ear and grudgingly released the mare, who lay still on the ground panting for several moments. The whites of her eyes still showed fear as she was slowly encouraged to her feet by an impatient Alexander. He didn't stop to contemplate any further. He waved the red mare away, picked up the pad, and placed it on the stallion's sleek back.

"I should kick your ass for that," he muttered in an exasperated tone to his horse. "You're too damned stubborn and ox-headed for your own good. I'd like to get you home in one piece, not run you to ground." Alexander grabbed his horse's head and planted a kiss on his nose. "But, if you insist on being an idiot, we got places to go. If your leg is hurt, you will just have to suck it up. We can't stop again until we're out of these mountains, and we may have to fight our way clear to Zadracarta."

"Check your gear!" Alexander raised his voice and commanded his men. "Let's go. Move it, men! We can rest again when we get to the city." He placed the bridle with the royal trappings on his horse himself, carefully checking that everything was secure and nothing pinched. Bucephalus stood calmly rock steady. Alexander could have sworn his horse wore a smug expression. "Jealous!" he muttered to Bucephalus, shook his head, and patted his horse on the neck. Fully tacked up, the stallion lowered himself in a stretch so that Alexander could easily vault onto his back.

Alexander led the way from the encampment at a cautious but steady pace. He occasionally stopped for directions and pressed on through the night on a narrow, treacherous, and little-used trail.

Past the plain where they camped, the terrain altered quickly. Where the Companions traveled, the area transformed from the golden-brown desert with light vegetation to rocky ridges. Soon the countryside changed yet again.

The mountains and their surroundings became increasingly lush and beautiful the further they pressed onward towards the north side of the hilly country. The trees were of a variety that dripped a sweet honey sap. Crystal clear, pure water became abundant, and there was plenty of grazing for the horses through the steep hillsides. The cavalry gathered food supplies from villagers and foraged. Mountain caves with waterfalls and underground rivers dotted the hills.

Alexander stopped to water the horses where a local villager showed him one of these caves. At the entrance was a huge breast-shaped gray boulder.

“It’s true, great king,” his guide told Alexander. “You can throw something in, and the river is so deep and swift it will come out the other side where it comes out of the earth.”

Alexander looked at the man incredulously. “Is there a way for us to get in and safely out?”

“You can climb down and climb back out of the cave, and it’s big inside, but you can’t walk to the other side underground. There’s a track above ground. You can only reach the other end of the cave where the river comes back to the surface.”

Alexander’s eyes lit up at the thought of an adventure. “Show me.” He looked around at the Companions standing close by. “Who wants to go down with me to explore this thing?”

“I’ll come with you,” Alexander’s historian Calisthenes spoke up and dismounted. He handed his reins to Ptolemy. “I want to see this wonder for myself.”

“Fair enough,” Alexander said. “Hephaestion, have that red mare sent forward. I want to see how she fares, and that gelding with the broken wind Nebarzanes brought. He’s not going to make it much further anyway and will have to be put down. Wait here until I return.”

“It’s fairly treacherous,” the guide told him. They stood at the mouth of the cave. “It’s dark down there. You’ll need a torch.”

“I will fetch a couple of torches from the baggage,” Calisthenes volunteered.

Alexander nodded in reply and leaned over, trying to peer through the gloom of the underground cavern. His curiosity was piqued. “How far does this go?” Alexander asked the local villager. Water splashed onto stone beneath them. The falls were loud enough that it made hearing difficult, and their voices echoed in the cavern.

"Not far downriver," the guide said, trying to shout over the noise. "But it is wondrous big, and there are holes that lead to more openings. When the water is down, you can go further than right now."

The lit torches Calisthenes brought shone off their white linen armor in the dark when they entered. The historian followed Alexander, who led the way, holding his torch high to see better the walls and ceiling, which glinted with sparkling stones and water.

The walls were in some places covered in fine vegetation. The powerful waterfall was ahead and to Alexander's left. A smaller stream also flowed deeper into the cave to his right hand. It fell into a swift-moving pool that disappeared into the darkness. The cavern was wide and deep, as his guide said. Alexander went as far as he could without getting into the river itself and peered past the torchlight where the water disappeared further underground.

After exploring the cavern, Alexander went to the red mare when they reemerged. The king examined the wound his stallion had left on her neck.

"Waste of a good horse. It's too bad," Alexander said aloud. He shook his head and pursed his lips, thinking. He could hear breath whistling in her windpipe. She and the gelding his Companion held were neither of them capable of making the strenuous trek ahead. The king knew he couldn't afford delays caused by a couple of injured beasts.

The Macedonian king made up his mind. "Push them over," he commanded.

"My lord?" Hephaestion gave a puzzled frown.

"We are going to have to put them down anyway. Push these two horses in, and we will see if they come out the other side." Alexander raised his voice so it would carry. "If they live through it, they can take their chances. We'll leave them."

"As you command," Hephaestion acknowledged and, with another warrior, locked hands behind the skinny gelding. They pushed the horse over the lip. The mare followed moments later. They heard the splash, followed by the horses thrashing in the swiftly flowing water.

Within minutes they were all mounted up and following the track above the river briskly. They missed the watchful eyes hiding in the thick green overgrowth in the excitement.

As Alexander passed, a young boy noted the number of warriors and horses before slipping away into the hills. When the boy was

well away from any possible discovery, he ran to report what he had seen.

The sun had moved its position in the sky when Alexander and his companions found the river again. Swift whitewater reemerged from the mountain at the other end of the track. The horses Alexander earlier ordered pushed into the water were lying limply to the side in the noisy rushing shallows. Both horses were dead. Buzzards already circled the corpses from the air waiting for the men to leave so they could feast.



A couple of miles to the North, the native boy sought out his father and village elders. After listening carefully to the boy's message, the village Headman sat quietly in contemplation for several minutes before speaking. "You say there was only a small number of horsemen? I need the truth of this matter before I send to the other villages."

The old man looked around at the few other men hastily gathered around sitting on pillows. Pipe smoke filled the air. Steaming teacups sat partly empty. Most of the men ignored them as they focused on pressing matters.

"There were less than 500, more than 100," the boy told them. "I couldn't see them very well, or they would have discovered me."

"That is not Alexander's army," another man spoke up. His graying beard wagged as he spoke. He waved his hand expansively. "I heard that Alexander's army went east of here by the main road through Shahrud. Surely Alexander would not double back and come this far west through the more narrow passes. That would put them halfway to Zadracarta by now."

"There were a lot of them. They were in armor," the boy told them, gesturing with excitement. "In the front of them, there was a slender man on a handsome black horse. The horse had a white face like an ox."

"There's no doubt then," his father said firmly, "it's Alexander here in our home territory. There's no mistaking him and his demon of a horse."

"Then we should not delay." His Headman stood up. "Leave the boy here with us and take a horse to the other villages. Gather as many fighters as you can and muster them here. We will let him get

into the passes and ambush him there. We can kill them here and now without the rest of the army to back them."

"And if he escapes?" a much younger tribesman spoke up. He patted a sword belted to his hip.

The Headman considered. He glanced at the young man and turned his attention back to the boy's father. "After you go to the other ten villages and send the warriors to gather here, take a fast horse into Mardia and tell them to be watchful," he said. "If Alexander escapes us, he may go further west or even clear to the sea through their lands."

"They, like us, may not believe he will go that far west, but I will do your bidding," the man said. He pulled his son close with an arm around the boy's shoulder.

"We cannot assume that we know what Alexander is going to do. We also cannot count on the Mardians to help us," the Headman told the boy's father. "If we cannot manage to trap him and kill him in the passes, however, it will help us if the Mardians can kill him. If they can do so, the threat to all of us will end. Now, go."

The boy's father bowed to the older man and took himself out.

As the boy's father predicted, the Mardians were skeptical when approached. "Why would he come here when he has gone so much further east?" they asked. Still, watchers kept an eye on the roads and narrow tracks if Alexander approached their country. When they saw that Alexander would come into their territory, the countryside quickly mobilized. They said, "Let him come. We'll kill him in the mountains."

A plan hatched in one hillside village in Mardia where the boy's father stopped. "We are a pastoral people," they said, "not warriors." Their interest was in grazing sheep, cattle, horses, and goats. Here, the Headman was not as war-minded as the Head of his home village. However, the other Mardian Headman saw a way to increase his wealth and holdings over his neighbors.

"Let the others fight," he laughed, "I have already heard that our neighbors will refuse to welcome him or send embassy to the foreign king. Me and mine, however? We will come in behind them when they are fighting. We can take the spoils without risk to any of our own. We will take horses, gold, and food supplies, then be gone before they know we were there. They won't find our people

in the hills. There are too many holes here where our people can hide what we take."

"If he comes here," the visitor from the Hyrkanian village said.

"I feel in my bones that he will," the Headman declared. "When he does, we will be ready." Feeling generous, the Mardian added, "If you stay, I will make you a gift of a new horse. My son can handle any horse alive," he said proudly. "If we get a chance at Alexander's stallion, we'll use him to cover our mares for next season's foaling. I will send you the firstborn colt. We will keep any fillies here for expanding our holdings."

"Night Death will not come easily from what I have heard. They say he's a demon in horseflesh," the Hyrkanian tribesman told him.

The Mardian laughed scornfully. "Don't believe superstitious tall tales. People will say anything. I will have Night Death for my breeding if he's as magnificent as they say. If not, he can pull my plow." The old man laughed again.

"Ah, my thanks, Alyssa." He turned to the young girl serving him a hot tea. "My granddaughter," he told the men. "She will be marriageable age soon. See how dutiful she is to old Elburz."

Ignoring the girl, the visitor smiled a predatory smile. "Mighty Bucephalus, favorite of King Alexander of Macedon, Egypt and Persia brought to plowshare?" the Hyrkanian laughed. "How sweet that will be!" The men in the whole room laughed with him. "I will gladly help you catch him, Elburz."

Alyssa caught her breath. Terror suddenly sat like a great lump in the young girl's chest, not at the threat of marriage but the other direction the conversation had taken. She, too, had heard the stories of Alexander. She thought of the shepherd puppy her father had granted for her birthday. If her dog disappeared, she would go to the ends of the earth to find him. What if Alexander loved his horse that much? She prayed that her Grandfather's ideas would not bear fruit in reality. Like her Father, Alyssa had the gift of Sight. In her mind's eye, the whole landscape burned with Alexander's wrath.

Alyssa hid her distress and left the room carrying empty dishes. Surely there was something she could do?



Alexander turned north through the passes again. The king intended to go on through without stopping to meet up with

Craterus and Parmenion then join the whole army together at Zadracarta. There he planned to rest, gather provisions, and do more exploration from the capital city. His men strung out behind him out of necessity on the narrow hilly track. The sun was low in the sky late afternoon so that it cast a golden light over the landscape when Bucephalus abruptly stopped. The stallion planted his feet in the dusty road. He refused to lead the column any further through the pass.

Alexander tapped his horse with his toe, but instead of walking forward, Bucephalus backed three steps with his ears pricked to nearly touching and began to sidestep. The stallion stopped again, looking up at the hills to either side of them. He blew hard through his nostrils. The sound echoed against the steep bluffs. Alexander held his hand up to call a halt.

Ptolemy and Hephaestion rode up beside him as Alexander tried to see what he knew his horse was hearing and smelling. "More trouble?" Calisthenes asked from directly behind him.

Alexander sat easy on his horse, watching the hillsides. "Bucephalus says there's an ambush ahead. Skirmishers, most likely, and probably archers judging from what I see of the terrain. If we enter the last leg of the pass as we are, we'll be cut to pieces from above among the rocks." Alexander sat quietly astride his horse for a moment as he thought.

"A little way back, there was another path up into the hills. Bring somebody to me that knows this area. Find out if we can go around," Alexander ordered.

"Yes, sir," Calisthenes immediately replied.

Alexander didn't have long to wait. One of the stragglers from Darius' army had grown up in the region. He had clan-kin nearby. The king questioned the man carefully. The native was well mounted on a small but racy gray speed horse of the type common in the area. Its bridle tassels lay gently against the curved angle of the mare's elegant face.

"How many men?" Alexander questioned.

"About 8,000 men are in these villages and scattered in the hills. Hyrcanian and Mardian as we are right on the edge of their territories, but mostly Mardian."

"So, this track we saw up through the mountains will take us around?" Alexander asked. His mismatched eyes were intense.

"It will," the native said. His voice shook slightly as he answered. The man felt as if the piercing gaze was reading his very soul. "It's a sheep and goat track, very narrow and treacherous on the steep hills

for horses. The only way to get through is in single file, but it can be done."

"Is it shorter?" Alexander wanted to know.

"It comes out behind the pass ahead of us," the man answered. "It cuts off one of the loops where we can backtrack, so it is a lot faster."

"How much faster?" the king demanded.

"It cuts a three-day walk to two days," the native tribesman said.

"We'll do it in half a day," Alexander declared. "Let's go! Show us!"

Bucephalus was relieved to carry Alexander away from the arrows and boulders he knew waited for them in the pass. The big horse spun in place and turned willingly to follow the gray as they backtracked.

Alexander demanded speed. His men had long learned to keep up or else. Horses that fell by the wayside were usually left behind, but this group was the Companions. They were the personal guard of Alexander and the elite horsemen of the Macedonian army. They rode the best, fastest, and most hardy horses, although none of them could match Bucephalus in the length of his stride or stamina. They charged ahead, following the big stallion as Alexander encouraged his warhorse to a hard effort. The Companions sped along the treacherous track through the night. Darkness hid them as their horses' hooves ate up the distance without stopping.

Alexander and his men emerged from the forest at first light. They came in behind the encamped tribesmen with the element of surprise.

The first warning anyone in the opposing army had was their own men's death screams. The ground shook with the vibration of thundering hoof beats as the Macedonians bore down on the sea of tents. Sleepy and confused, many of the tribesmen who managed to grab weapons and stumble out of bed in the chill of the pre-dawn light were cut down before they pulled together in ragged pockets of desperate fighting.

At the front of the charge, Bucephalus carried Alexander toward the center of camp and the largest tent. The king used their momentum and his lance to spear a man and pull down a tent into a cooking fire, which added smoke and fire to the confusion. Bucephalus kicked out at a tribesman, knocking the man down with a gash opened across his head.

Two men came at them from the largest tent with heavy blades. These Bucephalus dodged, and after the stallion trampled one man,

he reared to spin with a grace and speed that was nearly cat-like. He neatly placed Alexander where the king could easily take the other man with his lance using the momentum and weight of them both behind the thrust.

The stallion's teeth found another opponent who tried to punch him in the face. Bucephalus quickly ripped the screaming man's arm to the bone from shoulder to elbow. The big horse grabbed the tribesman by the neck and viciously shook him. The screaming stopped.

Fighting was heavy behind them, but Alexander nudged his warhorse forward. An arrow narrowly missed Bucephalus' head.

"Thrice damned archers!" Alexander roundly cursed the shooter. Another arrow came at them aimed at Alexander's throat. Bucephalus, sensing the danger, shied to the side in time for the missile to whistle by his rider's ear.

"Son of a..." Alexander swore again. "Over there!" The king shifted his weight, and the stallion responded instantly.

With a furious snort, his horse turned with Alexander clinging to his back like a burr. They ducked behind the now-empty tent. Not giving the archer time to take a steady aim at them again, Bucephalus came at the man full speed. The man dodged the horse's hooves only to be taken by Alexander's short sword. The stallion fearlessly spun again to protect the king. Lightning-fast, a double-barrel kick caved in the chest of the man who swung at his rider's leg with a sword. Bucephalus blew an angry challenge and squealed his defiance as Alexander took another opponent with his lance.

"Good work, Bukefal!" Alexander fondly caressed his horse's proudly arched neck. "We'll find the Headman of this group and finish this quickly." Alexander saw with satisfaction that more tents collapsed or were fired.

The tribesmen were cut to pieces in the fierce battle even though they overwhelmingly outnumbered Alexander's tired forces. The cavalry's speed confused their opponents. Some of them simply threw their weapons down and surrendered. Most of them were intimidated by the army's reputation and trained fighting prowess.

The heavy fighting ceased with no losses on the Macedonian side by mid-morning and only minor injuries. By contrast, the tribesmen's camp was in total disarray. Many were slaughtered. Alexander, however, spared those who surrendered. The Hyrkanians swore allegiance to the Macedonian king, and he was

able to regroup his men and aim for the capital city with no fear of attack from the rear.

With the pass clear ahead of them, Alexander finally made it out of the mountains and onto the lush green lowlands south of the Caspian Sea. Thinking the countryside appeased, Alexander split his people up again. He arranged a camp for his men and horses and left Bucephalus under guard to rest with the other Companion horses as he went on to Zadracarta. At the capital city, he met with Nebarzanes and other locals.

Zadracarta opened its gates and welcomed Alexander without a fight. The city headman swore allegiance to Alexander and offered him rest and entertainment while surrounding areas sent representatives for talks. They stayed for several days while the two halves of the army rejoined.

Delicious smells of roast meat, spices, and sweet cakes permeated the air. Wine and sweet Meade flowed freely. Men perched on benches around long tables piled high with serving plates. The king was halfway through his drink and flirting with a couple of emissaries from the Amazons. While he spoke with them, Nebarzanes listened from further down the table.

Alexander grinned crookedly at the statuesque brunette in front of him. She was athletically built and tall. She was only interested in negotiating for her queen, however. “We are planning to return in the morning,” she said. “Following the next moon, my queen will come to speak on her own behalf.”

Alexander listened closely to the woman’s proposal. “I will consider her suggestion when I meet her personally,” he replied.

The Amazon woman stifled the urge to spit. “My queen is traveling a long way here to meet with you. She needs an answer,” she said stiffly and raised her drink, “she believes a girl child of this union would be an ideal addition to her house. If it is a son, he will be sent to you to be your heir.”

“What makes her think I need a child?” Alexander raised an eyebrow, suddenly serious. He looked around at the men sitting nearby. Some of them were grinning and eyeing the king’s guest.

One of them leaned forward to whisper in the king’s ear. “If she’s as beautiful as this one, perhaps you should go ahead with this negotiation,” the man laughed drunkenly.

The Amazon glared at the soldier's rudeness. "This is a great gift my queen offers," she told the king, "and it would do well that she is not insulted or pushed aside. Our custom is to take mates outside the tribe. Therefore, this child would be a successor to rule in our country or yours. To do her insult would be an act of war."

Alexander nodded, understanding. "I can't promise anything, but I will talk to her myself," Alexander agreed, "you will get no more than that from me, so I'd advise you against making threats, or the answer will be no. Since you need my cooperation for this proposal, you might want to change your tone." He started on the contents of his plate when he was interrupted by a loud noise. A couple of messengers hurried through the double doors of the dining hall where they knew the king ate with his Companions.

The first messenger handed Alexander a stack of parchment, which the king looked through with a glance before he handed most of them back. "Tell the guard I will speak with the prisoners directly," he said with distaste. He paused to look at his Generals and spoke to them directly. "Although they may offer to join us, they are traitors to their own, so I can't trust them either. If their loyalty is this cheap, they'll sell it to anyone."

He took a quill and ink from the messenger and made some notes on a blank parchment. "Here, take this back with you," the king told the messenger. "I need you to bring me the current supply lists. I want all the men and horses prepared for a hard march when we leave. We'll hunt Bessus to ground. I'll deal with his treason myself. I don't need any delays," he said shortly. He nodded at the second messenger. "What do you have for me?"

Alexander went very still as what the second messenger told him sunk in. Unsure that the king understood, the man repeated his message.

"Sir. Alexander? There's been trouble. I was instructed to say that your horse is missing. He's gone."

"What do you mean gone?" Alexander asked in a carefully controlled, even tone.

The messenger, unfamiliar with Alexander's quick temper, mistook his dead tone for calm and briefly felt some measure of relief. "I mean, someone attacked the camp. They sent me to tell you that the Companions' horses were taken in the raid, Bucephalus with them. They also made off with a good portion of the treasury." The man winced as he relayed the message about the missing gold. The king's response confused him.

Alexander looked around the room that had gone very silent. He saw many shocked faces. His men had overheard. The messenger had the full attention of everyone present.

“Who? Who did this and how long ago?” Alexander’s voice was becoming tight with the effort of restraining his growing anger. His face remained an unreadable mask.

“We believe it was the Mardians. It was just hours ago.”

Alexander rose from his chair with his cup in hand. His freshly cooked steak still steamed on his plate with only one bite out of it. The king ignored it. He remained silent a moment longer, looking intently around the room.

The unfortunate messenger could not dodge the cup of wine that the king hurled at him. All of the guests, including the Amazons at the high table, fell back when the king moved. Alexander kicked the front edge of the heavy wooden table hard. It tipped over where the king shoved it with all of the food on top of it sent flying. Men close to Alexander and the heat of his terrible wrath scrambled unsuccessfully to get out of the way.

“Well? Why are you still here?” Alexander’s cold fury exploded. “Get out! Find him NOW!” he screamed at them. His mismatched blue and brown eyes blazed nearly black with fury and his face contorted in rage. He worked his hands with the desire to strangle the person or persons responsible. The king finally settled for balling his hands into fists.

Everyone forgot dinner. Men and women scattered toward the exit as the soldiers ran to arm themselves. Hapless servers were knocked into, and drinks were spilled all over the dining room in the men’s haste to comply with the king’s orders.

The messenger cringed as he stood at stiff attention. He had expected the Macedonian army would be upset at the losses, but he wasn’t sure what was happening. Horses and loot that the invasion force carried were replaceable, the messenger thought to himself. However, he didn’t dare say a word, and Alexander’s following words cleared up any confusion he had regarding the direction of the Macedonian’s actual concerns.

Alexander finally steeled his anger and gave the messenger his orders. “You go tell the Mardians that if Bucephalus is not returned immediately, safe and whole, that I will fell every tree! I will kill every last man, woman, and child! I will destroy every village! I will burn their whole country to the ground and lay waste to it until there is nothing left but bare stones!”

"Sir?" The man's face turned white. He thought of all the innocents in harm's way. "I'm sure it was only a handful of people responsible. Won't you give us time to find them and bring them to justice?"

"Justice? I WILL have justice," Alexander spat in response, "I will also have my horse! When I find him, there had better not be a single hair out of place. And you? You have my orders. Now, get out of my sight!"

"Yes, sir!" the messenger responded crisply and turned to go.

"Wait. Hold up a minute. What is your name?" Alexander asked him.

"Sulian, sir. I'm from Hyrcania. I'm not from Mardia," he felt it necessary to add as he felt the weight of Alexander's penetrating gaze.

"Do you have an idea who did this, Sulian? You'd better answer honestly." Alexander's sudden relative calm contrasted sharply with his angry outburst.

"No, sir, I don't," the messenger answered quickly, "but no one makes these kinds of decisions without the approval of the village heads. It could be stragglers from Darius' army, but the number of horses and items they took suggest it was far more than someone trying to escape somewhere."

"Why do they think it was the Mardians?" Alexander continued to question him.

Sulian looked around the room nervously. Did Alexander believe him? They were alone now, he saw, and the room was wrecked. Only the curtains moved, blowing in the light breeze.

"Your camp is at the edge of Mardian territory," he told the Macedonian king. "They are a pastoral people. That many horses and that much treasure would enrich the holdings of any of their villages. Your men were out cutting trees and burning underbrush at your orders, leaving the camp lightly guarded. It would be enough to tempt someone headstrong to raid."

"Someone stupid, you mean," Alexander glared intently at the messenger and paused for effect. His next clipped words dropped into the silence of the room's chaotic disarray like echoes against a mountain volcano ready to erupt. "You have a four-hour head start. Take Parmenion and Seluceus. Go to the Mardian village closest to our camp. Give them my message. I will be right behind you. Send me a guide who knows their territory. If I don't get results, I promise you, Mardia is going to burn!"



Alyssa rubbed her tired eyes and sighed where she stood. She'd spent the past several nights with her eyes open, staring at the ceiling and praying. Goosebumps rose along her arms, and she tried to rub them away.

Shimmery waves of heat rose in the air as she looked over the peaceful valley. A bell sounded in the middle of her tribe's grazing flock as the ewe who carried it moved slowly from one patch of lush grass to another. Despite the brightness of the lazy summer day, the young girl felt a persistent dark shadow.

The girl watched her younger brother fetch a straying lamb. At her feet, her fluffy shepherd dog waited for her signal. The canine yawned when he saw the boy had rounded up the stray. Alyssa was skipping out on other chores to watch the sheep. Even though she knew her brother and her loyal dog could handle the task of shepherding without her, she found herself restless and unable to stay indoors. The twisting ache in her stomach told her something was about to happen.

She plopped down on the hillside and put her arms around her fluffy shepherd dog. He'd been a constant in her life since her mother had died in childbirth. Alyssa was grateful for his warm companionship. Her mind wandered far from the fat sheep she was supposed to be guarding, and she thought again about the foreign king and his infamous horse.

Unable to shake the horrible feeling something was up, her heart sank when she heard swift hoof beats. Three riders came into view. She tensely caught her breath when she saw that two of the riders were foreigners wearing the white armored tunic that had been described to her to be of the kind worn by the Greeks.

While Alyssa watched from afar, the riders pulled up and stopped at a cross trail. They appeared to be arguing. The girl followed her urge to get closer to find out what they were saying. She crept silently forward, hoping she would not step on a stick that would betray her presence.

"I thought you knew where you were going!" the Macedonian accused their Hyrcanian guide.

The Macedonian soldiers accompanied the messenger to the outlying villages for safety and to ensure that he relayed the king's message correctly. At the second pass near the camp, a massive downed tree across a narrow track forced them to detour. Now the

Macedonians suspected, being out of his home territory, the Hyrcanian had gotten lost.

"That tree was freshly cut," Sulian observed as he looked around. "That was the main path between holdings. I know we're on the right track. If not the western village, then possibly this is the way the thieves went," he told the others.

Parmenion's jaw tightened. "Alexander gave specific orders. We do not deviate from those orders," he replied. The General warned him, "The king will be right behind us, and we better have some results for him, or it will be your head hanging with the villagers." Parmenion was in no mood to argue or go about things halfway. A seasoned fighting man, he had been General of the Macedonian army under Alexander's father. "Figure it out!" he ordered with a yell. "Now!"

Seluceus sat tensely on his horse. His hands tensed on his reins as he looked at Sulian. "Let's just kill this idiot and deliver our message ourselves." He reached for his sword.

"No deviation, or it will be our heads too. Alexander is in no mood to play around," Parmenion pointed out to his fellow soldier. He turned his attention back to their guide. "Don't waste our time, Hyrcanian!"

Alyssa was close enough to hear what they were saying. She briefly considered creeping away but then recklessly addressed the Hyrcanian. "If you are looking for the western village, it's that way." She pointed slightly north from their back trail.

"Her accent is thick. What's she saying?" Seluceus asked.

"She says the village is north of our position, which I already knew. We just need to go around the blocked pass," Sulian said.

"Fine, she knows where we're going. Let's take her along so she can show us," Seluceus declared. "Tell her if she takes us to the village, we won't harm her." Seluceus waited long enough for Sulian to explain and scooped the girl up with only a minor struggle. She felt fear for herself, but she was even more desperate to get them away from her own home.

Alyssa's brother yelled at the men to stop. It was no use as they turned their horses and left. He stood and sobbed helplessly, watching his sister disappear. In a panic, he ran to tell his grandfather. The dog was left alone with the sheep. Without the kids to guide him, the shepherd dog rounded up the sheep and drove them home.

 Alyssa guided the men to their destination. In an out-of-the-way corner, the girl settled herself to listen to what was going on.

An exit was close to her vantage point where she could slip out at any time. The conversation quickly turned to the Macedonian king.

“He said what?” the first village Headman exclaimed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about! As your king demanded, we laid down our arms, and now he’s threatening to burn us out over a horse? That’s ridiculous!”

“Over HIS horse,” Parmenion told him. “Bucephalus is Alexander’s horse. Is he here or not?”

“No, he isn’t here,” the village Headman snapped at him.

“Do you know who has him?” Seluceus demanded. “The other horses taken from our army as well?”

“No. Now get out of my territory!” the Mardian demanded.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Parmenion told him calmly. “Alexander is coming here, so I would suggest that you have Bucephalus unharmed and ready to go back by the time the king arrives.”

“Or he’s going to burn my village,” the Headman sneered. “I don’t know where he is. Even if I did, what makes you think I’d tell you? It’s just a horse. He can get plenty of those anywhere around these parts with a little bit of gold. I’ve got a gray mare I’ll sell him if he needs a horse.”

“No.” Parmenion showed his teeth. “He can’t get another horse like that one. Bucephalus was a gift from his father to Alexander, and he has carried him in every battle since. Alexander loves him. Your life and your family’s life is forfeit if you do not hand the horse over unharmed, and your whole countryside will be a smoking ruin. Every Macedonian knows the story of Alexander and Bucephalus.”

Alyssa’s heart sank. It was just as she had feared. Despite her trepidation, her childlike curiosity got the better of her. “If you please, sir? Can you tell the story? I haven’t heard.”

“Neither have I,” the village Headman admitted. “I would like to hear this tale of a horse so wondrous Alexander would kill for him.”

“ was there that day.” Parmenion rested on a woven rug. Seluceus stood propped against a wall.

Parmenion spoke with deliberate, even tones. “I was Phillip’s General before that traitor assassinated him. I planned to negotiate for the horse for thirteen talents with Philonicus the Thessalian if the king liked him. Only the horse was rogue, vicious, skittish, and

we found nobody could ride him. He would immediately turn on you to try to kill you as soon as you came near," Parmenion told them.

"Alexander and his mother Olympias were nearby and heard that his father was trying a new horse. They came to watch the horse be ridden. It was a terrible fight," Parmenion continued.

"I tried to get close, and the stallion turned on me. You couldn't mount because Bucephalus would rear every time. We tried ropes so that I could get on, but he threw me as soon as the ropes dropped. I'd never seen a horse so wild and unmanageable. After Bucephalus threw me, King Phillip tried to ride him with the same result. The next man to try, Bucephalus reached around quick as a cat, grabbed him by the arm above the elbow, and pulled the man off his back with his teeth - broke his arm too. The horse would have trampled him to death, but they managed to pull him away in time.

"Alexander came close. I could hear him arguing with his father. Olympias forbade him to go anywhere near, but Alexander would have none of it. Right there, he stood up to every one of the men and scoffed at our efforts.

"King Phillip was furious. He told his son to watch his mouth and that he would just put the horse to death and be done with it. The king threatened to put the horse trader to death for trying to sell him such a dangerous animal. I've rarely seen Phillip so angry. He ordered the horse to be led away. So they were taking the horse away, fighting them the whole time. Bucephalus wouldn't listen to voice, kindness, or whip." Parmenion shook his head, remembering.

"Alexander refused to back down. He kept telling his father that all of us were doing it all wrong. The boy got more upset when they took Bucephalus away. He repeated to his father, the king, 'What an excellent horse do they lose for want of address and boldness to manage him!'

"Finally, Phillip answered his son's challenge. He said, 'Do you reproach those who are older than you, as if YOU know more and are better able to manage a horse than they are?'

"Alexander told him, 'I could manage this horse better than others do.'

"Phillip laughed, of course, along with everyone else. All of us had just seen how useless it was to try to handle the horse. It was funny at the time to see this thirteen-year-old child claiming he could manage where the rest of us failed. So, Phillip asked

Alexander, ‘If you do not manage the horse better than they, what will you forfeit for your rashness?’

“Alexander told him, ‘I will pay the whole price of the horse.’

“We all wagered, and when it was settled, the grooms brought Bucephalus back. Alexander ordered the ropes off the horse and everybody else to stand back. I thought the horse would attack and kill the boy since there were no restraints on him, but the horse stood still. He let Alexander walk up to him and take him by the head. The boy felt around on the stallion’s face, blew in his nose, said something to the horse, then turned him toward the sun so that he wouldn’t jump at the shadows on the ground.

“Next thing we all knew, this thirteen-year-old kid was upon the horse’s back. They went off at a gallop and then turned and came back. Bucephalus acted as calm as a plowshare with Alexander aboard, but when one of the grooms came to get him to take him to the royal stables, the horse nearly took the man’s hand off,” Parmenion said.

“King Phillip was so impressed and proud he bought the horse for his son right there on the spot. Since then, a guard is always posted on Bucephalus, not just for the horse’s safety, but because someone who approaches carelessly is likely to find themselves dead,” Parmenion assured them.

Alyssa had sat through the story with her mouth open. She was impressed. But she wanted to know more.

“So why was Alexander able to tame him when nobody else could?” Alyssa asked. “A horse killed my father. Since then, my grandfather puts down any who can’t be managed.”

“Because Alexander saw what the rest of us missed,” Parmenion told the girl directly. “Bucephalus has been ill-treated by someone with more cruelty than sense. The horse was defending himself. Alexander took the threat of harm away, and the horse, although vicious still for anyone else to deal with, serves Alexander faithfully and willingly.”

“I see,” Alyssa said thoughtfully. “So what will Alexander do now? Will he really kill everyone if he doesn’t get his horse?”

Parmenion looked straight at Alyssa. “Yes,” he said coldly. “He will do exactly as he said. He will slash, burn and kill every living thing in your country until he finds Bucephalus unharmed. This whole place will be down to bare rock,” he assured her. “My king will be here within the hour, and he will be wanting his horse.”

Alyssa’s eyes were wide. She realized she’d forgotten to breathe. As soon as the men weren’t looking, she slipped out.

The girl's breath came hard as she took off at a panicked run toward her home. She thought she knew where the king's horse would likely be found. Her little brother came to mind. Next, she thought of her precious dog. None of their lives would be worth anything if she didn't do something quickly.

Only pausing just outside of town to take a gray mare for the extra speed, she disappeared into the backcountry. Alyssa thought she could smell smoke by the time she disappeared into the hills.



As soon as she returned, the girl's heart sank when she saw the unfamiliar and magnificent white-faced dark stallion in her grandfather's corral. Her uncle was limping and cursing but not daring the horse's pen. He had a long leather whip in one hand and a rope in the other.

She flung herself from the mare she'd borrowed and boldly grabbed her uncle's arm as he raised it to crack the whip at Bucephalus. "No!" she yelled desperately. "You can't, and you mustn't!" She struggled not to sob through her tears. "That's Alexander's horse! He's coming for him! If you don't give his horse back to him, Alexander's going to kill all of us!"

"Alyssa!" her grandfather Elburz cried out from the other side of the livestock pen. "You're safe!"

"Not for long!" Alyssa said. Breathlessly she tried to calm her racing heart. "Alexander is looking for Bucephalus and says he's going to kill every man, woman, and child then lay waste to our whole country until you return him!"

"He'll never find us in these hills," Elburz scoffed. "Where did you hear such nonsense, child?"

"I went to the border village. Alexander's men are already there. I smelled the smoke before I was very far away. They've already started!"

"We'll just move to the caves until he passes," her uncle told her. "We'll be fine."

"No, you don't understand!" Alyssa was practically bouncing in her distress. "It won't matter. Everything will be gone! Even if he doesn't find us, we'll starve!"

"Ah! Get yourself inside, girl. You aren't to tell grown men what to do! You forget your place. Now go! I want my tea," Alyssa's grandfather demanded.

Her uncle lifted the whip again, still furious that the horse wouldn't let him near. Bucephalus' ears were flat against his skull in a warning. He refused to back away from the whip. The stallion, no stranger to whips or a heavy hand, glared at the man and waited for him to come close enough for his teeth to find him.

"Don't hurt him!" Alyssa pleaded with her grandfather and uncle. Even though tears streamed down her face, she refused to give ground.

Bucephalus' ears came up with interest as he recognized an ally. Then they went flat again when the big man backhanded the girl so hard she hit the dirt. In response to the man's cruelty, Bucephalus bellowed furiously and tried to break the rails to get to the man to savage him. Alyssa's uncle's face drained of color when he looked into the stallion's eyes, which had lost any semblance of sanity in the heat of anger.

Alyssa scrambled to her feet and ran to the house. Her uncle backed away from the maddened stallion, intimidated and beaten before Bucephalus' strength. Elburz recognized his mistake too late. He realized that he wouldn't be breeding the king's horse. Neither would the horse be suitable to plow.

"Night Death," Elburz whispered. "Demon horse. Untamable bastard of a beast. We'll break you no matter what it takes," he added pridefully through gritted teeth.



Forest fires raged through the lush foliage. They went quickly across pastures driven by the steady breeze off the Caspian Sea. Village after village fell to Alexander's wrath as he demanded the return of his beloved Bucephalus. Mighty trees were felled. Livestock perished along with the people. Smoke wafted over Alyssa's village within just a few days. Word reached them that Alexander was headed their way.

Alyssa stood outside Bucephalus' enclosure as she watched him eat the fresh-cut grass she had brought him. The girl took the sickle to cut enough for the horse to eat every morning and evening. Water was provided by drawing well water and carrying it in clay pots. Gradually Bucephalus relaxed as she made no threatening moves toward the horse. She simply met his needs while the stallion kept his distance.

On the evening of the third day of the horse's captivity, with smoke darkening the horizon to a bloody hue, she knew she would have to act to save her people.

Alyssa fed Bucephalus a bit of grain and talked conversationally to the horse. "I'm sorry you have to be here," she told him. "My grandfather was wrong to take you away from Alexander. I'm going to help you," she told him. "You are beautiful, you know."

Bucephalus stepped closer with his ears up. His eyes held a soft expression. The girl wondered if he would let her touch him. He came close and extended his head.

Alyssa gingerly touched the scars on his nose. She noticed more around his mouth. "I see you." A tear ran down her face as she whispered to him, "I see why you are so angry. I'm angry sometimes too, when people are mean to me."

The stallion nuzzled her hand softly and went back to eating. Alyssa could see that Bucephalus wasn't as vicious as his reputation made him out to be. He was simply misunderstood. She realized Alexander had come to the same conclusion as a thirteen-year-old boy. The king had gained a magnificent horse as a result.

Alyssa was from a long line of tribespeople who bred horses. She resolved to remember Alexander's lesson for the future.

Remembering the story Parmenion had told her, she blew breath at the horse. He blew back at her through his nostrils and gave a relaxed sigh. She smiled at the horse who had such a reputation for making men quake in their sandals. The thought made her want to laugh.

Making up her mind, Alyssa fetched her gray mare. Knowing the horse's prior owner was likely dead, she had assumed the mare's care rather than try to take her back through the fires. She was a medium-sized mare, well built and pretty with good lean muscle.

Alyssa knew the mare was in heat and briefly wondered if the stallion might be willing to breed her. A prize colt from the pairing would bring value to her dowry. Alyssa could start her own herd should they both survive the king's wrath. Should she put them together, she wondered? Her plan formed. Alyssa made up her mind.

"Tonight," the girl whispered. "When everyone is asleep, I'll sneak out, and then we'll try. There's only one chance, so this better work."

First, however, she must go to their neighbors and tell them that Alexander's horse was here. They would come for him tomorrow.

She led her mare by the stallion's enclosure to gauge his reaction. "I'm going to fetch help," she told him. "I'll be back." The mare and stallion snorted and nickered to each other. "Shhhh!" Alyssa said. "You'll tell on us!" she grinned. "Tonight. Make it count, okay?"

She mounted her mare, who allowed herself to be persuaded and prodded stiff-legged away from the stallion's pen as she signaled her readiness for cover. "Not now!" Alyssa urged. "We must go!"

All was chaos when Alyssa rode into the neighboring village. The smoke drifted in thick clouds here, and everyone was packing in a panic to leave. The girl sought out the Headman's house.

Naveed was much younger than Alyssa's father had been. His father and grandfather were killed in the recent fighting. Naveed was now in charge of this village. She'd known him on a casual basis for years since he wasn't much older than her. She thought he would listen to her, so she sought him out.

"Here, you load this. You get those sacks filled. We have to take as much with us as we can." He was directing the preparations to leave when Alyssa found him.

"Naveed?" Alyssa still sat on her horse to avoid being lost in the hectic movement around her. "Naveed, I need to talk to you!"

"I don't have time, Alyssa. Shouldn't you be getting out with your family?" He turned away and dismissed the girl.

"Yes, you do have time," Alyssa snapped back at him. She slid down off her mare but kept hold of her bridle, walking behind Naveed as he hurried to his house for more belongings. "You can stop this mess if you help me." The girl grabbed him by the arm.

"What is it?" he asked her with an impatient glance.

"I know where Alexander's horse is!" Alyssa told him in an urgent whisper. "We need to give him back. My grandfather refuses to do anything. He stole him!"

Naveed paused. She now had his rapt attention. He didn't hesitate for long. "Quickly! Inside." He looked around. "Mother! I need you to come here!" he called. "Stop everything!"

"Your grandfather stole him?" Naveed turned to her again intently this time. "Alexander is killing everybody in his way demanding that horse, and your grandfather has him?"

"Yes." Alyssa nodded. "We have to do something!"

“God smiles on us!” Naveed said with relief. “The fires are getting close, but we must send word to the army and let them know we will return Alexander’s horse forthwith. No one knew anything about it. This news will hopefully save us all!”

“Son?” A handsome woman with silver in her hair appeared at his side. “I’ve nearly got the donkeys packed. What do you need?”

“Mother, I need you to take Alyssa inside, give her some tea and make her comfortable while I gather the other men. A solution just dropped in my lap. We have to do this fast!” he told her. He ran off yelling to call a halt to the preparations. Several confused faces turned toward him.

“Stop, and all men join me at the house, now! Alexander’s horse is found so that we can put an end to this!” Naveed told them. The excitement and relief all around were palpable in the cheers. “Have the women keep working. We still need to get out ahead of the fires!”

The family groups variously held up their hands or yelled assent. Word spread. The tribe members quickly gathered and filed into the big house. Around forty men squeezed into the room to hear what the girl from the neighboring village had to say.

“Okay, Alyssa. Please tell us what you know,” Naveed encouraged her.

“My grandfather Elburz has Bucephalus in our village,” Alyssa began. “He brought him there three days ago. I have been looking after the horse because I’m the only one he’ll allow near him.”

“A girl?” a deep voice scoffed.

Alyssa merely glared at the speaker, then continued. “I know I can’t go back to my family after this,” she said to Naveed. “Even so, I can’t just sit by and let everybody hang or burn and not do anything. I’m hoping I can go with your women when you leave,” she said simply.

“Who does your grandfather think he is?” another man spoke up angrily.

“I’m sorry,” Alyssa said. “I don’t know, but his greed led him to steal the king’s stallion and take the army’s gold. My grandfather and uncle can’t handle Alexander’s horse even if they keep him. They are afraid of him. My uncle wants to use whips. Night Death...” Alyssa paused. “Bucephalus needs to go back for his own sake and ours too.”

“We are going to have to sue for peace to Alexander,” Naveed said. “Elburz must be held accountable for putting all of us in danger,” he added.

“I know,” Alyssa said sadly. “I love my grandfather, but I will leave the decisions on what to do about him to you. I will offer to go with whatever escort you deem fitting to take Alexander’s horse to him tomorrow, as I know I can handle him.”

“It will take that long to prepare,” Naveed agreed. “I need a couple of volunteers to take a fast horse to the other villages that Alexander hasn’t found and burned. Another volunteer will take a message to the Macedonian army.

“We’ll ask our neighbors for provisions and items of value. We’ll send 50 men to Alexander with Alyssa to handle the horse and offer him gifts and our apologies. For now, we will all go to Alyssa’s village to see this wonder of a horse. We’ll put Elburz under arrest for the theft. His holdings will be forfeit for his audacity. Our people are dying, yet he does nothing!” Naveed finished angrily.

“What about my brother and me?” Alyssa wanted to know.

“You and your brother can come with us. Your family’s livestock will cover your upkeep.” Naveed avoided looking at her. “Think of it as a reward for bringing this to us.”

Alyssa nodded assent. Minor tribal disputes were common, but this went far beyond what she’d ever heard.

Naveed continued as he turned to look directly into her eyes. “You have our thanks, Alyssa. You will be a hero to our people for your actions.”

Ghe next day, fifty men bearing gifts for the Macedonian king escorted Alyssa with her gray mare and a weary but satisfied Bucephalus. A simple rope halter on the stallion’s head and a light touch were all she used to guide him as she rode her mare at his side. The stallion came willingly enough. He seemed to understand Alyssa’s gentle explanation that she was taking him back to Alexander.

A messenger had informed Alexander that his horse was found and that the stallion had an escort. Following the group of fifty men, the rest of the Companions’ horses were also being returned as a group.

Alexander agreed to meet them in the flat lowland. The army had not burned the forest or felled the trees where they gathered. Alexander halted all work and executions as soon as he heard the good news that his horse was found safe.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Alexander muttered as the group of Mardians approached. As soon as Bucephalus scented Alexander, he reared up, nickered, and shook his head. He broke free of Alyssa's grip and galloped to the king's side.

Alexander ran his hands over Bucephalus checking for wounds, whip marks, or harness marks. Finding none, he nodded his acceptance. Bucephalus lowered himself into a stretch for Alexander, who vaulted his horse bareback.

The Mardians pushed an old man forward. He looked tired and sad. "Great king," he began and bowed deeply. "I am Elburz from the southernmost village in the hills. I apologize for stealing your horse. I beg you to have mercy on my people. They had nothing to do with his disappearance and did not know where the horse was. I acted alone. It is thanks to my granddaughter's right thinking that Bucephalus is safe and returned to you today. If you execute me, I pray that you spare her."

"We will see," Alexander said in a heavily accented version of the Mardian's native language. He waved his interpreter back to his place. "Where is your granddaughter Elburz that I may thank her myself?"

"Here." Alyssa rode forward on her grey mare. Her horse was still showing signs of heat for the stallion. The girl nudged her, and the mare squealed. Bucephalus huffed at the mare in return but stood rock steady with the king on his back.

"Well, it looks like Bukefal found a lady friend in my absence," Alexander remarked sardonically.

Alyssa caught her breath, suddenly afraid. Would the king be angry? He put her at ease with his following words.

"You have my thanks for bringing him back," Alexander said. He examined the girl with a piercing gaze. "Of all your people, it took a girl child to act. Did you halter him yourself?" The king pointed at the rough knotted rope around his horse's face.

"Yes. Sir." She hesitated. Alyssa was unsure how to address the king. She settled for simply being honest. "I treated him kindly, so he let me touch him."

"Approach. Let me see," Alexander commanded with a half-smile. "Without your horse, on foot," he added.

Alyssa threw her leg over the mare's neck and gracefully slid to the ground. She approached the king and his 'Night Death' with confidence. Alyssa held her hand out, palm up. She gently blew at him. Bucephalus reached his nose out and softly blew back. The horse sighed and pricked his ears, letting the girl stroke his face.

The soldiers around them stayed their comments, simply saluting the girl's bravery with a fist to their chest. Many of the tribesmen broke out in subdued cheers.

"Awesome!" Alexander's half-smile turned to a huge grin. "Bucephalus likes you. Therefore, I will decree this, rather than put the mare to death, or you for taking a breeding without permission. Since Bucephalus and thus the foal are my property by right, I will make the mare's life and the foal a personal gift from me to you. You may keep any foal that springs from the mating. It is yours and yours alone. Bukefal has good taste, and your mare is excellent. It should be a good match," he smiled.

Alexander turned to address Alyssa's grandfather, who wore a stricken expression. Elburz fell to his knees in shame with tears in his eyes for his bitter pride and loss of face. "You, I should put to death for your actions. But with my horse safely returned and the gifts, I'm feeling generous. I pardon you. Now get out of my sight," Alexander said with narrowed eyes.

The old man prostrated himself and babbled his thanks in relief that he wasn't to forfeit his life. A couple of Naveed's kinsmen hauled the disgraced Elburz to this feet, dragged him to the rear of the group, and set a watch on him.

Naveed came forward and bowed formally to the king. "I am Naveed, Headman of the central village. On behalf of my people, please accept apologies from all of us. Elburz will be dealt with appropriately. We will ensure he cannot repeat his offense, great king. When Alyssa came to us with the location of your horse, we made haste to return him to you unharmed. I also personally oversaw the confiscation of your goods for return. I made further arrangements for additional supplies you may need."

Naveed waved his hand. One by one, the men laid the looted treasure at Alexander's feet in addition to their people's costliest gifts. They also presented Alexander with livestock and foodstuffs. "As a token of our goodwill and desire for peace," Naveed said. He bowed again.

The King nodded in satisfaction. "That will do. You also have my thanks, Naveed, for your actions. I will have my scribes record this day's events and will have them send missives to my regent at home," Alexander told him.

"I leave you in charge of the whole of Mardia-Media in appreciation for your loyalty. You will administer this country in my absence. As King, I decree that today all your lands are a territory under my protection with the full authority of Macedonian law to

back you. I will ensure that you have gold, scribes, and a lawgiver to assist you. We will arrange the exchange of trade goods and will also see to arranging the formal education of your children.” Alexander smiled at the young man standing before him.

Naveed’s eyes were huge. The king’s generosity far exceeded his expectations. The full realization of the weight of responsibility Alexander had just placed upon him nearly staggered the young Headman. He pulled himself together and stammered his acceptance to the king.

Alexander sat his weight back on Bucephalus and pulled him up into a full rear. The black warhorse spun around catlike at a light touch from the king. Bucephalus loudly snorted when his front feet touched the ground. His tail was up, neck arched, tensed, and ready for his rider’s commands. Alexander addressed his troops in a loud voice. “Alright, men, claim your horses, and let’s get these goods back to camp!”

EPI-PROLOGUE...

Daily life had begun to settle into a routine for Naveed and Alyssa’s combined villages. Invitations to their upcoming wedding went out to the remainder of the Mardian villages left untouched by Alexander’s wrath. A fast horse carried a messenger to Alexander’s camp. The king declined to attend as he had no further direct interest in Mardia. He was busy with the last of his own preparations to leave Hyrcania to hunt Bessus into southern Bactria for the murder of King Darius III of Persia. However, the messenger returned with the king’s congratulations and a generous gift for the bride.

Decked out in a bright red overcoat and dripping with jewelry, including the extravagant necklace the king had sent her, Alyssa tried to face her wedding calmly. Her heart pounded loud in her ears with her nervousness. Since her grandfather and uncle were in disgrace and exiled, and her father and mother dead, Naveed had proposed to her personally the evening after they returned from seeing the king. She smiled, remembering the soft admiration in her new husband’s expression.

She’d accepted, relieved that it would neatly settle her circumstances, even though it was whispered that there were other interested suitors. Although Alyssa was not beautiful, she was

young and pretty. Her inherited land and livestock made her even more attractive to local men considering taking a wife.

Alyssa's share of her family's remaining sheep and goats was a rich addition to her future husband's house. The mare who was likely pregnant with a foal by Bucephalus was a priceless gift. Naveed confirmed that the mare's previous owner indeed was killed. Alyssa would keep ownership of the gray mare. The foal would also be hers as gifted to her by the king.

Lush green pastures in the valley caught her glance through the window of the stone house which sat on a high vantage point. The girl smiled, thinking about the colt or filly that would mark the start of her own horse herd.

Anticipation warmed Alyssa and helped calm her nerves when Naveed's mother came to fetch her son's bride. She gently took her by the arm. "Come. It's time," the woman told the girl with a gentle smile.

Golden sunshine joyfully contrasted with the abject terror of the weeks before. Alyssa saw that the number of people present was greater than just her village or Naveed's village. She recognized some of the girls her age and smiled and waved at them. Alyssa didn't recognize many others but vowed to herself to change that. They were in attendance for the celebration and the feast. Alyssa knew her people needed to share in her happiness and relief, so she welcomed them with open arms.

Alyssa and Naveed exchanged promises and were married in the center of the village at noon on a summer day in 330 BCE. Many people of Mardia were present to celebrate their new life together and their country's future. We hope that Alyssa and Naveed lived happily ever after. For some good deeds not only truly deserve to be rewarded but also change the course of history.

3

THE AFTERMATH

TWO WEEKS AFTER THE END OF SPEAR OF CHAOS...

JULY 26, 1985, ROANE COUNTY, TENNESSEE

“Excuse me! You don’t talk to me like that! Who you think you are all big, bad, and threatening me behind that badge?” The female officer drew herself up with the kind of indignation that only a strong black woman could muster. She glared at the neatly uniformed man across the polished mahogany desk in front of her. Her spine was straight and unflinching. “Calm down now, or I’ll walk my ass right on outta here!” she threatened.

“I want answers! I want them now!” Sheriff Wilson screamed at his deputy and stomped his foot like a spoiled child. “I’m not gonna play this game of cat and mouse. You either tell me what happened, or you’ll be fired. I’ll throw you so far under the jail for obstruction that you won’t ever see the light of day again!”

“I don’t have the answers you want!” Deputy Diane Stanley retorted. It appeared that her move from the Kingston Police Department to deputy sheriff was going to be short-lived, she thought as she grew weary of his tirade.

Although she was fascinated by the blotchy red appearance of the sheriff’s white face, she refrained from saying anything about that as he worked himself into a righteous fit. Her own chocolate brown skin couldn’t turn that color. He’d been yelling at her for the past twenty minutes.

Diane finally gave an exasperated sigh through her gritted teeth. She yelled back, “I told you already! We stumbled on a cult while

investigatin' the murders in Rockwood. That old abandoned church burned down to the ground! There's nothin' left!"

The sheriff practically spit when he replied. "I've got one officer in the hospital in a septic coma with necrotizing fasciitis and another one dead! He looks like he was torn to pieces by some wild animal! The officers' guns were fired and emptied of bullets. I have five more people hurt and in the hospital. They aren't talking either! You have no scratch on you, and you have no answers for me? What are you hiding?"

"Fine! I'll tell you!" Diane finally conceded. "Zombies did it."

She had to put her hands over her ears as the sheriff roared. He went from red in the face to purple. "Do you need medical attention?" Diane finally asked him.

"Why, I aught'a bust you right here, right now bringing that cockamamie bullshit to this office!" he finally gasped out. "You're supposed to be a professional!"

Diane lowered her hands and calmly looked at the sheriff for several long moments. "So're you!" she shot back. "You won't believe whatever I tell you, and you'll be too lazy to investigate it yourself. Why weren't YOU out there checking out the rumors of disappearances and kids trafficked?" she said at last and realized the truth of her statement. "You don't have to fire me. I quit!"

Officer Stanley's badge hit the desk in front of the sheriff. Her belt and department-issued gun followed the badge. "I'm not afraid of you! I don't have to take your abuse either!" She turned calmly to go. Nothing he could do would scare the hell out of her like what she'd already gone through. She wrinkled her nose. His fit was pitiful by compare. She felt the urge to call on the professor.

"What am I supposed to tell the people of Roane County?" the sheriff demanded. "They will want answers!"

Diane turned back for a moment. "I doubt any of them noticed," she pointed out. Her reply tasted bitter on her tongue. "It's not in the paper, and most of the cultists were misfits, druggies, and runaways. If something ain't right in their face, most people don't see past their selfish concerns."

She struggled with her emotions as she remembered the precious children lost that no one would miss except her. Diane saw them every time she closed her eyes. She wanted to weep. She had to get out; find someplace where she could be at peace.

"I have my eye on you!" the sheriff shouted at her retreating back. "I only hired you because of affirmative action! You ain't nothin'! I'll talk to the judge about you!"

“Whatever! Don’t call me bitch-assin’. I won’t answer!” She grabbed the polished brass door handle and pulled the door open to stalk out. “You too dumb to see the truth if it smacked you in the face, racist white boy,” Diane muttered viciously under her breath.

“I heard that!” Sheriff Wilson yelled.

Diane waved her hand dismissively. She slammed the door behind her so hard the walls shook. Maybe it was childish, the now ex-cop admitted to herself, but stress had taken its toll. Diane shook her head tiredly to clear the fatigue from lack of sleep. Whispers in her mind were keeping her eyes open long after she woke screaming from her dreams each night.

Diane sought out the coffee machine on the way to her locker to collect her personal belongings. Regret sat heavily in her heart, but she was also relieved. Although Diane loved being a cop, other, quieter pursuits also suited her. She would figure out what those were later. For now, she knew where she would spend her free time. The coyote would be waiting for her daily visit. She shuddered, remembering the terrifying reason he recuperated at the veterinarian. Thankfully, Deputy Mulligan’s panicked bullet had missed the coyote’s vitals. She fervently wished others had also been so lucky to survive the mess with Ulfr, Nash, and the skinwalker cult.

“I can’t do anything about it now. First stop? The Vet’s office. Next stop? Medicine Bear’s house,” she said quietly aloud. She realized she was talking to herself again. “Daddy wouldn’t approve of you going crazy like this,” she told herself sternly. “Shut up, Diane.”

Diane repeatedly blinked in an effort to suppress the remembered horrors in her head. With a force of will, she beat back her chaotic thoughts enough to concentrate on stuffing her belongings in a gym bag.

 soft fuzzy blanket beside the couch in the professor’s living room made the coyote comfortable later that evening. He was still slightly sedated. Diane considered the amber color of the stiff drink in her hand and wished she could be sedated too.

“So tell me, Officer Stanley...” her host began.

“Just call me Diane,” she replied matter-of-factly. “I quit today before I went to pick up our friend from the Vet.”

"What did the Veterinarian tell you? How's he doing?" the Medicine Man asked her.

"Uh... well, he did what he could for him. The bullet is out, and he's recovering, but I was advised to take him up to Crossville to a wildlife rehab center. I might take him tomorrow since I won't be off to work with the sheriff's department," Diane told the professor.

"What happened? I'm curious why you quit. I thought you were happy on the Force," he asked.

"Sheriff Wilson is off his rocker over the whole Ulfr thing. He would rather blame people than investigate anything," Diane explained with a heavy sigh. "I've better things to do than pander to the sheriff's delicate sensibilities. There has to be somewhere I can help people rather than be constantly harassed."

"I'm glad our friend there is going to recover, and I know you'll figure out what's best for him... but what about you, Diane?" Professor John 'Medicine Bear' Holderman nodded. "What's going on? As if I can't guess. You look like you've not slept in days."

"The dreams." Diane shivered with the remnants of her fear that caused goosebumps to rise on her arms. "I can't seem to shake it. To make it worse, I'm hearin' voices in my head, and I keep seeing coyotes every time I close my eyes. When I'm not dreamin' about that monstrosity, that is."

"And?" the professor prodded in a gentle tone.

"Dark shapes and snippets of strange music, too. Especially drums. I also keep seein' sand and stones carved with symbols. It's all jumbled. I'm beginning to think I'm goin' crazy," Diane complained. "I've seen a lot in my time on the force. I didn't think anything could shake me this bad. All of it, it's gettin' worse, not better."

Medicine Bear sighed. "You have been challenged spiritually and shaken to your core. I'm not surprised you have leftover trauma."

Diane nodded. "I'll say!"

"But there's more going on than that, I believe," Medicine Bear told her. "Once you walk through that kind of fire, you can never go back to ignorance or innocence. By that, I don't mean guilty. Once you see and know there's more to the universe than what meets the eye, you have to choose sides. You can't then un-see it. You also can't refuse the spiritual challenge you faced and will now face in the future. At least, not without further damage to your spirit."

"I've never been very religious," Diane said.

“This is not a matter of religion. It’s a matter of spirituality.” He smiled gently. “You know what you know now. The Great Spirit, or God in more common terms, is going to speak to you how you can best hear, and you have already chosen a side. When you choose life, to stand by a fallen comrade at risk to yourself is a choice, good over evil.”

“I have no idea what to do now,” Diane told him. “Not for a job, and not personally either. I can’t sleep peacefully, and I can’t function without feeling like I’m falling apart!”

“You listen,” Medicine Bear said gently. “The Great Spirit will guide you. So will your inner voice, your intuition if you prefer. It will tell you what is most important to your heart.”

“I see,” Diane said softly. She sat quietly, sipping her drink as she thought over the shaman’s words. For several minutes they simply sat in companionable silence. Then she made up her mind. “If you will, I would like you to help me. Show me how you do what you do. Then, maybe the nightmares will stop.” She looked earnestly at Medicine Bear. “Will you teach me?”

Medicine Bear considered her question. “It’s not easy. The shamanic path is not a simple one. It’s also not something I can just give you. Our Wiccan friends would tell you the same,” he told her. “Any true spiritual path is a journey. I may be able to explain what is happening to you and I can show you how I do things, but your path is yours to walk.” He paused again and pursed his lips, thinking. “There are also spirits which will speak to you that are not mine because of your ethnic background. I would venture to guess that you have some African spirit guides that are showing interest in you.”

“Even though I was born here in America?” Diane looked surprised.

“Yes. But your blood calls to the Nubian spirits of your ancestors in addition to those of the land upon which you live and were born. Even though all humans are family, your bloodline diverges from ours because you are descended from Noah’s son Ham, who not only was black-skinned but took his family to Africa. His people carved an existence out of that territory in harsh conditions and did so under the watchful eye of the spirit helpers of that land. They don’t forget their own,” Medicine Bear pointed out.

“CO-YO-TE appears in your dreams because you fought for him. He will guide your steps, but other spirits fight on the side of right and are allied with God. Some are from the land of your forefathers

Mary Lou Wells

who came here when your people did. I think you will do well to speak with them, also."

Diane nodded thoughtfully. "I understand what you're saying," she said. She sat forward on the comfortable cushions of the couch. "If you can show me where to start, then?"

"Yes," Medicine Bear agreed. "Come with me out to the garden. We will begin simply. For you to close your mind to the trauma, you must open it first. You will be tested. If you succeed it will make you stronger."

Diane called ahead the next day and made a short trip up Rockwood Mountain onto the Cumberland Plateau. Near Crossville, the Catoosa Wildlife Preserve covered hundreds of acres of pristine wilderness. Diane pulled into the Rehab Center parking lot and sat for a few minutes with the coyote's head on her lap. She was still tired from being up late with Medicine Bear the night before, but at least she had slept peacefully and without hearing screams in her sleep.

Diane helped her companion out of the car. They were met by the wildlife rehab rep. She noticed when she entered that the interior looked like a veterinarian's office and service area. There was an exam table, chairs, and surgical equipment in a second room.

A program license offered by the Center would protect him as long as he was with her or housed there. After witnessing her bond with the animal, the administrator agreed to give her an employment recommendation with the local forestry service. Diane hoped that the coming interview would go well. Animals didn't stress her out nearly as much as humans.



JULY 28, 1985, THE SPACE BETWEEN, ASTRAL PLANE

Nkhdathir growled deep in his throat. His boxy, evil-looking canine-shaped head was held low and ready. Stark white fangs of the daemon flashed against the neutral backdrop of the dead realm and his muscular form. Drool dripped and pooled under him.

Ikhadthir crouched on the bare stones where very little of the hated light penetrated. Darkness hung so thick around him that even the songs of the stars muted to silence. He crept slowly toward the one who had summoned him.

Ikhdathir would have ignored or devoured the summoner for his presumption if the creature he was called to meet were not one of the original Fallen Angels. His low class prevented him from doing so.

He knew he had little chance if this meeting came to blows. His partial dark-born daemonic lineage from the Fallen who sired the first of his kin was too distant to matter. He crept closer. His muscles tensed for fight or flight, and he watched for any sign that the Fallen was only interested in a quick meal. Outranked by strength, Ikhdathir could still perhaps escape.

“Spawn.” The Fallen growled contemptuously at the fear of the half-breed mongrel.

“Lord Jibril,” Ikhdathir acknowledged.

The dremorzen avoided remarking on his companion’s current state of being. Centuries of earth time had passed since he had in truth been considered a dread lord, one of the original archons who followed the angels Azazel and Semjaza when they rebelled against God. Ikhdathir knew that his current companion’s fight with the true Archangel Gabriel over the assumption of Gabriel’s identity in sowing a lie among humanity had brought him to near death.

The Archangel Gabriel had taken it personally and retaliated against his imposter. The Fallen one then became twisted further to this caricature of himself. Though dark and garbled, the name he appropriated stuck. No one was sure at this point if Jibril even remembered his True Name. Ikhdathir’s thoughts were busy, but his face and body didn’t betray him.

The one he faced was still more powerful than any who were not pure dark-born or a Fallen, so Ikhdathir reminded himself to mind his reactions carefully. Even though he towered over the dark angel in size, he was still no match for him in power.

“I have orders that you are to enter the mortal realm of Midgard. Our ally Loki requires his property. Your task is to retrieve the Spear of Chaos from Earth and bring it to me,” the Fallen Angel seethed through the scars that twisted his visage.

The dremorzen-class daemon felt a flash of rage that he should be ordered about, and he wished he could bury his claws in the twisted entity before him. Despite his fear, he still had the urge to feast on the Fallen Angel’s dark essence.

Human suffering held an even greater attraction, however. Ikhdathir smiled through his anger. He flashed his white fangs again in the darkness. Almost, he could smell the blood. His tongue snicked out as if tasting the non-existent wind. Anticipation of the coming feast with orders to go into a mortal realm excited him. However, the danger involved in this type of excursion led him to one crucial question.

“Lord, if I can slip past the guardians of the realms to feast, plunder the corrupt mortals of Midgard, or to steal the spear, why do you not go yourself?” Ikhdathir sneered again to hide his thoughts.

“You are being chosen because your low birth caste and race suits you for slipping into the physical world. You are less than pure spirit and will be solid enough when you touch the spear to bring it here with its power to aid you. You are scum, but you are of use,” Jibril hissed.

“I will go,” Ikhdathir snarled. “You insult, angel. Best curb your tongue.” Ikhdathir flexed his four-fingered hands with a show of his long talons. His anger and hate began to take over his sense of self-preservation. The Fallen’s next words, however, backed him down again.

“Do not get sidetracked,” the angel commanded, ignoring the implied threat. “You haven’t the time to indulge yourself. You may do as you wish after your task is complete, but I am not the most patient of beings.” The angel bared his dagger-like fangs and flared his dark aura to make a show of his strength. “If you fail to acquire the Spear of Chaos, or if you dare attempt to use it yourself, rest assured I will gut you through your core and throw your pieces to the lord guardian of the pathways myself. Anubis can have your stinking hide for a trophy.”

Shrinking back in terror at the brief mention of Anubis, Ikhdathir fully acknowledged the superior position of the other by debasing himself. Tales of the guardian of the pathways terrified the dark ones, and Ikhdathir was no exception. The dremorzen had seen other daemoni splattered at the base of the Moonpaths who dared cross Anubis by attacking the innocent. One of the only things worse for any of his kind would be to face the searing, burning light of the judgment of the Greater Divine.

“There will not be a failure.” The daemon bowed, knowing this had been a foregone conclusion from the start. He was heading to Earth.

“Good,” Jibril told him. “When war breaks out again, we will all feast on the spoils of mankind. Then such destruction will be wrought across all the worlds that God himself will be brought to heel at last! Never again will I take orders from Him. We shall see, when our great leader is first in Heaven, who is greatest then!”

Ikhdathir was not impressed. More intelligent than most of his kind, the dremorzen didn’t bother with a parting word. He kept his thoughts to himself when he turned to be about his charge. He knew the Fallen would kill him if he voiced them.

If the angel is greater, why does he not rule the heavens already? Instead, he languishes in the Abyss while most of his armies lie scattered among the pathways-between. But maybe Jibril is right. Perhaps it is time the daemoni, all of us, take our rightful place as rulers of earth and heaven both and extinguish the Light forever. I will find the Spear of Chaos, but we shall see to whom it belongs when I have it!

Ikhdathir laughed in anticipation as he slid through the nothingness. For a moment, he paused to allow his senses to quest for a break in the energy continuity. He needed to take care trying to enter other astral realms and pathways.

Not only Anubis or Heimdall would threaten him, but the jump itself could kill if he came out in the wrong place. Opposing energy currents could rip him apart, or he might land in the middle of a densely solid object and become trapped. He found a ripple that marked a stable pathway in space and time and jumped. Not a thread of blackness remained to mark his passage.

4

INDESTRUCTIBLE

JULY 30, 1985, KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

"**R**ach's preddy," Mary Lou declared impishly with a gleam in her eye. "Hey Rachul, take-a-look-at-thith."

"What?" Rachel asked as she dodged racks of hanging shirts, belts, and cheap jewelry, "Why are you talking like that all of sudden?" Rachel asked her.

"Cuz, I'm drunk!" Mary Lou lied cheerfully. "Why else?"

"Oh Lord!" Rachel declared, shaking her head. "What next?"

Her friend giggled. She was in a good mood and wanted to play. "Never mind, look at this, it's really cool! I can make it respond without even touching it!"

"Wow! That IS cool!" Rachel watched the glass energy ball's electric current move wherever Mary Lou hovered her fingers over the ball or touched it. "I've never seen that before. It must be new."

They played with it for several minutes before walking out of the mall gift store without purchasing it. Mary Lou regretfully left her toy behind and peered through the crowd.

"Where did Ken and Sierra go?" she wondered aloud.

"Down there." Rachel pointed. "They're heading into Crystal Visions. I wanted to go in there anyway. We can catch up to them and look around. We have time to do that before we eat and go see if there's a good movie playing at the theater."

"Sounds good to me," Mary Lou agreed. "I think "Back to the Future" is still playing, and I'd also like to see "The Black Cauldron." It looks cool. We might not have time for the movie, though. I have to get back to my parent's house. My Dad's been hateful lately about

me hanging out with you guys. I think my grandparents have said a bunch of crap about how I'm on drugs, and you're a bad influence."

"They don't know you very well, do they?" Rachel said and rolled her eyes.

Mary Lou responded, "No. They are completely clueless. I'm the last person on earth likely ever to do something like that. They don't bother to really know me. Now they have the rest of the family thinking I'm the black sheep or something."

"If only they knew what was really going on," Rachel said softly.

"And we aren't going to tell them either," Mary Lou told her friend firmly as she tried and failed to awkwardly slide down the rail of the stairs on the way to the next storefront. "They probably wouldn't believe it and call me a liar, or else they would be scared shitless. Either way, it would be more trouble than it's worth to explain that we're carrying around the most dangerous artifact created in the last thousand years aside from the atomic bomb and that we're the ones who have to destroy it or else."

They found Kenneth and Sierra browsing the jewelry and stones. Kenneth was admiring a huge hollow raw Amethyst full of dark purple crystals.

"Now that's a big rock!" Mary Lou exclaimed, coming up behind him with a handful of crystals and a leather bag from the raw stones bin she'd passed on the way into the store. The sparkles in the Goldstone had caught her eye, so she'd gone ahead and purchased them. The Amethyst was nearly as tall as herself, the girl realized. "Ith's preddy!" she giggled at herself.

"What's wrong with you?" Kenneth asked, eying her sideways.

"Other than being hungry?" Mary Lou smiled crookedly. "Welth, 'm drunk! Can't 'cha tell?"

He eyed her. "Uh, huh, yeah, um, okay," Kenneth agreed, completely unconvinced.

"Watsamatter Ken? Yu canth taketh a yoke?" she slurred and leaned on him, nearly knocking him off balance.

Kenneth put his arm around her to steady them both. Her good-natured high-jinx caught on. Ready to blow off some steam himself, he joined in the fun. "Yeth, can taketh a yoke," he slurred back with a grin and draped himself on her in turn. She staggered under his weight and giggled out loud.

"Here," she said as she got under his arm, "lesh go to gesh some food. I'll help ya to a chair since yur too drunketh to walketh."

"Kay..." Kenneth agreed and nodded. Together they walked out of the store, weaving on their feet and holding each other up.

"Petros chili n chips, Pizza or sammich?" Kenneth inquired.

"Petros," Mary Lou said. "Wif lotsa sower creem," she deliberately drawled out her southern Appalachian accent.

"I'd drather have a nisshe bloody steak," Kenneth declared, "but Petros it ishh." He pointed the direction they were going and began singing loudly off-key, getting fully in the spirit of their game.

"I don't know you two," Rachel said behind them but followed them out anyway. "I am not with you," she shook her head to clear what seemed like an odd buzzing in her ears. "Sierra, let's go get something to eat. I'm famished. I'm ready for some Chik-fil-A and a milkshake."

Rachel wasn't drunk as the other two pretended, but somehow suddenly, she felt oddly distant from her surroundings. Her nerves, already reeling from their experience several days before, were making her feel anxious and uptight in the crowd. She struggled with not remembering the melting faces and dead hands grabbing at her ankles while she desperately fought for her life. She had stared her death in the face that day and barely escaped.

"Ohh, hot, sexy mama!"

Rachel stopped short. A young guy in a blue mohawk walking with a girl in slashed jeans and a nose ring was eyeing her. She didn't see his mouth move but could have sworn he'd said something.

Sierra stopped, nearly running into her cousin. "What's wrong, Rach?"

"What did you say?" Rachel half turned to stop him.

"What?" he asked with a puzzled frown.

"Nevermind," Rachel told them as the passing couple scurried away and disappeared in the crowd of slow-moving mall shoppers. Her black hair flowed around her face as she shook her head and shivered. The buzzing seemed louder. "I'm losing my mind," Rachel muttered and huffed in frustration.

"Nobody said anything, Rachel," Sierra told her cousin. She was puzzled. "You've been acting all weird since we came back from that old church in Rockwood," Sierra observed. "You've never been scared before, but now you act like you're seeing ghosts around every corner."

"Do you wanna tell me you ain't jumpy as heck too after all that?" Rachel demanded, "cuz' you haven't wanted to be alone for five minutes since then!"

"Yeah, so? I don't," she declared. "What if the Viking isn't really gone after all, and he's going to come strolling in here when we

aren't expecting it? Then what? We're sitting ducks with nobody to help us if we're caught by ourselves."

Neither of the two young women cared that they were stopped in the middle of the throughway, blocking foot traffic flow as they talked. They ignored the glares of those who had to dodge around them like waves parting around a boulder to avoid a crash.

"He's gone!" Rachel declared fervently. "He has to be! The alternative is too awful to think about." The voices around her seemed to increase in volume. Rachel wanted to clamp her hands over her ears. It was enough to make her move with the flow of the crowd finally. "Let's just go find the others."

Sierra nodded in agreement and followed her cousin. *What if?* She thought to herself as she did many times each day. *What if he isn't gone?* She had been working herself to a paranoid frenzy, and she could tell by Rachel's jumpiness and her new habit of talking to thin air that her cousin was just as fearful as she was.

he friends found a side table at the food court with enough elevation to see everything around them. Their cheerful conversation as they ate was belied by cautious glances that took in all of their surroundings and noted the people who walked by.

Halfway through their meal, Mary Lou watched another group of teens move past them sporting leather, studs, and mullet haircuts. She dismissed them as unimportant. Her gaze lit on three mall security guards who were talking and seemed to be looking in their general direction. Her eyes narrowed, noting that they were watching her. "Hmmm," she said aloud. *This could be a problem,* she thought.

"What could be a problem?" Rachel asked her around a mouthful of chicken sandwich. "What's wrong?"

"Mall security," Mary Lou said, eyeing her friend with raised eyebrows. "But we aren't doing anything wrong. We didn't steal anything, so it's no big deal."

Rachel and Sierra turned to look. Kenneth was busy mixing his bowl of food and didn't look around.

"Why are they watching us like that?" Rachel's eyes widened. The buzzing in her ears was beginning to get on her nerves. Nothing was making sense. Rachel felt like she was inside a movie with people talking but not moving their lips.

“Probably the same reason Daddy doesn’t like working day shift security at West Town Mall on the other side of Knoxville.” Mary Lou shrugged. “We’re kids. So they don’t like us, and they’re just waiting for us to do something so they can call the cops.”

“Just ignore it,” Kenneth told them. “We have a half-hour to finish eating before the movies start. We need to be deciding what movie we’re watching.” He took a bite, grimaced, took another bite, and put his spoon down.

“Oh Lord. That’s all we need,” Rachel muttered. “There’s more cops after us.” She popped a waffle fry into her mouth and chewed it to bits.

“Nobody’s after us,” Kenneth told her. *You’re being paranoid*, he thought but didn’t add aloud.

“I’m not paranoid.” Rachel glared at him.

“I didn’t say you were,” Kenneth said.

“Yes, you did. I just heard you,” Rachel retorted.

“No. I didn’t,” Kenneth countered. “I told you a few weeks back that it’s not a good idea to read other people’s minds. I thought it, but I didn’t say it.” He picked up his spoon again and waved it at her for emphasis.

Giving up on his food, he grabbed a bite out of Mary Lou’s bowl, who merely gave him a good-natured glare. Hers didn’t taste any better. He gave up and put his spoon down. “It’s not a bloody steak!” he complained.

“He didn’t say that, Rachel,” Sierra chewed on her lip with a puzzled expression.

“Yeah, but you do it all the time,” Mary Lou pointed out.

“Do what?” Rachel asked.

“Ken. He’s always fin...” Mary Lou began.

“...ishing your sentences for you,” Kenneth smirked.

“Yeah, that. So you’re always reading my mind like we have some weird psychic connection or something.”

The teens had quit watching the security guards, so Rachel jumped when one of them walked up behind her and spoke to them. Sierra glared at him and saved her cup from getting knocked over.

“I need you kids to come with me,” he said.

“We are eating,” Mary Lou told him. She was undaunted by his stern voice and official-looking uniform. “We aren’t finished. Why? What’s the issue?”

“We had a report of a disturbance. I am going to have to ask you to leave.” Reflected light gleamed off the guard’s brass nametag as he spoke.

"Hey!" Sierra objected.

"We will leave after we finish eating," Mary Lou said, gesturing at the table. "We paid for this food. If you wanted us to leave, you could have said something before we ordered or sat down."

"Have you kids been drinking?" the security guard demanded.

"Yeah." She gestured around at their cups. "Coke, Sprite, and I've got water," Mary Lou said with a bite to her tone.

"Don't get smart with me, missy," the man said warily.

"You asked, I answered," she pointed out. "You are being unreasonable, and you aren't my boss."

"Mary Lou, let's just go. It's okay. I'm nearly done anyway." Rachel began to push her chair back.

"But I'm not." Mary Lou was glaring now as if she wanted to strangle the guard.

"That's because you spend more time talking than eating," Kenneth told her. "You can eat later. They're throwing us out."

Her friends got up and picked up their trash while Mary Lou sat there unwilling to comply. A quick wave from Kenneth changed her mind. "Fine!"

She stuffed her spare napkins in her pocket. When all their trash was thrown away, they walked out ahead of the guard. Mary Lou eyed the kiosk that included caramel corn and chocolate fudge in its display as they passed but exited as Kenneth led the way.

"Wouldn't you know it?" she said when she saw the weather had changed while they were inside. Puddles had already formed underneath the gray sky. Raindrops vigorously splashed droplets across the pavement. Mary Lou could hear water trickling in a nearby storm drain as Kenneth held the door open. It sounded louder when she exited the mall entrance.

"Well, at least it matches my mood," she muttered furiously under her breath. In her anger, she practically stomped out the glass double doors. Her pique made her slow to respond when the world seemed to go crazy.



"Look out!" Sierra shouted. She lagged behind Mary Lou, and both girls were helpless to stop what unfolded with lightning speed in front of them.

The last in line, Sierra was able to jump back from where she had been about to step off the curb to dash through the thunderstorm to the car with the others. A red Ford pickup truck,

which had just tried to speed through the pedestrian zone in low visibility, lost control and skidded on the wet pavement.

The driver cursed as he saw them at the last moment through the driving rain and his bald tires gained no grip when he punched the brake. The back end of his truck went sideways as the horrified driver realized too late he was about to kill someone.

“Move, Rach..!”

Rachel screamed as Kenneth pushed her out of the way and went down himself, rolling under the wheels of the truck.

“Kenneth!” Mary Lou shouted.

“Oh, my God!” Sierra sucked in her breath and held it. She froze where she stood and watched as the driver gunned his engine in panic. Tires squealed as he sped off into the rain. All Sierra saw of its retreat was a confederate flag sticker on the back window and a bumper sticker that read ‘Jesus Saves.’

“Our problems aren’t over just because we killed the bad guy,” Mary Lou said quietly to Kenneth so only he could hear her.

The girl’s breathing was slightly ragged as the panic minutes before was replaced with relief. She tried to take deeper breaths to calm down. Mary Lou squatted in a puddle of water in East Town Mall’s parking lot with Kenneth and tried to come to grips with what had just happened.

“Goddamnit, Rachel! Didn’t your mamma ever teach you to look both ways before crossing the street?” Kenneth griped.

Although the rain still raised goosebumps where it chilled them, Mary Lou was grateful that it seemed to be lessening to a sprinkle. She gently held a wad of clean napkins on Kenneth’s bleeding leg. “I thought you were dead for sure.”

“No, I ain’t dead, but I’m mad as hell!” he replied through gritted teeth. “But yeah, I think you are probably right,” he told her. “Shit keeps piling up. What are those security dipshits doing back there anyway? Did they see anything?”

Mary Lou looked up at the mall security guard and glared at him again. She kept control of her anger despite feeling that all of this was security’s fault. “He’s on his radio,” Mary Lou replied to Kenneth. “I can’t hear what he’s saying, but they’re probably calling the police.”

The guard saw her looking at him and came over to them. Sierra finally dared to step into the parking lot and came with him.

"We've called an ambulance. An officer is on the way," the guard told the bedraggled teen sitting on the soaked pavement. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine! I'm sitting in a pool of my own blood after getting run over by a truck," Kenneth gritted his teeth to keep from snapping at the man. "I ain't getting in no fuckin' ambulance. That costs money," he replied, motioning to Mary Lou to back off. He twisted his torso to place his hands against the ground and lever himself up without putting pressure on his wounded leg.

The sergeant raised a skeptical eyebrow. "How did you survive that?" the man's eyes were wide as he asked. He watched Kenneth stand up. "That is one of the worst hit-and-runs I've ever seen, and I've been at this job for years, seen a lot. That pickup went clean over the top of you. You should have been crushed, and you don't even have a broken bone."

"Physics." Kenneth shrugged dismissively.

Rachel stood back with Sierra, who watched what was happening with her mouth set in a firm line. Sierra's eyes glittered with tears, and she simply shook her head while Rachel sobbed with near hysteria.

"Let's go. It's not as bad as it looks," Kenneth told his companions. "My clothes are ruined, though." He tugged his jeans down to hide the ripped flesh over his shinbone and ankle.

Mary Lou looked up at the sky. "At least the rain has stopped." Hints of an ozone taste lingered in the air. There was also a faint tinge of sulfur and prickle of electricity. She sniffed deeply, puzzled. She remembered that smell from their fight with Ulfr. It troubled her, but she didn't mention it to the others. She pursed her lips and glanced at Rachel, who was clearly unable to handle anything more at the moment.

As they helped Kenneth limp to his car, he grumbled at Mary Lou. "I can walk on my own," he frowned. "But, I think somebody else will need to drive."

"I'll drive," Sierra volunteered.

"Where to?" Mary Lou wanted to know. "Should we take you home?"

"He's bleeding!" Rachel whimpered. "We should get him to a doctor."

"And tell them what? That I got run over, or that we have a curse on our heads?" Kenneth asked sourly. "No. I'm not going to no damn doctor. Just give me the towel and get in."

They all piled into the car and sorted out their seating arrangements. Kenneth sat in the front with Sierra and dabbed at his wound. “The bleeding’s stopped. I’m okay.”

“I think...” Sierra paused. “That we should go to the professor. He at least knows what’s going on. I also think maybe we should go pick up Carly and the spear and head back to home territory and get his help getting rid of the stupid curse.”

“Works for me,” Kenneth groaned as he stretched his leg out.

“Okay,” Sierra replied and started the car. “At least doing something is better than sitting around waiting for something even worse to happen.”

Ghe ride to Carly’s house was uneventful, but Sierra’s mood didn’t improve when the younger girl got permission to go with them. Sierra only looked sourly at the Spear of Chaos as she opened the hatchback. Carly placed it wrapped in towels in the back of the older girl’s car.

“Oh, My God!” Rachel complained from the back seat. She shivered when the spear came close.

“What did you tell them?” Mary Lou asked.

“I told them we were going to our grandparents at the lake house, or they wouldn’t have let me come with you. They think this is the badminton poles and net. I didn’t tell them any different,” Carly grinned. “Mom told me to make sure to bring it back and put it away where I got it when I come home.”

“Not bloody likely... I’m surprised mom and dad said it’s okay,” Mary Lou peered at the house to see their Mom looking out the window.

“Yeah, well, daddy’s been more hateful than ever about me hanging out with you and your friends lately, but he figures this saves him a drive to Harriman.” Carly shrugged. “Daddy’s getting ready for work at West Town Mall anyway.”

“You always get your way with him,” Mary Lou complained, but then turned away, “It’s just as well, though, because we need you with us today.”

Carly just looked for a spot to sit and wedged herself between Rachel and Mary Lou in the back seat. “Let’s do this,” she said.

“We can stop and pick up my Celebrity at the lake house, so they don’t have to bring us back. I’ll drive it separate,” Mary Lou told her.

"And we don't have to explain where we're going if it's just us," Carly agreed.

Mary Lou glanced at her sister. "Kenneth can ride with us. We'll drop his car off. He needs the extra room with that leg, and I don't care what they think anyway."

"Your parents don't trust you guys at all, do they?" Sierra looked at them in the rear view mirror as she put the car into gear.

"No. Our parents don't trust *her*," Carly added.

"That's just stupid!" Rachel said as they pulled away from the curb.

"No eyes to see what they're looking at," Kenneth remarked. "Although to be fair, she's up to a lot these days, and she's not telling them jack shit."

"So!" Mary Lou retorted. "I bet you're not exactly talking either."

"Nothing to explain." Kenneth waved his hand, unconcerned. "We saved the world. Now we just need to get rid of this damned spear b'fore the god of chaos comes looking for us. Simple, right?"



"**W**here are we going?" Carly asked Mary Lou as she slowed the gray four-door Chevy Celebrity to look at the names on the mailboxes of the cul-de-sac on the right-hand side of the road.

"I'm looking for Dr. Holderman's name on his mailbox. I know he lives close to Moira. I think it's just past her farm."

Kenneth grumbled from the back seat, "You may as well call her Skuld. There's no reason to continue pretending that she's mortal anyway."

Mary Lou nodded. "True, but I can't exactly call her that in public."

"It's not like the average idiot knows their Norse mythology," Kenneth snorted cynically.

Carly looked in the mirror and saw that Sierra's red hatchback slowed down just behind them. It also turned in past the white rail fence that marked the edge of Skuld's property line. Mary Lou pulled her Celebrity past Skuld's drive and discovered a dead-end road with another mailbox. This one had 'Holderman' on the side written in faded stick-on letters.

"I guess this is the right place," Mary Lou muttered to herself and drove up a winding paved road that came close to Moira's fence and gravel driveway, then it branched off toward the base of the

mountains. The girls could see that a large field separated the two homes, but the lady's house was just out of the line of sight.

The professor's house was simpler than Skuld's jumble of outbuildings clustered around her white frame house. John's austere taste showed in his cabin's natural red-brown wood look and simple covered porch. Instead of shingles, the house sported a green corrugated roof with rain barrels to avoid wasting water.

The girls could see a woodpile and a small domed structure half-hidden by trees behind the house when they stopped. The large red cat they'd seen next door was sleepily sunning itself on John's porch rails. John 'Medicine Bear' Holderman appeared in the doorway as Sierra pulled in beside them.

"Hey, this is cool," Mary Lou remarked as they all piled out of the cars. "It's simple and looks like a bachelor's digs. I like the cabin." She eyed the green roof, noting how the colors neatly complemented each other.

Sierra was less charitable. "Yeah, if you like someplace that looks like you would hitch a stinky ole horse."

Mary Lou was taken aback. "There's nothing wrong with horses. Humanity wouldn't have gotten this far without them," she pointed out archly.

"Sierra, rude much?" Kenneth asked as he got stiffly out of the car. Mary Lou noted he favored his leg less than he was when they'd stopped to change vehicles at her grandparent's house.

John appeared at the door. He waited, leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed. "This is an awfully big group for just a casual visit. I thought we were done with world-ending complications," he stated dryly.

John didn't give any outward sign of the icy prickles that were crawling up his spine. The large wrapped item Carly pulled out of Sierra's car confirmed the professor's suspicions.

The shaman could sense the dark energies rolling off of what he knew was the Spear of Chaos. Concerned, he could also see taint setting in at the edges of the auras of the teens. Their colors were still there. He could faintly see Kenneth's bright gold and Mary Lou's electric blue, Rachel's violet, Sierra's green, Carly's orange, but they were muted, muddied by the presence of the spear.

Ghe large red cat that had been lazing on the porch rail now sat up. The cat pricked his ears while flicking his long furry tail

slowly. He purred as he listened intently to the conversation. Intelligent green eyes moved to watch Mary Lou as she spoke.

"Hello, professor," Mary Lou greeted. "We needed a place to go to destroy the spear. None of us can do it at home with our families watching everything we do. We called Moira, uh – Skuld." She glanced at Kenneth. "Skuld didn't answer the phone, so we came here to see if you could help us."

"So you brought it here without calling me first," John observed. He didn't bother to hide his grimace at the menace he felt emanating from The Wolf's weapon.

"Should we go, then?" Mary Lou briefly wondered where they should try to go that would be private enough, but his following words relaxed her.

"No," John told her. "I will have to help you see this through to its distasteful conclusion. I don't think any of us will rest easy until this is done for good." John uncrossed his arms. "Go on around back. There are some chairs out at the fire pit."

"**S**o now what?" Carly asked the professor when he joined them in the backyard.

"Well, what are our options?" he asked as he pulled up a chair to sit down with a beer in his hand.

Carly looked around the yard. "Bust up the spear, burn it?" she asked tentatively. She stopped as she heard another car.

"Carve the thing into little pieces with a carving knife?" Mary Lou shrugged.

"Soak the wood 'til it falls apart? Hey, that sounds like Bryan's car," Rachel said. "D'you want me to go see? I let him know we were on our way out here."

"I will go," the professor told her. "You stay here and help them figure out how you all want to approach this."

"Okay," Rachel agreed.

Mary Lou examined one of the chairs for spiders and then sat down to think. "Well... at least there's a fire pit here to burn it. I don't think soaking it will do anything, and besides, where would we put it to soak anyway?"

Rachel chewed her nails and sat on the edge of another chair, trying unsuccessfully not to bounce her leg with nerves. Sierra was more outwardly calm. She moved a heavy mattock off a large stump

before sitting down beside Carly, who planted the butt of the spear in the dirt.

"The first option sounds good to me," Kenneth said. "Cleansing the spear in holy fire might do the trick."

"Sounds like we have a plan then," Carly agreed. "It's too big for the fire pit, though, which is why I think we'll have to bust it up first." She wrinkled her nose in distaste at the corrupt feeling that just oozed off of it. The only reason she could stand it at all was the blood ruby hanging around her neck. Skuld's gift seemed to blunt the worst effects. It had been nearly two weeks since their fight with Ulfr, which gained the ancient Viking spear that Carly held. She still could not tolerate touching the accursed object for long.

In moments Bryan arrived with the professor. "Hi, guys! So, what're we doin'?"

"We're burning the Spear of Chaos," Kenneth responded.

"Okay," Bryan said. "I'm ready." He bounced on his toes.

"If the professor don't mind us starting a fire here," Rachel spoke tentatively as if she thought the answer might be no.

John bit his lip and eyed the Spear of Chaos thoughtfully. "We'll need more than wood for this. We'll need smudge and sacred herbs to help dispel the evil stink as it burns."

Rachel and Kenneth looked at each other and grimaced. Carly glared at the spear. "I don't care how it smells. I just want it gone."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Mary Lou asked.

"If you kids will go over to that pile and bring some of those split logs over here, I'll go in and get some of the supplies I need. If any of you know how to put a proper fire together, you can start doing that too." John turned to the boys. "You two can split some of those into kindling. Carly, just hang loose and keep hold of that thing. It won't be much longer now."

Carly sighed deeply. "I've waited this long."

Mary Lou, Rachel, and Sierra started gathering wood blocks and bringing them to the ring of stones one by one.

"Ooomph! These are kinda heavy." Sierra sat hers down and complained after her second trip, "Damn, I broke a nail!"

"So, are you going to just sit there or go help them?" Kenneth asked Sierra when she plopped bonelessly in the chair Rachel had vacated.

"I'm resting," Sierra pouted and chewed her broken nail.

"Resting don't get the job done," Kenneth said sourly. "You had the energy to go into the cave and let Mr. Uber Undead, Evil Badass, out of his cage; you can carry a few frickin' sticks of wood!" He

reached down and picked up the mattock, shaking his head in disbelief. Kenneth found his leg still hurt and limped slightly.

"If it hadn't been me, it would've been somebody else," Sierra retorted.

Carly struck furiously before Kenneth could reply, "But it wasn't! You did it, and then you didn't tell anybody. You're right, but what if a little kid had wandered in there after you? What then? Saying it could be anybody doesn't change the fact that you are the one who broke his bindings!"

"It's Tyrone's fault!" Sierra exclaimed. "He's the one who wanted to go up there to explore. I had nothing to do with that!"

"Were you there?" Kenneth asked her. "You followed him knowing you shouldn't?"

"Well, yes, but..." Sierra trailed off, not knowing how to respond.

"Then shut up with the excuses and bring me some wood over here to chop. My leg still hurts." Kenneth waved Sierra over to the wooden block she had dropped. "And you have never been kind to him, you know."

"After what he did!" Sierra huffed before throwing herself out of the chair and stomping over to the piece of wood. She then picked it up and carried it over to Kenneth. Sierra threw it down, where it nearly slammed into his hurt leg as it rolled.

Bryan caught the wood as Kenneth jumped back. "Here, Ken." Bryan reached out for the mattock. "I can do this part."

"Damnit, girl!" Kenneth cussed at Sierra before turning to his friend. "Bryan, I ain't no damn cripple!" Kenneth objected. He snatched the mattock back.

"Fine, I'll go grab that ax," Bryan told him and walked off.

"You do that," Kenneth nodded to Bryan. He looked grimly at Sierra and continued. "I know what Tyrone did, and it was wrong on so many levels, but he was a victim too. You just never saw it or acknowledged it. You were too busy worrying about yourself while your boyfriend suffered."

"He wasn't my boyfriend." Sierra curled her lip in scorn. "White girls that date black guys at school are called trash names and practically run out of town."

"For all intents and purposes, he was. If the Viking's magic hadn't mentally addled him, we would have seen an entirely different person," Kenneth pointed out. "In this case, skin color is irrelevant. You were best friends, and he loved you. His end is tragic. It's not his fault the two of you were ill-prepared for what you found."

In response, Sierra hung her head low. She brought more wood for Kenneth to bust into smaller pieces to avoid answering.

Bryan pried a full-size wood ax out of a log and hefted it. “This’ll work!” He strutted back to the fire pit with a grin on his face. “Hey, Carly?”

“Hey, what?” Carly responded.

“Put that thing down over here.” Bryan rearranged two of the larger blocks about three feet apart. “I’ll go ahead and chop it up to make it easier to burn.”

“Dude, that’ll never work,” Kenneth said and stared at Bryan with a deadpan look. *Surely he’s not that stupid.* Kenneth thought. *But I could be wrong.*

“Sure it will. This ax has plenty of heft, and it’s sharp,” Bryan said.

“It’s not the ax that’s the problem, dude.” Kenneth rolled his eyes and shut his mouth.

“Ah, nah. I busted a broom handle about this size the other day over my knee,” Bryan bragged. Kenneth just stared at him incredulously and finally shrugged but stood back to watch.

Carly carefully placed the Spear of Chaos on the two blocks and stood back out of the way. Mary Lou, Rachel, and Sierra also stopped to watch.

Moments later, the professor could hear shouting outside, from inside his house. “Whoa! Hold up there! Ho!”

“Told ya!” Kenneth said as he took in the results of Bryan’s first attempt at chopping the Spear of Chaos in half. “That thing’s a thousand years old. It’s probably petrified practically into stone by now since it’s not rotted.”

Bryan looked up from his position flat on his back and groaned. The ax lay three feet behind Bryan’s head, where the recoil had caused the handle to split into two parts and the blade to separate from the shaft. The spear itself appeared untouched.

“Did’ya learn a damn thing?” Kenneth asked Bryan.

“Well,” the professor said as he came up behind them, “we’re going to need...”

“A really big bonfire, professor?” Kenneth finished for the Medicine Man.

“Yeah, that,” the professor laughed. “But I was also going to say a new ax. As for the spear, we’ll have to put it on the fire as it is.”

“I’m on it,” Kenneth told him. “It’ll be big, though.”

John eyed the ring of stones and the spear, calculating the size difference. “It will have to be. Move those rocks back about three feet so we can build the fire up,” he said.

The teens all moved the stones and added wood to create a pyramid-shaped structure. Finally, judging it big enough, Carly slotted the spear into the stack to test its stability.

“That’s good right there,” John nodded in approval.

“D’you have any lighter fluid?” Bryan had picked himself up and was plucking grass out of his short light brown hair.

“We don’t need lighter fluid... not for this fire. We only use natural materials in a sacred fire. Since this is a special case, it must be done properly. Besides, I came prepared,” the professor smiled and paused, considering. “Here, I’ll do the herbs.”

The trees and grass shivered as a single gust of wind rolled over them. Thunder rumbled in the distance, though there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. The shadow of a hawk passed over them as it circled overhead. John could see movement at the edges of his vision. Quick flitting white shapes disappeared when he tried to look directly at them. “The spirits are with us in this. I can only hope it will be enough.” Professor Holderman suppressed a flash of foreboding as the spear pulsed hungrily in response to the rise in energy.

Sierra wrinkled her nose. “I don’t see anything.”

“One would think that you would have learned to use your eyes by now,” Kenneth replied.

Mary Lou reached back and scratched her spine between her shoulder blades, shifting uncomfortably. A sensation between an itch and a muscle cramp pulsed up her spine. In addition to goosebumps, it felt like something moved beneath the skin of her back. Sierra gave her a dirty look as she bumped her accidentally.

“Ooops. Sorry,” Mary Lou said. “Hey! I see them too.” Hers and Kenneth’s eyes followed the darting shapes as they swirled across the clearing.

“I still think you all are crazy,” Sierra said scathingly.

“You were the one who started seeing things first,” Mary Lou pointed out archly.

Kenneth held out his hand for a fist bump, to which Mary Lou met him halfway.

Sierra huffed at their antics. “Can we just get on with it?” Sierra whined and looked to Rachel for support.

Rachel was tight-lipped and nodded without saying anything. The indistinct whispers in her head were louder.

Carly agreed, "Let's just light it." She briefly shivered as it felt like an icy hand grabbed her forehead and sent cold tingles down her scalp and spine. The young girl got the impression she had just missed something important. Foresight was coming more frequently lately, but it had proved to be a temperamental gift and prone to be unclear. Carly shook off her gut feeling that they shouldn't do this. She stayed silent and watched as the professor placed chunks of pine resin and kindling in strategic places around the firewood.

Professor John Holderman, Medicine Man, was also uncomfortable as he worked. He hummed softly and chanted while sprinkling sage and tobacco on the fire. As he did so, he could sense the spear calculating, amused at their efforts as if it was awake and waiting like a snake coiled, poised to strike. Professor John Holderman started to reconsider when Kenneth stepped forward and struck the match.

The professor could feel his totem spirit guide Shay at his side. He had been his companion since childhood. The large gray spirit wolf with bright blue, glowing eyes leaned against him. The man felt radiating warmth and comfort even though John could only make out a vague outline. Shay waited to assist him.

The professor drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, steeling himself. He took the long match from Kenneth, who stood close as the tiny fire touched the pine resin. It immediately began to sizzle and melt onto the wood, helping to spread the flame.

It took a few minutes of patience and careful blowing, but the fire caught with the first match. "Ah, a good omen." The professor smiled. "It usually takes two or three matches even on the pine," he said.

The Spear of Chaos sat quietly in the fire until the flames started licking along its bladed tip. It drew energy from the fire into itself. The fire turned bright green and swirled around the shaft without touching it. Before John could give warning, the fire pulsed once with a loud pop against the ring of sacred stones, retreated, roared high over their heads, and exploded outward.

Burning shards of wood sprayed in all directions. Closest to the fire, the professor took the brunt of the blast in the face and was thrown clear. John felt his wolf spirit guide envelop him in a protective embrace in the last instant of consciousness.

Kenneth caught enough of the embers and resin that his clothes caught fire. Everyone else was knocked off their feet in an instant.

Mary Lou Wells

The girls were screaming and beating embers out of their hair and any exposed skin. Bryan came to his feet without eyebrows where the heat singed them.

Kenneth quickly realized that he was not nearly as hurt as he should be. On noticing that his skin wasn't burning, he calmly patted the fire off his legs. In quick succession, he found that bending and stretching his calf muscles no longer hurt, and his wounds were gone. The fire itself simply gave a faint prickling sensation.

Kenneth noted that the bonfire was out with the spear still in pristine condition. He bared his teeth at it and growled in response to the impression that it was taunting them. He looked around for the professor and groaned with dismay.

"Uh, you guys?" Kenneth stared at the ground where the professor lay prone. "We have a huge problem."

5

CONSEQUENCES

"s everybody okay?" Rachel was too dizzy to do anything but sit up while Mary Lou and Carly slowly climbed to their feet.

"Oh. My. God!" Sierra exclaimed haltingly. For once, she was shocked out of saying anything snide. She just stared at the professor, or what had been the professor. "Is he dead? What in the crap just happened?" Sierra's eyes were big as saucers.

"I don't know. I'm just as lost as you are on this one," Kenneth told her. "I've never seen anybody turned into a wolf before, well, not unless it's in a really stupid horror flick." He shook his head in confusion and went to check on the medicine man. The professor was bone-chillingly still, but Kenneth could feel a heartbeat. Their ally was indisputably now an enormous wolf.

"He's alive. It's hard to say how badly he's hurt aside from being a werewolf," Kenneth told them.

He considered a moment. "That's not all that's weird." He stood and removed a lighter from his back pocket. "Check this one out. Ummm, this is new. I heal fast, but damn! Look!" Kenneth said. He lit the lighter and ran it along the skin of his forearm.

"What are you doing?" Rachel gasped.

"You haven't had enough fire?" Mary Lou asked him in dismay.

"Oh shit!" Carly exclaimed. "You aren't burned at all!"

"Not at all, and look. My leg looks like nothing ever happened to it." Kenneth pulled up what was left of his pants to show them that his skin had no burns and the wounds from getting run over by the truck that morning were simply gone.

"Wow. That's freaky," Carly said quietly. "So, now what do we do?"

"The spear," Sierra said, ignoring anything the others had to say. "The spear did it." She stood, staring at it and staring at the

professor, who was still unconscious. “You all can do what you want, but I’m leaving. Let me know how it turns out. No...” She stopped. “On second thought, don’t,” she continued in a flat tone. Sierra’s car keys jingled in her hand as she waved them for emphasis.

“Where are you going?” Mary Lou asked her. “We are supposed to be destroying this thing today.”

Sierra turned on her. “Mary Lou, what do you think any of you, or me, can do to destroy a thing that can cause this sort of madness?” Sierra demanded as she snapped her fingers. “I never wanted any part of this in the first place.”

“Not to burst your bubble or anything, but I will remind you that we are all in this because of you,” Kenneth pointed out. “You need to see this through the same as any of the rest of us.”

“No,” Sierra said firmly. “I don’t. You can all leave me alone. I’m going home. I don’t believe in any of this anymore! I can’t take any more of this shit!”

In a fit of anger, she kicked the spear on the ground. As soon as she touched it, she felt such a wave of hate take over her gut it nearly left her breathless. She looked at Mary Lou and grimaced. “Pitiful. I will see ya’ around at college if you live long enough to get there.” With that, Sierra turned on her heel, walked away, and left the rest of them looking at one another helplessly.

“Bitchy!” Carly muttered. They could hear Sierra’s car engine start running. The sound faded as Sierra left the Shadow Angels behind for good.

“I didn’t abandon her,” Mary Lou said sadly. “She would have died without us, sacrificed on that stone altar.

“No, you didn’t, and neither did we.” Carly shook her head. “But... she’s bitter inside after the living nightmare that all of us went through, and not everyone has the same kind of heart you do.”

“It’s been rough on everyone,” Bryan said. “Nobody expected to have to deal with any of this. Better to let her go than try to hold her back. We have other problems to deal with, like now what?”

Carly shrugged, thinking. “Maybe somebody should get a stick and poke the professor to see if he’ll wake up?”

“I say we let sleeping werewolves lie,” Bryan said dubiously.

“No. We can’t leave the professor there on the ground like that.” Rachel smacked Bryan’s arm. “We need to get him inside. He was helping us, so we need to help him; ‘sides, you’re the medical person.”

I'm a paramedic, NOT a Vet, Bryan thought uncharitably... and werewolves eat people.

"He is so not going to eat us!" Rachel shouted at him. "That's the professor, so you can just take that back!"

"Hey, I didn't say otherwise!" Bryan defended himself. "I didn't say anything. I just thought it."

"Quit lying! I heard you loud and clear," Rachel protested vehemently.

"Um, no Rach', he didn't say anything." Mary Lou looked at her questioningly. "You were doing that at the mall. Like we told you earlier, you ARE reading minds; only a lot stronger or not limited to one person."

"Oh, Lord," Rachel said and covered her eyes with her hands, "I didn't mean it."

"Didn't mean what?" Mary Lou was puzzled.

"When you said you wanted to read minds?" Kenneth grinned. "Maybe you shouldn't have asked for it."

Rachel glanced at him through her fingers. "I just thought I'ze goin' crazy."

"No argument there." Kenneth grinned wider.

"Not helping, Ken," Mary Lou remarked. "That still doesn't solve the problem of us getting the professor inside. How are we going to manage that?" She considered the size of the wolf. "I don't think being a wolf made him any smaller. We'll have a hard time carrying him. I'm hoping he doesn't wake up 'til we know what this is."

"Uhhh, you guys?" Carly interrupted. "Is that another car I just heard out front? We're all here, so who could that be?"

They all got quiet and looked at one another helplessly when they heard a door slam close to the house. "Somebody needs to go see who that is," Carly practically whispered.

"What do we do with him?" Rachel whined nervously. She could feel another panic attack approaching. That morning she'd suspected they hadn't seen the last of trouble but hadn't wanted to be right. Her thoughts spun as she tried to calm herself down.

Mary Lou looked around quickly, wondering how they could hide the big gray wolf lying in the middle of the yard. She spotted the tarp used to cover the woodpile and carried it over to conceal the professor from sight.

"We can use that to get him inside," Kenneth pointed out.

"Yeah, that'll work," Bryan agreed quietly. "But we need to get rid of whoever just pulled in."

"Hi, you guys!" Diane rounded the corner of the house. "Hey, it's great to see y...." She stopped abruptly, noticing the guilty looks on her friends' faces. She simultaneously observed the crater in the yard where the fire pit used to be. "What's going on? Where's the professor?" she asked. "And what happened to your clothes?" She looked Ken up and down. "I thought we agreed to no more fightin'," she told him half-jokingly.

Bryan started to try to explain. "The professor..." he trailed off. Unsure what to say, he gestured vaguely to the tarp on the ground.

Diane put her hand to her heart and staggered as she gasped. "He's not dead, is he?"

All of the Shadow Angels started talking at once, "Ummm... not exactly." "Maybe." "No, kind of...?"

Diane quickly slipped into cop mode. "He is or isn't dead?" she demanded in a stern tone that didn't invite argument.

"Well, not exactly," Mary Lou stood forth. "But we do seem to have a problem."

"Oh for gosh sakes!" Diane stalked over and lifted the tarp. She stopped short. "Are you guys pullin' some kind of joke or what? I thought you said this is John."

"Well, it *was* the professor," Kenneth said. "We aren't entirely sure what he is now."

Bryan interjected, "Popular vote says werewolf." He bounced on his toes.

Diane considered for a moment, looked at the teens, looked at the comatose wolf, looked at the teens again, and stated in a deadpan voice, "If it wasn't for all the other insane shit that gone down recently, I wouldn't b'lieve a word of it."

The coyote who had arrived with Diane made his way over to the group. Curious, he sniffed out the wolf. Instead of backing away or being aggressive, he nudged him with his nose, yipped, and pawed at him.

Perplexed and smelling magick overlying the professor's scent, the coyote sat down beside him before sneezing to clear the strength of the scent out of his nose. He looked up at Diane and waited for the humans to decide what to do.

Diane looked down at the coyote dubiously. "So you think that's John too, huh? Well, I s'pose I'll b'lieve it if you do," she said. "First, let's get him in the house, and then you guys can tell me what on earth happened here to cause this kind of chaos. I see that thrice-damned spear, so I assume it has somethin' to do with this."

They all pushed and pulled the large wolf onto the tarp. Together, Bryan and Kenneth drug him to the house. They had some difficulty getting him up the steps but still managed with Diane and Rachel's help.

"After seeing zombies up and walkin' round, a werewolf isn't that much of a stretch, I s'pose." Diane huffed and finally sat down on a cushioned chair with her legs folded under her. "But I wanna know what happened. John hasn't shown any sign of anythin' like this before or even any indication it's skinwalker magic. I've been here on the full moon. So what gives?"

Mary Lou spoke up, "We tried to burn the spear in the fire pit out back. It exploded. Well, the fire did," she told Diane as she sat cross-legged on the floor. "Professor Holderman was closest when it happened. It knocked us all down, caught Ken on fire, and after we managed to get ourselves together, we found the professor like this." She gestured toward the wolf on the tarp in the middle of the floor where they'd gently laid him down.

"That's pretty much it," Carly agreed with her sister. The girl glared at the spear where it stood, propped in the corner as far away from them as possible but still kept in sight. There was no scratch on it or even a bit of char from the fire. She wanted to curse it and felt a seething anger wanting to bubble up inside her. Carly clamped down on it. *You're not going to beat me, you asshole.* Carly thought at it. *I win. You're dead and soul trapped.*

Carly was becoming familiar with the battle of wills against the thousand-year-old bloodthirsty artifact that was proving to have an intelligence all its own. Her attention was pulled back by the professor, who was beginning to stir.



An impression of the world spinning around him was the professor's first sensation. Awareness and then the pain hit. Next was disorientation as the wolf briefly wondered where he was. A soft layer cushioned a slick surface underneath him. The professor attempted to move, and he opened his eyes. A flood of sensation and new stimuli hit him all at once.

The tarp crackled loudly as what had been Professor John 'Medicine Bear' Holderman tried to move. As a wolf, he saw the room from the perspective of the floor, but everything was oddly discolored. His living room was unfamiliar to him, muted and yet

filled with sharply vibrant aura halos. He moved, determined to sit up, but only ended up flopping around on the slick tarp like a fish out of water. He attempted to get up again and yelped loudly as his shoulder impacted the floor.

“Easy, John,” Diane said and gently pushed him down onto the floor. “You need to get your bearings while we figure out what just happened to you.” She avoided making any sudden move when he turned his gaze on her. “Blue... spirit eyes.” She muttered and sat back on her heels. “John has the brown eyes of his native ancestors.”

Diane looked over at the coyote sitting on the sofa with his head in Kenneth’s lap. Bryan absent-mindedly stroked the coyote’s back from the other end of the sofa. The Coyote felt Diane’s eyes on him. The animal looked back at her with pricked ears. The ex-cop considered him. The coyote’s eyes also tended to blue. She’d come to understand he was an avatar for a Spirit of Light, one of God’s many allies, but even *his* eyes were not quite as brilliant as this.

Diane looked up at the teens sitting around the room. Their expressions conveyed varying degrees of fear and concern. “He’s not a werewolf,” she said flatly. “The eyes betray that this is somethin’ with a spiritual root. He’s not a skinwalker because this shape is not something he chose. It was imposed on him.”

“How can you be sure?” Rachel asked nervously. “I told Bryan he won’t eat us, but I watch scary movies too.” Embarrassed, she laughed a little.

Bryan poked Rachel, who had leaned on the arm of the couch next to him. He grinned at her. Still smiling, he turned his attention back to the conversation and considered everything being said.

“John’s been teachin’ me native medicine path,” Diane told them. “I come here every evenin’, and we discuss the nature of things. One of his totems is the spirit of the wolf. Maybe that has somethin’ to do with this.”

Ghe professor tried to speak. It came out as a series of yips and barks, which startled him into silence. He lay back and looked expectantly at Diane while he thought hard. The room stopped spinning so that at least was an improvement. *What happened?* The professor thought back to right before the blast of power had hit him. He reached out mentally for the familiar mind-touch of his

spirit guide and felt no answer. *Could that thing have? Damned spear!*

He closed his eyes and forcibly pushed away the tide of grief to deal with later. He then opened his eyes and assessed his unfamiliar body with his eyes. *Ok, so I'm a wolf. Shay must have protected me somehow, or it probably would have killed me. Spear of Chaos, indeed!* He growled low in his throat. *Hey, at least that's neat,* he thought. Running his lengthened tongue across his new fangs, he considered further. *Am I stuck like this? Okay, think like a dog, maybe I can get up?*

His friends watched the professor work out how to operate his new body shape. Diane reached out and helped to steady him as he very deliberately and carefully rose to his feet at last.

Rachel gasped. She held her breath for several seconds before slowly letting it out. "I think I can hear him!" she exclaimed. "For reals!" She looked around at the rest of her companions.

"We can all hear him." Diane gave Rachel a questioning look. "He obviously can't talk like this."

"No, I mean, I've been reading minds all day already, but for some reason, I can hear the professor in my head super clear. Like he can think-talk."

Diane's eyes slowly widened, and she looked at Rachel intently. "Telepathy, with everythin' that's happened, what if." Diane started to say and then trailed off hesitantly.

"What if?" Mary Lou asked.

"What if all of us got more of a gift or somethin' even if it's just temporary?" she said. "I know I'm on the shaman's walk now, but there's somethin' else."

Kenneth pursed his lips and sat up straighter with the coyote not moving from his lap. "Like, what?"

"Well, we have to destroy this spear, so maybe they're giving us special powers. I know it sounds far-fetched, but Rachel is reading minds, Mary Lou can mess with the weather which we already knew, Carly has shown foresight, and watch." Diane glared hard at the spoon Kenneth had put on the table. "I just figured out I could do this last night when the TV remote was across the room out of reach." The spoon flew off the table into the floor with no one touching it.

"So, what's my special psychic super-hero power if they've got telepathy, weather-working, and you've got telekinesis?" Kenneth asked.

"Eating?" Mary Lou giggled.

Mary Lou Wells

"Ha, ha. You're so not funny," Kenneth said. He wasn't laughing.

"No, listen. You ate that golden apple at the church, and Ulfr was ridiculously upset about it. We don't know why exactly or what it was for."

Carly thought hard. Vaguely she thought she remembered something. "I looked stuff up about Norse legend after we put the Viking down. Eden's apple," Carly said. "It's supposed to be food for the gods according to legend."

"Idun's apple," Kenneth corrected her and stopped cold. "The apples of Idun convey immortality, but surely that can't be right in this case. In Norse mythology, it's said that the fountain of youth feeds Ygdrassil the world tree and the fruit of the ash tree keeps the gods young. Now I remember that Ulfr muttered something about it right before we killed him."

Rachel smiled at that. "And I'm thrilled he's gone. But, superpower? Maybe it takes a superpower to eat those."

"Maybe it's not a myth," Mary Lou pointed out. "We just found out that a lot of things we thought couldn't possibly be real, really are real. I know I'll never look at anything the same way again. Perhaps what we see is barely the tip of the iceberg. So who knows what else is actually out there? Maybe since you ate the apple you'll figure out what it means."

"I just wanna know how you get an apple from an ash tree? Figure that one out," Kenneth observed, shaking his head. He looked at Bryan, who was still listening without comment. "Wonder what you got, Bro?" he asked.

"That's weird," Mary Lou agreed. "But also over the past half a year, we've learned a lot of weird stuff most people don't even believe in - that magick is real and that it works, but it is dangerous to play with, and also that reincarnation *is* possible under special circumstances." Mary Lou stopped and looked at Carly pointedly, then continued.

"We also know spirits are real and they can actually hurt us, and that we are all gifted people. We also discovered we can handle much more than we ever thought, and if we think about it hard, we've already done more in six months than most people do in a lifetime," Mary Lou said.

Kenneth agreed, "You got that right. I'm still not sure how we got roped into this crap."

"Yeah. So what?" Mary Lou considered John now sitting up beside the coyote. "We have another problem. I know we just lost

Sierra, but we can find our solutions. I think there's more out there that we don't know but will find out."

Carly nodded throughout Mary Lou's attempt to try to cheer up the group. "Hey, yeah, Shadow Angels remember?" She leaned in and high-fived her sister.

"Exactly," Mary Lou said with a grin. "We do good shit."

They all looked at her in surprise at the uncharacteristic strong language. Carly wasn't fazed, however, and high-fived her again. Diane nodded at all of them and held up her hand to stay further debate.

Diane thought hard about what the girls were saying. "I agree, folks. We can and will figure out what to do with the spear, and we definitely need to explore the psychic issues, as I said..."

"First, though, we gonna need to figure this current crisis out... that's what we need to be thinkin' about. Does John's transformation have somethin' to do with another gift we were given that we need to solve the next problem, or is it a fluke? One thing I'm sure of is that if Rachel can talk to the professor using her newly discovered gift, we have a start."

"I don't know how this works," Rachel began. "It's kinda just been happening at random on its own with no rhyme or reason to it."

Bryan finally spoke up, "Well, Mary Lou and I have done some Astral Travel. You can probably do something similar. Since you hear him already, you can probably just talk to him. If that doesn't work, see if you can trance. I know Ken's worked with you guys on meditation, right?"

Rachel nodded. "Yeah." She looked at the wolf intently, thinking at him as hard as she could. "Nothing," she said flatly in frustration.

Carly looked across the room at Kenneth. "Ken, you usually lead. Why don't you guys sit down with him on the floor and have Diane help since she's worked with John?"

"Here, I'll move," Mary Lou offered. She unfolded herself to exchange places with Kenneth. The coyote hopped down to settle on the floor beside Diane when she took the sofa. As always, the humans' prickle of magick or energy use drew the coyote's rapt attention.

After a couple of false tries, Rachel, with Diane and Ken steadying her worked out that she wouldn't be able to simply 'think'

at the professor in wolf form because he couldn't hear her. However, they found that they could talk to him verbally, and Rachel could listen to his mind-speech in reply. His yips and barks were similar to speech, but John couldn't force his throat and tongue to make more than a close approximation to syllables.

Once they had a method to communicate with him, he could haltingly talk to them. Diane's guess had proved close to being correct.

"His mind is okay," Rachel translated. "It's just his body affected as far as he can tell." She sighed. "Thank God!" she added. "He says the idea of eating anybody is just gross."

"That's one worry taken care of," Carly said grimly. The rest of them nodded their relief.

"But that's not nearly as fun!" Kenneth interjected with a lopsided grin.

Rachel turned a glare on her friend. "Really!"

Kenneth grinned at her and clacked his teeth together. He had to duck to avoid Rachel's swung fist. "I was kidding, girl! What else is he saying?"

"He's saying he might eat you anyway if you don't stop being a smart-ass," Rachel told him.

"Careful dude, Rachel has a wolf, and she's not afraid to use it!" Bryan chuckled from behind Kenneth.

That wasn't primarily what Diane urgently wanted to know, although she felt relieved that John posed no threat. She waved her hand and shook her head. "Never mind that y'all. Seriously, Rachel, we need more information."

Diane looked into John's eyes directly and reached out to hold his face. "Can you tell us how this happened if you have any ideas?" she asked him and waited while he yipped his answer.

Rachel paid rapt attention to the thoughts behind his vocalizations. "The spear," she said. "Okay, but what... Shay. He's saying Shay." Rachel wrinkled her forehead and looked at Diane in confusion. "Dead. Sort-of?"

Diane looked sad. "We've had another casualty in this war," she told all of them. "As I told you, John has... or *had* a wolf spirit guide. Wolf was his totem animal, in addition to Bear. Shay's first instinct would be to protect his soul friend from a spiritual attack. However, I'm not sure how it causes this change. John?" she addressed her friend with the question.

Rachel listened closely. "He says that Shay blocked the Spear of Chaos when it attacked and saved his life. It went for blood of its

own doing. It killed Shay instead of him. But Shay isn't gone, per se, just on him, kinda like a skin. He thinks when the energies mixed, that Shay transformed the attack into protection that would stick."

Rachel's brow furrowed as she continued, "That still doesn't make sense! How does a spirit dying translate into John having this, whatever, done to him?"

Rachel listened to John's reply and spoke aloud for the group's benefit, "True sacrifice has power, willing self-sacrifice even more so."

Kenneth hummed aloud. "Much like Christ's sacrifice for all, but targeted to one person?"

Diane broke into the conversation, "That makes more sense than most the rest of this, to be honest."

"So does that mean stick as in he's stuck like this? Or can he be a person again?" Mary Lou asked.

"He doesn't know," Rachel said after a pause. She shook her black hair out of her face and shrugged.

"Grrrr! I hate you!" Carly spat at the spear propped in the corner. "Even dead, Ulfr's evil still insists on living."

"BITCH." Malevolence rolled off of the artifact. The room suddenly seemed to close in on them. Mary Lou felt like gasping for breath even though it didn't feel like an asthma attack. Kenneth suddenly felt unexplainable rage and the desire to rend something with his teeth. The wolf and coyote both growled low in their throats.

Rachel couldn't stifle a strangled squeal as all eyes went to the Spear of Chaos. "Now it's talking to me!"

"I heard it too!" Carly said with narrowed eyes. Tension tightened her muscles with the overwhelming desire to break it over her knee.

"Me too." Bryan looked around with goosebumps raised on his arms. He tried to rub them down to no avail. The rest were nodding as well.

"Me as well." Diane looked worried.

"I thought we were going to be done with this today." Rachel began to cry. "Maybe Sierra was right to just walk away. I don't know if I can take much more."

Bryan looked grim. "Don't let it get to you, Rachel. It's just tryin' to rile us."

Diane stood up, staring at the spear. "We don't need to discuss anything further with that thing present," she declared. "Carly, take the spear outside for a few minutes, would you? I want to test

something. I just had a thought. What if the spear's presence is causing John's difficulty?"

Carly retrieved it and headed out through the kitchen to the back door despite her disgust at laying hands on the cursed weapon.

Diane gestured at Carly's disappearing back. "Everybody go with her, please. I don't think anyone needs to be alone with that bloody thing. I will stay with John in case something happens."

All of the teens filed out to the backyard. The screen slammed behind Rachel with a loud bang. Diane settled in for her vigil in the silent house and waited.

Carly carried the spear to the edge of the yard. Bryan grabbed a chair for her as he passed the wrecked fire pit. The pre-teen plopped down in the offered seat.

"Diane has a point. On the other hand, there's no guarantee getting this stupid thing away from him is going to fix it," Bryan said when they had regrouped at the end of the mowed grass.

"Not likely without complete and total destruction," Kenneth pointed out. "We are going to have to come up with a working solution..."

"... And fast," Mary Lou finished for him.

"So, does anybody have any more bright ideas?" Bryan asked.

"Oh, you don't want to try chopping it up again?" Kenneth teased. He crouched beside Carly close to the spear. Now that all was quiet, Kenneth considered the undamaged shaft, the Nordic runes, and the intricate metalworking on the blade. He inwardly shook his head.

"Like your idea was any better, Mr. 'Holy Fire should work,'" Carly responded. "Fire obviously isn't going to cut it," Carly pursed her lips, "unless we have something a lot bigger and hotter."

"Blowtorch, maybe? What about we blow it up with fireworks?" Rachel's words sounded with some bite. "What else?"

Kenneth considered her suggestion. "Probably too dangerous given what happened here. It would take some really powerful, strong heat to melt that thing down."

"Or maybe a chainsaw if the ax isn't strong enough?" Bryan said.

"Grind it up into sawdust, maybe?" Rachel added. "If we could figure out where a mill is."

Mary Lou sighed and looked at the house. "Regardless of what else we do. I think today's a wash anyway. We need to get it away from John, so we might as well plan on taking the spear home and continue this as soon as we can get together again." With her back

turned to Carly, she failed to see the beginning of what happened next.

Rachel, however, choked on her next breath. The whispers that had been at the back of her head since her telepathic gift showed up were drowned out by a single new voice. Multilayered and grating, the voice seemed to claw at her very identity.

Though Rachel had not seen Ulfr's possessed dagger kill the skinwalker, she had been terrified by her friends' description of what had happened at the Satanic church where so many died. She'd had nightmares of what she was seeing.

The hatred Ulfr had carried with him as a constant companion since his childhood, found a home within the Spear of Chaos. It seethed as it listened to the intent of those around it. In the failed attempt to kill the Shaman, the expenditure of energy had left it ravenous. Fear flavored the air.

More pressing, however, was the bright aura of power around the carriers of the hated bloodline around it. The bitch Ingegerd's descendants had accomplished her revenge and completed Lord Loki's plan, but now they were an annoyance. Their light energy was infiltrated by its taint, perhaps just enough that it would be able to feed on their deaths. Rachel's fear became its conduit to influence the fabric of the world around it.

The Spear of Chaos worked its way into Rachel's wide-open mind with aware precision. Her mental barriers shattered, and it took delight in the violation of her mind the same way Ulfr had once delighted in violating the bodies of his victims.

Rachel's scream echoed in two different levels of reality as the entity within the spear struck with lightning swiftness. Choked and unable to move, she could not warn her friends of the shadowy figure that suddenly loomed large in her sight.

Tendrils of darkness seized the young woman, stabbed psychic barbs into her, and began feeding. Empowered, the Spear of Chaos expanded its attack to envelop all of them. The skinwalker's stolen gift rendered all of them unable to see and began pressing the air out of their lungs.

Mary Lou had barely managed to turn when Rachel screamed. Kenneth recognized the method of attack. Only the imposed paralysis kept him from cursing aloud. He seethed

inwardly and felt the emotion of his hate cause the darkness to constrict further.

The gentle brush of warm fur against the exposed skin of his leg distracted him from his fury. A soothing purr vibrated against him. *The red cat!* Kenneth remembered his kitty friend's presence at the same time he realized he was suddenly, inexplicably free to move the moment the cat touched him.

He didn't stop to question how Skuld's cat had broken the spell on him. Instead, Kenneth moved quickly against the spear's attack. He was closest to Carly, who could also not move as she held the spear. Kenneth rose from the ground already in a spinning snap kick to get it out of her hands.

The spear spun across the yard and landed with its point buried in the dirt, still standing. Its concentration broken, the artifact was forced to release the group from its murder attempt.

Rachel collapsed bonelessly, no longer able to stand since the spear let go of her. Vaguely, she could hear Kenneth roundly cursing the artifact. Bryan joined him with several choice words of his own while Mary Lou and Carly tried to help Rachel to her feet to no avail.

Mary Lou held up her hand to forestall her sister against any more attempts to move Rachel. "She's gray. She's also shaky," she said with concern. "Bryan! Get over here," Mary Lou ordered. "There's something wrong."

"Damn, Rach, you okay?" Bryan got down beside her. Rachel tried to move her mouth, but no sound came out. When he touched her hand, he found that she was cold. "As warm as it is, okay," he checked her pulse and found her heart racing. "Fast and shallow breathing."

"What do we do?" Carly stood back out of the way, feeling helpless.

Bryan thought hard. "Well, she's just been through a hell'uva trauma, but her symptoms say low blood sugar attack."

Carly's eyes widened. "The spear can do that? Why would it hit her so much harder than the rest of us? I was holding onto it."

Mary Lou inclined her head toward the blood ruby around Carly's neck. "You have protection the rest of us don't," she told her younger sister.

"Never mind that," Bryan told them firmly. As a Paramedic and first responder, he was in familiar territory. "We have a medical emergency here. Mary Lou, go quickly and see if the professor has something sweet that we can get into Rachel to get her blood sugar up."

“Make it quick!” Kenneth added as Mary Lou headed at a half run toward the house.

The girl burst into the house, opened cabinet doors, and slammed them shut again.

“Diane!” Mary Lou called out desperately. “Do you know if there’s any candy, snack cakes or cookies, or heck, even sugar in here?”

“Cookie jar, top of the fridge,” Diane answered her. “I made John some white chocolate peanut butter cookies a couple of days ago. I believe there’s some left,” Diane said as she strolled into the kitchen wearing a perplexed expression. “What the hell happened out there?”

“Aha!” Mary Lou spotted the cookies. Unable to reach it, she jumped and smacked the cookie jar off its perch before neatly catching it in midair. “Tell ya’ soon as we get Rachel on her feet!” Mary Lou told her and ran back out.

“Wait, what?” Diane called after her. Casting a glance back at John, who still seemed to be stuck as a wolf, she apologetically waved at him and followed Mary Lou outside. The professor, reasonably able to make his new shape work, also pushed open the door. He’d heard the commotion and was determined to find out what was up himself.

Rachel’s color slowly returned to normal, and her shakes diminished as she devoured the handful of cookies Mary Lou brought her. She finally spoke to her friends, who helped her sit up.

“We HAVE... to get rid of that thang!” she said. “Afore it kills ever’ last oneofus,” she continued with difficulty. She worked her mouth to make her words come out with some sense. “Sierra’s right. We should just put... back where we got it or throw it in the river. Walk away.”

“We can’t put it back,” Carly said. “Daddy drove by there the other day and said the whole side of the hill has slipped. They have a retaining net over it to keep it off the road. If they’re working on it, there’s no way we’re getting up there.”

“I don’t care,” Rachel whined. “Just get it away from me.”

“So, what just happened?” Diane demanded. “Care to clue me in?”

Everyone looked around at each other, wondering where to start and how to describe the paralyzing fear and darkness. Bryan, who still supported Rachel in a sitting position, began to explain.

“Remember back at the church?” Bryan began as Diane nodded. “The first time, not the second time. You were there.”

"Go on," Diane nodded. Her eyes grew big as her suspicion at what he was getting at made her want to shiver.

Kenneth broke in, "What he's trying to say is that damned spear is acting like the Skinwalker's dagger... only worse. Now it's super juiced up, and it attacked all of us just standing here."

"Ulfr!" Diane spat the hated name. "So, since Carly killed him with the spear when that bit of his soul was out of the dagger, he's just actin' through the new item? Makes sense, in a sick and twisted kind of way."

"Yeah, this is what I was afraid was going to happen before I killed Ulfr with it," Carly stated flatly with distaste. "I figured that his death was just gonna make it worse because of the stupid pact he made with Loki. How do you sit at the right hand of your evil, nefarious so-called 'god' if you're dead?" Carly wrinkled her nose. "Unless your death just makes you something else, and that thing eats people."

She thought over princess Ingegerd's memories. She recalled the murder of her children a thousand years before by the same weapon Carly now found herself forced to carry until its destruction. The girl shivered.

Bryan continued in a subdued tone, "We were talking about how we are going to break it up or get rid of it, in front of it."

"The Spear of Chaos is as self-aware as Ulfr was in life - or at least half-life since he wasn't really what you'd call alive," Diane said.

"Yeah, and this is the same way Skinwalker got his ass handed to him," Kenneth mused as he rubbed at a smudge of dirt on his face. "He had his own plans, and Ulfr didn't like it. Now we're the next target."

Diane turned the problem over in her mind and came to a decision. "Don't tell it any more of our plans. We will have to watch it until we figure out what to do. Carly, wrap it up and put it in the car, and you guys get it out of here. We'll plan our next move out of earshot."

"What if it does it again while my sister is driving?" Carly wanted to know.

"We really don't have a choice right now," Diane said firmly. "We have got to get Rachel home. I'll see to her and the professor. Just get that thing out of here so I can clean up its mess."

"I'll see Rachel home," Bryan told them as Carly wrapped the Spear back up.

"Fine. Call me later, and we'll go from there," Diane said.

6

A NEW PLAN

AUGUST 3RD, 1985 LENOIR CITY, TENNESSEE

Whitewater boiled out of only one spillway at the base of Fort Loudon dam. The current was light, but a questionable weather forecast kept most fishermen away. Mary Lou pulled into the mostly empty parking lot on the hill overlooking the dam with Carly and Kenneth in her Chevy and Rachel with Bryan in the Thunderbird right behind them. Diane and the professor were there waiting for them.

Out of concern for the Medicine Man, they chose a spot on the opposite side of the parking lot from his small powder blue Toyota hatchback. Kenneth and Mary Lou got out and walked over to the professor's car. Student paperwork from his college classes littered the back. They saw Diane with the near human-sized gray wolf in the vehicle's back seat.

Mary Lou's heart fell. She let out a sigh and addressed them both. She forced herself to sound more cheerful than she felt.

"Hi, guys! No luck with the professor turning back into himself?"

Diane looked worried. "Oh, actually, he did about a half-hour after you guys left with the spear in tow. But about 20 minutes ago, John and I were sittin' here perfectly fine, and then he started havin' somethin' like a seizure. I threw that blanket you see in the back floorboard over the top of him so nobody would notice if they pulled in here. Thank goodness they didn't. As you can see, he's now a wolf again."

"Twenty minutes..." Kenneth heard Diane as he approached the driver's side. He thought hard, calculating time and distance. "We

would have been in Loudon getting close to the interstate with the spear in the car.” He whistled and glanced at Carly, who was carrying the spear wrapped up in a beach towel as she approached from behind him. “This thing has some kind of impressive reach!”

“What makes you say that?” Diane bit her lip and involuntarily shuddered. She looked around for the rest of the group and noticed Rachel standing back away from everyone. Diane thought Rachel looked grim and frightened. Her own comfort level was nonexistent with the spear this close. Diane stared suspiciously at it for a moment, but it was quiet and harmless-seeming. She knew that for a lie and steeled herself mentally.

Kenneth cleared his throat and leaned on the car, looking at his friends. The professor didn’t look injured, but he took up the whole back seat of the small Toyota hatchback. “Because,” Kenneth began, “we would have been about eight to ten miles away. It is twenty minutes from south of the river to Loudon. That’s a long stretch for some kind of raw spiritual effect.”

Diane glanced again at Carly, who was holding the spear. “One wonders what else it can do and what other effect it may have at that distance.”

Kenneth just nodded and agreed, “Yeah.”

“Why don’t y’all quit chattering about it and get it out of here,” Rachel finally spoke to the rest of the group.

“Good idea.” Diane nodded. “We should get this over with, John?” She looked back at the professor, who showed no sign that he wanted to get out of the car. Instead, he just laid his ears back and glared at the spear as Carly passed by with it in her hands.

They headed to the steep ramp that led to the walkway below the dam. The sidewalk continued for a stretch alongside the churning water. Rachel, who led the group, began to hang back so that she trailed along behind while Kenneth led the way to the river and the water’s edge.

“They’re not letting a lot of water through the turbines.” Brian bounced eagerly. “It’s too bad we don’t have fishing poles with us,” he said.

Mary Lou looked back at him doubtfully. “Yeah, but we have other things to worry about today.”

Kenneth broke into the conversation as they walked, “There should be some good fishing here. I’ve heard there’s some massive fish in this lake.”

“How big?” Carly asked, looking across the lake at the swirling waters beneath the dam.

“Big enough to take your head off.” Kenneth grinned at Carly’s widened eyes. “Some of the fish in this lake are as big as you are,” he said.

“Whoa, that’s some big freaking fish,” Mary Lou responded. “So where are we going, Ken?” she asked when he started up another set of steps.

“Down to the end as close as we can get to the deepest water,” Kenneth replied. He glanced back the way they had come. “At least it’s deserted this morning except for us. That probably has something to do with the approaching weather, I’d say.” He eyed the sky and looked at Mary Lou. It was becoming a running joke even though both of them knew it was no joking matter. “Your dark cloud is following you around, as usual,” he said to her.

“Looks like it,” she agreed. Mary Lou peered at the quick-moving layer of clouds above them. Another thunderstorm threatened. The sky along the horizon was dark, and thunder began to roll. In response to the cloud cover, the water turned dark gray.

“Ominous,” Diane muttered almost under her breath.

“That storm is moving almost as fast as the current,” Bryan agreed in a subdued voice. “We shouldn’t be standing out here when it hits.”

“Mary Lou can keep us safe,” Carly stated confidently.

“I can’t while we are here,” Mary Lou answered. “I don’t have any control with the spear this close to me. It’s like everything is going wrong all at once.”

“What do you mean?” Diane asked her.

“I couldn’t find my keys this morning. My tire was flat. I had to air it before we could get started, and there were two wrecks on the road between home and here,” she shook her head in wonderment. “Although I hardly think the spear could be responsible for all of that, though.”

“Maybe not. But it has demonstrated incredible power to harm and a long reach. I don’t think we can underestimate it,” Diane pointed out.

“No argument there.” Mary Lou nodded and watched Carly hand the spear to Kenneth.

KUpon taking the spear in hand, Kenneth felt an immediate surge of hate, lust, and desire to kill, all wrapped up in his emotions

as soon as he touched it. "My God," he whispered and nearly doubled over from the tension that took hold of his muscles.

Determined not to let the spear distract him from his purpose, he bounced it in his hand three or four times to get a feel for its weight and balance. With the spear held over his head like a javelin, Kenneth walked down the steps to the edge of the churning water. As he did so, the siren horn on the dam sounded warning simultaneously as the gusting front of the storm hit.

White-capped waves on the lake threw spray into their faces. With a blinding flash of lightning that split the air, the heavens opened up with a downpour. In seconds their clothes were soaked. Visibility was reduced to just a few feet. The spillway of the dam opened and changed the character of the lake. Moments before, it had been only a strong current, and with the additional water flow, it was far more violent. Despite the wind or the rain, Kenneth drew back and, with full strength, attempted to hurl the spear as far away from himself as possible, only to find the spear refused to let go of him! As he hit the water, a mocking sense of triumph from the Spear of Chaos met his dismay as it pulled him beneath the raging waters of the spillway.

Powerful enough to rip an average person apart with thousands of pounds of force behind it, the current swirled around Kenneth as he finally managed to let go of the spear, which sank to the bottom point first.

Even in the murky water, the spear gleamed darkly as a black miasma streamed out from it. Kenneth determined the direction of the surface, but the circling current caught him as he tried to swim.

Looking up, he recognized that backlit against the light from above him was the supple shape of the only shark able to live in both fresh water and saltwater. He watched as it attacked another fish the size of a small Volkswagen. It bore the other fish to the bottom and bit it in half. Fish blood and miasma from the artifact attracted the attention of other denizens of the murky waters.



From Kenneth's perspective, every living thing in the river suddenly went mad. He found himself at the center of a feeding frenzy. Desperate to defend himself, he grabbed at the only weapon to hand as the sleek shape of the bull shark sliced through the water straight at him.

The Spear of Chaos allowed itself to be picked up and used as a weapon to fend off the blood-crazed predator. It easily cut through the water without typical resistance and speared through the shark's body. Black veins crawled over the shark's skin from the puncture.

In Kenneth's hands, the spear shuddered and poured a sense of pleasure into him as it fed. He swung violently to try to dislodge the dying shark, only for it to be ripped off of the spear by a catfish twice Kenneth's height.

Tainted blood poured into the water from the shark. The catfish that attempted to eat it shuddered, twitched, and went belly up. It was torn apart by others before it reached the surface as the feeding frenzy grew. Sleek brown shapes jetted between the fish, unidentifiable in the gloom caused by the storm and increasing mud and debris caught in the current. Tiny claws closed around Kenneth's knee just before a set of teeth ripped a chunk out of his upper thigh, narrowly missing tendon. An impact from behind threw him forward against the rocks at the bottom. The unidentified attacker caused him to hit his head against the spear's shaft while in his grip. It also scraped all of the skin on his knuckles and wrists off.

Kenneth realized two things simultaneously. First, he wasn't drowning even though he hadn't surfaced in far too long. Secondly, he could not leave the spear where they had planned to get rid of it in the river.

A horrible grinding sound came from the dam. It echoed hollowly under the water as a turbine stalled and the sirens blasted across the rain-drenched river. Kenneth wondered if the dam was also going to break. He fought his way through the raging waters with the spear and finally kicked his way to the surface, but barely for a moment.

A sandpaper vise closed around his calf and yanked him back beneath the water as something tried to eat his leg. He kicked at whatever held him, but his leg only slipped further down its throat as he attempted to get loose.

Anger gave him extra strength. Kenneth finally took the butt of the spear and slammed it into where he estimated the thing's eye might be. Maddened, it let go of him. Rolling as it went past, the sharp edge of a fin tore open his side. It flayed skin apart and laid his ribs open to the bone.

Kenneth fought harder to regain the surface. He caught a momentary glimpse of the shore and struck out for it with the spear

in tow. With his head just barely above the water, he could not see what rammed into his abdomen and stole his breath as it knocked him back beneath the waves. Another ominous grinding sound echoed as the turbines squealed in distress under the dam.

The frenzied fish gave the blackened water a red tinge as they violently got torn apart. Worse, they died en-mass as they shared the poison. The corruption of the spear stopped their hearts as they fed. An increasing number of fish floated dead in the current.

Onshore, the anxious teens heard a growl from the car where Medicine Bear still sat turned into a wolf. Many things suddenly swarmed over the rocks from the river to the parking lot.

“Oh my God!” Diane exclaimed, eyes wide. “Rats! Look!”

“Shit!” Bryan exclaimed while Rachel started screaming. “Everything’s going crazy!”

More minutes passed. They began to lose hope.

“He’s dead!” Rachel sobbed, inconsolable. She looked at Bryan with wounded eyes and her hair plastered to her face. “That thing finally managed to kill one of us! Ulfr, you bastard!” she screamed at the river.

Mary Lou, unwilling to give up, tried to peer through the rain and scoured the banks to either side of the river with her eyes. She mentally reached out with her empathic gift. She could still feel Kenneth’s presence. “No! He’s not dead!” she screamed back at Rachel. “We just have to find him!”

“It’s been at least twenty minutes!” Bryan argued. “There’s no way!”

“I know he’s NOT DEAD!” Mary Lou was crying but determined.

“Wake up, Mary Lou, there’s no way anybody could have survived that!” Bryan tried his best to comfort Rachel by holding her while attempting to make his other friend see logic. “It’s time to go! We’ll call the Rescue Squad and have ‘em dredge for his body. It’ll only take them about five to eight minutes to get here. I can call them from my EMS radio in the car.”

“You can go!” Mary Lou snapped through chattering teeth. Goosebumps covered her arms as she tried rubbing them to warm herself in the drenching rain. She was too upset even to try to reach out for the storm to calm it. “I’m staying right here,” Mary Lou declared. She peered through the water pouring down her face. “I know he’s coming. I can feel it...” she trailed off hopefully. The logic was beginning to war with even her conviction. It HAD been too long, and the minutes were ticking away. She knew Bryan had a radio. The rescue squad would be on their way soon.

“Either Ken’s dead, or he isn’t,” Carly shrugged. “We can’t do anything. You can stand here and argue about it, but I’m going back to the car out of the rain.”

Mary Lou turned to glare at Carly’s departing back. Her mouth was open, and her eyes were wide with surprise. For the moment, Carly’s cold response chilled her to silence more than the wet droplets running down her neck. She watched forlornly as the rest of her friends walked up the ramp.

Mary Lou scoured the raging current one more time before she too gave up and walked away. A splash caught her attention, and she gasped. “There!” She turned to yell at the others, but they couldn’t hear over the thunderstorm from the parking lot.

Kenneth finally surfaced at the water’s edge with the spear in hand. Grabbing onto a large rock, he steadied himself as he spit water and gasped air.

“Ken, are you okay?” Mary Lou clambered over the rocks and grabbed him to help him up onto the bank.

“I’ve been better,” he said, gasping. “We need a new plan, though. This thing is too dangerous to leave just lying around.”

“We’re running out of ideas,” she said as she half pulled, half supported him up the walkway. Her eyes were big, and she shivered in the cold rain. Icy fingers seemed to trail up and down her back with the proximity of the spear.

“I know,” he nodded. “But we should have known better than this after that last attack. It’s not going to go easy,” his tone was grim.

“What happened out there?” Mary Lou asked through chattering teeth. “Everyone thought you drowned.”

“I should have,” he said definitively. “It’s only by the grace of God I didn’t. Currents are so strong I couldn’t surface or breathe. Everything was crazy stupid. One of the turbines broke after the spear hit the water. There’s no way I could leave it.”

“We’ll figure it out later. For now, let’s get you warm and dry,” Mary Lou said. “I’m just grateful you made it out of there.” Her relief made her forget her reserve, and she slipped her arms around him.

“I seem to be immortal.” Kenneth began with an indrawn breath and ended with an ironic chuckle. “Well, if we have to be stuck with

this damned thing, at least there are some perks.” He checked his wounds which, though raw, were already closing.

Rachel interrupted him while he was still trying to speak. She only had eyes for the spear Kenneth held and completely ignored what he’d said. “How dare you!” she screamed shrilly. Rachel’s frustration and fear found voice. “What are you doing?!? That thing is supposed to be gone, gotten rid of! You had no business bringing it back up here!”

“Damn, Ken! It’s been forty-five minutes at this point, and Loudon Rescue is on the way, but Rach’ is correct. We need to be done with this thing for good.” Bryan pointed at the spear. “I’m glad you made it out of there alive, but we came out here to get rid of it. What gives, man?”

Kenneth handed the spear to Carly, who took it reluctantly. “Somebody better have a towel or something,” he said.

Bryan happened to have a spare shirt in his trunk. Kenneth wiped the water, mud, and blood off his face as he explained. Diane and the professor stood by, listening quietly to the conversation. Diane looked worried but felt helpless. She had also thought the boy was gone, drowned in the river.

“Here’s how I see it now,” Kenneth said. His expression was grim as he looked around at the group. “If we leave it out here, it’s going to get serious fast. ‘Spear of Chaos’, right? What could possibly go wrong with that on the downside of that much water?” He paused to let his words sink in.

Their eyes widened as they realized what he was saying. Rachel looked at the dam and finally got it. Her shoulders sagged in defeat as Kenneth continued.

“If the dam doesn’t break, the water will be poisoned for miles. If the water isn’t poisoned, how many deaths of fishermen or workers would the spear be responsible for, and us by extension? I’m sorry, Rachel. I just couldn’t leave it in there when I saw what it was capable of doing in just the short time it pulled me in.”

“We can’t do it this way,” Diane said. She thought hard to come up with alternatives and drew a blank. She threw up her hands.

“We’re going to have to take it back home,” Carly sighed. “Again.”

“Yep,” Kenneth agreed. “Or, no,” he stopped, thinking.

“It needs to go back to your place, Carly.” Bryan’s expression was bleak. “We can’t do anything else today either.”

"It seems to do the least amount of damage at Mom and Dad's," Mary Lou observed. "Probably because they're already so dysfunctional." She wrinkled her nose.

"And because nobody is messing with it there," Bryan pointed out.

"Probably," Mary Lou agreed. "Okay, so we'll take it back there wrapped up and hide it in the garage in all the junk they keep in there."

"Let's go then. The sooner we drop this thing off, the better," Bryan said.

"Wait," Kenneth stopped them. "No, that's not it. You are forgetting," he pointed at Carly. "She is why it's doing less damage stuck in the basement garage in Knoxville in all the hoarded chaos of the mess your mom keeps. It's what's around her neck, the blood ruby, that's keeping it in check."

Carly wrinkled her nose. "Probably." She looked up the hill and noted the help that was late to arrive. She pointed at the flashing lights.

Ken turned to see an ambulance, marked Lenoir City police patrol car, and two SUV's that came smoothly in behind them. One officer had a boat in tow marked 'Loudon County Fire/Rescue.'

Bryan's face lit with a grin, his relief showing. "They'll want to have a look at you, Ken. We better go talk to them anyway, so they know they weren't called out here on a wild goose chase." Bryan walked over to the Lenoir City officer, greeted him with a handshake, and high-fived the EMT that got out of the ambulance. Kenneth joined them.

The others stood back watching while Ken went to the back of the ambulance, where the EMT's looked at his injuries. Mary Lou felt almost shocked at what had just happened. She could tell from their wary eyes and pensive faces that her friends weren't happy either. Carly was oddly resigned and quiet. Rachel's teeth clacked together, chattering with both cold and nerves as she hugged herself.

"We have to do something," Mary Lou said softly. "Before one of us dies for real."

Diane moved closer. "You're right, Mary Lou," she agreed. "I've seen enough death a'ready because of that thing and its maker — Ken's right. We can't leave it someplace without an active guard. It's dangerous. It's clearly capable of attackin' and manipulatin' its environment. Maybe it'll be satisfied for a while, though, after this little incident. I hope anyway."

"I hope this will give us time to figure out what our new plan will be," Mary Lou said.

"Girls, after witnessing this today? I'd say we don't have the time to play around any longer," Diane replied. "We have to have that new plan now. Despite the magic ruby, I suspect that taking it back to a child's house, even with protection, is a bad idea."

"Sooner or later, the spear will be found, and how's she going to explain it to her parents? If they try to get rid of it not knowing what they have, that would be a highly volatile situation and put other lives at risk."

"So, what do you suggest?" Mary Lou asked.

"I will take it, for now," Diane said flatly with distaste. "I'm an adult. I live alone. Our coyote friend is there to help guard it, at least part of the time. As an avatar, he has some spiritual protection of his own."

"Then what?" Mary Lou asked pointedly.

"I'm not done," Diane told her and looked to her sister. "Carly."

"What?" Carly asked.

"You're going to have to give up your necklace," Diane told her.

"But I'm charged with holding on to both things." Carly objected in a plaintive tone.

Diane didn't entirely ignore the young girl's narrowed eyes and tight lips. Did she see a glimmer of possessiveness over the spear? Was it taking hold of her after all?

"You don't have a choice, child," Diane pointed out. "Ken is right about the stone. The blue binding beads are gone. Those were the only thing holding the fractured spirit of Ulfr in check. Now the blood ruby is all we got. So wrap it up, put the necklace on it, and hand it over."

Carly reluctantly complied. Diane placed the carefully wrapped spear in the trunk of the professor's blue car. She hesitated a moment as a thought hit her. She closed the car's trunk firmly and turned to look at their anxious faces.

"I'm going to take this thing home to get it out of here," Diane told them in a determined voice. "You all take care of things at home and meet me this next Saturday bright and early back at the professor's house. I just had another idea."

"Ok," Mary Lou agreed. "What are you thinking?"

"We can discuss that Saturday, away from the Spear of Chaos where it can't listen in." Diane hesitated. "Just a question, can anybody do a road trip, camp, travel?" She looked around as people

Spear of Destiny

thought about it and nodded yes or no. “M’kay then, it’s well enough. I’ll see you Saturday so we can plan.”

7

STORMS

MAY 3, 1986

Puffy clouds made shadows and sunshine skate along the ground. A light breeze chilled the group. The wind made jackets necessary as the group of young people prepped to leave early on the morning of May the third, 1986. Mary Lou took heed of the chilly morning. She had needed to sit on her pack to zip it up due to the extra coat she'd stuffed in it.

"Nope." Kenneth shook his head. "That's not gonna work." He was staring thoughtfully at the trunk of Bryan's car as Mary Lou tried to squeeze the second bag in on top of her tent and blankets.

"What's not going to work?" she asked him. The trunk lid swayed as the car shook with her efforts.

Kenneth grabbed the trunk lid and lifted it to keep it from falling on her head. He pointed at her luggage as she shoved harder. "Stop! All that isn't going to fit like that."

"Sure it will." She eyed it and sighed at the futility of continuing to try to force the issue. "You're probably right, though. Any ideas?"

"Do you need all that?" Kenneth asked and gave her a dubious look. "We're only going to be gone a few days. I've only got one small bag and a bedroll. That's everything I need."

"I go camping all the time. I use all this stuff, Ken," Mary Lou protested.

"Not like this, you don't," he told her. "You camp out of your car, which isn't real camping. Our trip will require a hike in rough country and set up in a place that's in bad shape after the eruption last year. I'm guessing that you don't have a clue what you're up against, do you?"

"Well, no," she admitted.

"Uh, Huh." He nodded and waved her off. "You go over there and get familiar with the map. You are going to have to help drive.

I'll fix this." Mary Lou could hear Kenneth muttering under his breath as he proceeded to pull everything back out that she had just loaded. He rearranged it all neatly where it would fit.

Diane and Bryan hunched over a huge wrinkled map of the United States with a stack of smaller state maps plopped on the hood of the professor's car. The professor was lying down in the open hatchback with his head on a tent. The coyote was with him. Professor Holderman found himself stuck as a wolf again with the close proximity of the Spear of Chaos which had to go with them.

"Hey, buddy!" Mary Lou rubbed the coyote's ears fondly in passing. She smiled at his friendly yip and waved to the professor. "Hi, Medicine Bear!"

"So this trip is going to take us probably about 5 or 6 days, tops?" Mary Lou asked Diane. She wedged in beside Bryan to look at the map.

"Maybe, if we're lucky," Bryan told her. He held one side of the U.S. map down while Diane traced their most likely route with a highlighter.

"How far is it? I've traveled a lot, but I've never gone this far." Mary Lou looked closely at the paper map.

"A little over twenty-five hundred miles, I'm guessin'," Diane said. She held a sharpie in the other hand, which she used to make a careful dot on the map. "These're possible stops to refuel or eat," Diane pointed out. "If we drove non-stop, we'd be lookin' at about a day and a half, maybe two days to get there. That, of course, ain't plausible."

Diane tapped her fondly on the shoulder. "We have to get gas, get out and stretch our legs, stop to eat, etc. Even if we take turns drivin', stops will extend our time. When we get to the mountain, we camp overnight, which of course adds another day."

"I see, got it," Mary Lou said.

"On the way back," Diane continued, "we might rent a couple of motel rooms. By then, we'll be tired enough to want a real bed. I been busy this week, makin' phone calls and checkin' things out to see. Some layover spots are on the route."

Mary Lou traced her gaze along the route Diane was marking and whistled. "Geez, how many states are we going through?"

"Ten states, including Washington State and our own State of Tennessee," Bryan answered instead of Diane. "It's generally northwest from here by Interstate and highways."

"See here?" Diane pointed at the top left of the map. "This's where we're goin'. Mt. St. Helens is near Seattle, Washington." She

drew a circle around their destination. “We got these smaller maps of each state, so we have more detail where we’re drivin’ in case we need to detour for traffic.”

“Okay. Well, at least we shouldn’t get lost,” Mary Lou said with relief. “I have never been west of Hot Springs, Arkansas, so I have no clue about any of the territory.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be fine,” Diane told the teen. “I’ve got it covered. A portable CB radio is now installed in John’s car. Even if we’re separated, we can talk back and forth since Bryan a’ready has a radio in his car. There’s maps here for both cars.”

“Foolproof,” Mary Lou smiled. “I like it.” She glanced at the back of the blue hatchback at the bundle with a red sparkle glowing on a pure gold chain wrapped around it. “The spear isn’t going to like it.”

“Shhhh! Not here, not now.” Kenneth walked up behind her. “That infernal piece of crap doesn’t need to know anything,” he said. “The car is packed. We are ready to go on our adventure.”

“Cool. Thanks, Ken!” Mary Lou said brightly.

“You’re welcome, by the way. Your packing would go easier if you didn’t try to bring everything plus the kitchen sink with you.” He winked at her good-naturedly.

“It really isn’t *that* much.” Mary Lou smiled as Diane folded the maps up and put them in the car. Bryan grabbed his stack and gestured at the vehicle. They were ready.

Mary Lou found herself looking forward to the trip. Even the ominous peals of thunder in the background didn’t dampen her spirits as they departed. She glanced up curiously but didn’t see a threatening storm, just a partly cloudy sky.

Mary Lou missed Carly and Rachel for a brief moment, neither of whom were with them this time. She thought back to Carly’s present snide attitude. *It’s just as well she has to stay behind for school.* Mary Lou thought. *Something’s going on in her head that she isn’t saying. Poor Rachel, though. She’s close to a total nervous breakdown. Rachel doesn’t need to be anywhere near the Spear of Chaos right now. She’s totally losing it, and who could blame her with everything we’ve been through?*

With Bryan driving and Kenneth riding shotgun, Mary Lou had the back seat to herself along with the blankets Ken had moved out of the trunk. With the long drive ahead, she watched the passing scenery for a while. The guys’ voices slowly lulled her to sleep.

The girl felt strangely safe with them in the car with her. It wasn’t something she was used to feeling. She hoped it would last.

A small niggle of foreboding, however, gradually crept into her subconscious. She sought to ignore it, but it grew stronger as the miles, and the morning, flew by. It hit her full-on when they stopped at the Kentucky border rest area four hours later. Kenneth shook her awake.

"If you need to pee," Kenneth said, "now's the time. We aren't going to stop again for a while."

"Yeah, okay." Mary Lou rubbed her eyes and made her way to the busy women's restroom. It was clean and neatly painted. *Much nicer than the Ohio rest areas I've seen on past trips.* She thought to herself gratefully. *This bathroom is well kept and maintained. Kudos, Kentucky.*

She thought back to some of her family's previous road trips for Masonic events or visiting family out of state. *Those were all for fun. This time it's deadly serious, and they just think I'm off on a camping trip with my girlfriends before I start College. For real, they are CLUE-LESS.* She giggled to herself.

Mary Lou felt free like she had flown away from the bird coop at last. *Don't get cocky.* She admonished herself mentally. *We have a long way to go, and that Spear has a habit of making monkeys out of us just when we think we've got it all figured out.*

She shook her head as she washed her hands. The mirror showed she looked tired, more worn around the edges than she wanted to admit. All the mess of the last several months had taken its toll on her too. *I can't quit, though,* she admitted to herself. *I made a promise. I'll stick by it, wherever it leads. I just hope this new plan works. If it doesn't, we're just screwed.*

he direction Mary Lou's thoughts had taken proved prophetic. She arrived at the cars to see Bryan swearing and waving his hands around more animatedly than usual. His light brown hair bobbed up and down as he bounced on his toes. He was with Diane, who spoke with the owner of a gray Subaru backed into John's car.

"Uh oh." Mary Lou's heart seemed to sink into her gut. She joined Ken, who stood back a little from the carnage. "How bad is it?"

"Not as bad as it could be." Kenneth pointed. "Dented bumper and rear fender. No tire damage. It's drivable. But we'll be delayed because there has to be a police report."

"Crap! Uh, question?" Mary Lou eyed the situation dubiously.

“What?” Kenneth examined her. He didn’t usually hear that unsure tone of voice from her.

“How’s the cop gonna react to a wolf and a coyo’ in the car when he gets here?” Mary Lou glanced worried at the two ‘dogs’ in the car. Would the cop notice what they are? Would the Spear strike out in some way?

“I guess we’ll find out in a few minutes. Bryan already called them. They’re not far away.” Kenneth shrugged.

“That’s something, at least. I’ll sit with the canines while we wait. There’s nothing for me to add since I didn’t see anything,” Mary Lou told him.

The ominous feeling increased when she got in John’s car. She could sense the Spear making an effort to reach out through its bindings. She mentally distanced herself as best she could from its influence while willing it still.

It wasn’t long before the officer arrived to take the report. But the longer they stayed at the rest area, the more the cloud cover increased. The afternoon began to grow dark as another officer arrived. The sky went from partly cloudy to mostly cloudy with wind and thunder. The sky seemed to reflect her mood. She thought she saw sinuous moving shapes in the clouds above. Lightning struck to the west in the direction they were heading.

“Great,” she muttered. “Looks like we might be driving through some storms. I didn’t think the weather forecast was calling for bad weather. It just said partly cloudy.” She glanced at the Spear. Its hate was palpable but damped down. Her anger flared at the same time thunder rolled. “Stop it,” she growled at the inanimate object. John and the coyote moved restlessly. They could feel it too. “If I could, I’d break you with my bare hands,” she told it angrily.

The second officer walked close and peered into the car. His eyes widened in surprise and then narrowed. He turned to Diane and Bryan, pointing into the vehicle. “I’m not getting out and leaving them in here,” Mary Lou whispered.

“You got a permit for a wolf?” the officer asked Diane.

“Officer, I’m a park ranger, and yes, but it’s part dog. It’s okay. See the blue eyes? It’s not a full wolf. He’s got his rabies tag and ID on.”

John moved slightly where the oversized orange collar Diane had thought to place on him that morning would show. He allowed his tongue to loll out the side of his mouth in what he hoped was a friendly or casual expression as he wagged his tail.

"I don't like dogs myself." The officer glared. "I'm a cat person." His gut told him something was wrong, but they didn't appear to be doing anything illegal. An inexplicable urge in his trigger finger made him want to draw his weapon.

Do it. Kill them. Kill them all. A mental hissing voice said. It startled the officer out of the sudden stupor that threatened to draw him in like a nightmare.

The officer jumped back from the car. With eyes wide, he shook his head clear. No one expected a ten-year veteran of the police force to want to randomly kill a bunch of kids! What was wrong with him? "Maybe it's time to retire," he muttered to himself where the others couldn't hear.

Coward! The voice hissed.

Fuck you! The officer thought back at whatever was causing his thoughts to spiral out of control. He took hold of himself and returned to his cruiser to allow his coworker to finish up. After all, it was just a fender bender, and they were from out of state. "Not my problem," he said out loud to hear something besides that negative voice wanting to worm its way into his mind.

A few splatters of raindrops fell on the windshield of the police cruiser. "A good hot cup of coffee would be great about now," he said aloud. Following his fellow officer out of the parking lot, the policeman left to go about his patrol. He forgot about the group of young folks and their weird-looking dogs.

The travelers pulled out, going the other direction. Heading north on Interstate 24 to hit 57 north, they went west on Interstate 64 to the Illinois/Missouri border at St. Louis. They stopped again at a small town outside the city to refuel and switch drivers.

Under cover of night, nobody noticed the odd-looking canines who got out to take advantage of the rest to eat, drink and relieve themselves when the humans did. This time, to everyone's relief, it was an uneventful stop. It gradually warmed as they continued west, steadily eating up the miles.

Kenneth switched to Diane's car to give her a break from driving, and Mary Lou took over Bryan's car so he could nap. It had been a long 18 hours. They were barely halfway to their goal.

Dawn broke with the group headed west through Kansas. Clearing cloud cover barely obscured the sunrise behind them except for a persistent small storm that seemed to stick with them as they went. They found mostly small towns and quick stops in Topeka, Kansas on Interstate 70 to the state line.

“What boring countryside.” Mary Lou had given the wheel back to Bryan. She eyed the perfectly flat expanse of scenery on both sides of the road. Ahead of them, the road stretched to a tiny pinpoint at eye level where the ground abruptly ended and the sky began. The land was dotted with miles of crops peeking up from the dirt where it was newly planted. An occasional house poked its roof up out of the fields with a handful of trees around it.

“There’s not much out there except farmer’s fields,” Bryan agreed with his friend. “This is tornado country too. One of these days I’m going to come out here and be a storm chaser.”

Mary Lou turned a critical eye on Bryan. “That’s just insane,” she laughed. “Why would you deliberately seek out trouble? It’s bad enough trouble looks for us when we aren’t looking for it.”

“You don’t have any room for talk, girl,” he said. “You’re the one with thunderstorms wont to follow you around. You are the one that might bring trouble down on us out here.”

“Too true.” Mary Lou sighed, eyeing the sky. Darkness did seem to follow her around lately. Heavy gray clouds were piling up in one area, whereas in most of the sky, simple cotton balls of scattered white puffs sat overhead. One particular dark cloud was with them persistently. “The prevailing winds blow to the east, but the one above us looks like it’s going west. What gives?” Mary Lou wondered aloud.

Aurinel was not inclined to explain herself to the travelers below. She preferred to remain unobtrusive and unremarked within the cloud cover. The storm elemental was ethereal and camouflaged among the chaotic winds she rode. She carefully hid herself so that the people looking upward might only remark upon the interesting dragon-shaped cloud she pretended to be. Aurinel’s attention centered on the girl herself.

The sudden storm Mary Lou had raised the summer before had brought Aurinel out of her mountain territory and into the valley to investigate. The dragon stayed near to watch the unusual activity because most humans never wielded the dominion power God had given them. As she soared through the sky, over Mary Lou, Aurinel savored the memory of the unusual amount of electricity that had crackled beneath her talons when she rode that previous storm. Aurinel controlled the ever-threatening chaos of the weather patterns as one of the elder Powers assigned to protect and guard.

This weather was different, however, and the storm dragon was concerned.

Something else dark, ancient, and threatening was at play. It was sending the girl's gifts into an uncontrolled spiral. Aurinel, as the dragon closest to the object causing the problem, would be held responsible by the Prime Creator to keep the weather in check. She was ready, waiting. Something else almost as sinister drew the storm dragon's attention.

Unseen sentient entities were nosing around the edges of the darkness, hateful creeping things that sought the source of tainted power. They, however, were creatures born of chaos and death, unable to cross the veil because their very existence was anathema to the natural order.

Nephilim. Demonkind. Hateful spawn of Septalim and fallen Watcher angels. Aurinel hissed at the thought. In response to her anger, thunder rumbled around her. Demons were always present when blood and death threatened, like sharks circling their prey ready to feed.

Almost as if the spear sensed the dragon's attention, the hate within it fought its bonds harder as they drove on into Colorado. Restless, the coyote shifted in his sleep in the back of the car. When he stretched, the necklace slipped free of the unholy artifact.

The flat and bland terrain behind them turned to rolling grasslands as they journeyed onwards. Mary Lou half expected to go through mountains once they got to Colorado, but Denver was relatively flat. Instead of heading on west into the Rocky Mountains, they turned north on the bypass around Denver. They were still in Denver, having followed the signs toward Cheyenne, Wyoming, when the spear's influence, freed unnoticed from its bindings, found fertile ground for chaos.

Traffic had begun to back up so the two cars were forced to slow for the traffic in front of them. Drivers around them began honking. Bryan was getting agitated, and Mary Lou felt oddly annoyed by the noise.

"Shut up already, geez!" Mary Lou shook her head. "What the heck is the issue?"

"The interstate is going down to two lanes," Bryan told her. Someone behind them honked. In response Bryan slowed down further. "Piss off!" he yelled out the window. The CB radio crackled with truck drivers talking. Mary Lou tried to make out what was going on.

Ahead of them, Diane moved over. She grabbed her CB and pressed the button. “You guys ok back there?”

Bryan grabbed the speaker and answered, “Yeah, you got an eye on what it looks like up ahead?”

“Can’t see much,” came the answer. “I’ll pull left and look.”

“I’m right behind you,” Bryan affirmed. He put the mic down as traffic sped up.

“It’s clear sailing ahead,” Diane’s voice crackled. She paused and started to get back over into their lane. Both drivers were looking behind them and noticed what was bearing down on them simultaneously. “Oh fuck!” Bryan yelled. “Move, Di!”

Both drivers expertly spun their wheels and swerved into the marked off lane next to them. They moved barely in time to avoid being crushed.

An impatient driver in a blue SUV sped past them and cut off the tractor-trailer truck just ahead and to the right of them. The SUV failed to see that the off-ramp was full of cars at a dead stop, swerved over, and hit the rear of a truck on the ramp. The semi-driver tried to swerve to miss the SUV, but clipped its back. Pieces of the SUV bounced several yards down the interstate. Horrified drivers only had a moment to observe a child’s car seat and pink lunch box skitter past them on the pavement. The tractor-trailer jackknifed, went partly airborne, and rolled over several cars.

The sudden stop and resulting explosion of somebody’s gas tank caused several more vehicles to crash into the drivers ahead of them. Thick, black smoke quickly blanketed the highway. Spine-tingling primal screams rang out at the crash site. Other horrified drivers sat frozen or exited their cars, checking for survivors.

By bare luck and skill, Diane and Bryan had avoided the pileup. Bryan jumped out, grabbed his emergency kit, and ran to help. Mary Lou and Kenneth were close behind to see what they could do.



It had been days. Ikhdathir tracked the scent of hate, corruption, and death. He located them amid blood and chaos. The daemon licked his chops eagerly. Greasy black smoke spiraled skywards to where he rode the winds just beneath the threshold of the storm dragon’s territory. Drifting forwards half-in and half-out of the physical part of existence, he opened his maw to take in the

scent of suffering as it rose from the tangle of mangled metal and fire below.

Delicious! His eyes sparkled with hunger. Weariness dragged at his limbs from his long chase, but he would not falter until the Spear was in his grasp. Several prey creatures bolted from their vehicles towards the crash site, leaving fewer of them to guard the Spear.

A push of will brought him closer to reality's physical side, and he flowed into the smoke to hide his form. Embers floated from below into the sky and no one noticed that two were descending rather than rising toward Heaven.

Ikhdathir's focus was shattered by a scream, higher than the rest with the taste of innocence behind it. He froze with the smoke coiling around him. Soft sobbing and the scent of terror oozed outwards. His gaze snapped behind him.

A child! The daemon salivated. It has been so long.

The young girl was trapped. The underside of her vehicle had bent. Straps held fast to her as she tried to wiggle free. The car behind her had rammed into the backside of the van before catching fire. Her mother slumped unconscious over the steering wheel. The flames inched closer by the moment. Mesmerized, Ikhdathir crept forward, drawing her terror and pain into himself, feeding on her life and soul.

The baby girl's head snapped towards him, and she *Saw*. She saw the evil coming for her. The child screamed so loud that it touched Heaven, and the heavens responded.

Lightning leaped from cloud to ground. Ikhdathir howled as a dragon's wrath blew a hole straight through his neck without killing him. The thunder that followed flattened him to the pavement with its pressure. A web of lightning crawled across the clouds as the enraged elemental dragon gathered her strength for another strike.

Ikhdathir yelped with fear as rain poured down from the clouds above. It quenched the fire and tingled painfully across his skin. Another bolt narrowly missed his muzzle as he dove away from the road and into the ditch beside it. Even that proved perilous as water began sluicing from the roadway to the ditch where he cowered from the storm's fury. *Another day*, Ikhdathir promised silently as he slunk, defeated from the wreckage in the road. *And I'll get you too, bitch.* He thought hatefully at the silver form he could just barely make out, curled around the thunderhead above. *When I have the spear, I'll be unstoppable.*

Aurinel let the daemon go. She hissed as he made the Jump from physical reality to the Space Between. Since the innocents below were no longer under active threat from the daemon, the storm dragon turned her attention to putting out the fires and watching for more opportunistic incursions. She noted that the other shadows also retreated, having taken the warning of Aurinel's swift punishment of the stronger daemon seriously.

The girl below that had drawn so much of Aurinel's interest crouched down and stared upward at the dragon that she could not see. Mary Lou hesitated. She had checked on the baby who was slung to the pavement. The infant was dead, a victim of an impatient parent.

With tears in her eyes, she looked around for someone she COULD help. She'd heard the scream of the child in the van just before the lightning bolt rattled her bones.

"Lightning never strikes twice!" she assured herself, deliberately ignoring the fact that it just had so she could make herself move. People needed help. She ran to the van hoping the electricity crackling above them would stay in the sky. The van was locked, but the sliding door was crushed, and partly open. It had gashes like something huge and clawed had scraped it. She squeezed into the opening and saw the terrified child and the unconscious woman.

"Hey, lady! Are you ok? Wake up!" she called out. There was no response.

She pulled herself away and looked around for more help. Diane passed close by, supporting someone bleeding but on their feet.

"Diane!" She was relieved when Diane turned around. "There's a lady dead, or maybe unconscious in here with a baby! Can you check on her while I get this child out?"

Before long, paramedics had the woman on a stretcher loading her into an ambulance. This one was lucky compared to some of the other victims of the crash, Mary Lou thought.

The child's mother finally responded weakly. Her name was Sharon, she told them and tearfully asked about her child. Diane reassured her that her baby was only scraped up. The mother was too injured to hold her little girl, but Mary Lou came close with her so her mom could see her.

"Sharon, do you have someone we could call, or... maybe have come to get your baby?" Mary Lou asked. She looked at Diane. "Do

they need to take the baby to the hospital with her mom? How is this normally handled, or by whom?"

"Officer Dietz says her father's on the way. They ran the tags and called the family," Diane told her. "We'll wait with her since it seems you have a new friend."

The little girl clung tightly to Mary Lou's neck for reassurance, still sobbing and hiccupping with the shock of having her world upended. Mary Lou hugged her, consoling her as best she could while they waited.

Diane left to check on their people. Kenneth and Bryan were still busy helping other motorists injured in the crash, so she returned to the car. When she opened the trunk to check on their canine companions, she saw the coyote standing over the spear growling with the loosened bindings.

"Sum'bitch!" Diane exclaimed. "No wonder," she said grimly over the cursed object. "Up to your same tricks, 'old man.'" It was not a question. Ulfr's Spear of Chaos was too dangerous to move but far too dangerous to let lie either. She shook her head as it reached out to her.

"Stop it!" Diane gave the artifact a mental slap. "Get outta my head!" It recoiled in surprise at the force behind the ex-cop's response. The Medicine Man's training blended well with her natural grit and experience gained from serving her community as a patrol officer.

The spear settled back, contemplating pushing her as she renewed its binding with the blood ruby. The mental grumbling quieted. Diane wasn't fooled. She knew it was only waiting for its next opportunity. "Don't worry. We'll be outta here soon," she told it.

Six hours later, traffic was backed up for miles. The emergency responders cleared the wreckage enough for one lane of traffic to move. The group was eventually able to join the other drivers making their way onward toward their destination.

They wondered silently when the spear would make its next attack as they continued across state lines into Wyoming. No one voiced their fears or suspicions as they didn't want to encourage the artifact to get any ideas. Their mood dampened by the horror they'd witnessed during the pileup in Denver, they rode on in somber silence.

Still leading the way, Diane sat up straight and tensed in the driver's seat. Beside her, Ken sat half-turned to keep an eye on the

still whispering artifact. They could both feel the palpable taint rolling off of it, making the ride uncomfortable.

The spear quieted further as they pulled into the rest area at the Wyoming welcome station about 10 miles after crossing the Colorado/Wyoming state line. It was small and difficult to access. As she looked for a parking spot among the other travelers, Diane grabbed the CB.

“Anybody need a break back there?” Diane’s voice crackled over the radio in Bryan’s car.

“Affirmative!” Bryan replied. “Mary Lou has been pestering for the last 20 minutes about a bathroom stop.”

“10-4! These dogs need to be let out. They’re bound to be floating by now.”

Still stuck as a wolf, the professor turned a blue-eyed glare on his companion. “A-rroo-roo,” he declared. *Who you calling a dog?*

“Oh, it’s worse than that, my furry friend.” She grinned unrepentantly. “I’ve gotta put a leash on you. We don’t need some jumpy cowboy to see you as anything but a dog. That officer in Kentucky was bad enough. Try to look small and tame.”

Diane next turned her attention to the coyote. “You too, my friend.” She pointed to the leashes in the back floorboard. “Ken can take you to the bathroom. Keep a low profile, ok? People out here are more likely to know what you are than at our stops back east.”

“Alright, let’s go,” Ken said. “Time’s a-wastin’.” He took the offered leashes and patted the coyote on his head.

Bryan pulled into a spot next to Diane and parked, allowing his stiff passenger to get out. Mary Lou watched them open the doors to let the professor and the coyote out as she stretched. The ‘wolf’ had his ears down with head and tail tucked. He was the very picture of misery.

“Is the professor ok?” she asked.

Diane snapped a leash on his collar. “Yeah, he’s just not happy.”

Mary Lou nodded. “He doesn’t look it.”

Bryan chimed in, “No, but at our other stops, we got away with just parking away from everyone and letting them out. However, this place is small on this wide-open field. Wolves and coyotes are native. Everybody has a gun out there and they’re dumb if they don’t due to dangerous wildlife,” he told her. He patted his door where she knew he kept his firearm.

“Makes sense,” she said. “We can’t have somebody trigger happy shooting them. I’m gonna go visit the bathroom. You stayin’ here?”

"Yeah. I'll watch to make sure nothing happens while you're taking care of business. Go pee, and then you can watch over the cars while I go," Bryan said.

"On it," Mary Lou replied as she walked off. She saw that the parking lot was mostly empty despite Diane and Bryan's concerns. Above her, the same gray clouds hovered over them that had been there the whole trip. They were low, thick, and ropy with curling serpentine shapes that flowed in the mists above. At the near edge of it, streaks of rain fell in front of a distant clear blue sky.

"Freaky," she muttered. "Maybe the spear is affecting the weather. The weatherman on the radio says no rain and clear sailing." She shook her head in wonder at the faint peal of distant-sounding thunder. "I don't think he knows what he's talking about."

Mary Lou entered the facility and found the ladies' room. "Aha!" She breathed a sigh and entered.



khdathir crouched low in the deep shadow of the building at the rest stop as he also glanced upward. Mindful of his last encounter, he was loathe to show himself to the storm dragon that patrolled the sky above.

Due to the taint emanating from one of their cars, the daemon had no trouble tracking their movements as they traveled. Ikhdathir lay in wait until the spear stopped moving, then made his jump to where it drew him.

Careful exploration of his new surroundings told him that he should be able to claw his way through the veil to get to his prey. Ikhdathir's tongue snicked out, and he tasted the energy of the place.

Fortunately for the daemon, mundane traffic in the physical realm created a ready exit. People full of intense emotions like anger or hate, greed, and lust stressed the barrier just enough. He sniffed out one of those torn places and formed a plan when he realized that the girl from earlier was separated and alone. He stalked her. *I get you, distract, get spear*, he whispered ominously. *This is too easy*, he smiled to himself.

Ikhdathir flexed his claws in anticipation of drawing real blood from a hated human. *Later*, he promised himself. *I will finish the job*. His tongue slid across his misshapen black lips in hunger at the memory of hot, sweet, life-filled fluid from a fresh kill dripping from

his fangs. *Human cattle, I will feed on the marrow of your bones like the lioness after the hunt.*

Ikhdathir focused on his game of cat and mouse. *I am the cat.* He hissed in amusement at the direction of his own thoughts. *Deadly. Strike. Cat. Come here little tasty cow... kill the queen, kill the hive, and the drones are easy picking!*

The daemon considered the other living shadows slinking around in increasing number. None of them dared challenge the dremorzen Ikhdathir. He showed his fangs, and they pressed back in fear. He then ignored them as beneath him. Seeing his opportunity, he started his attack.

Ikhdathir came face to face with the girl. He looked at her from the astral side of the veil. Carefully, he pressed his weight against a weak point. To his satisfaction, the mirror he had chosen as his method of entry began to splinter beneath his will. He had only partly broken through when his prey looked up and noticed him draw shadow around himself to become solid.

They looked at each other eye to eye. Ikhdathir felt the first pangs of fear when he finally SAW her clearly. He realized that he may have miscalculated; however, it was far too late to formulate another plan. He pushed harder on the barrier, and it gave way. He was through!

Facing her in person, the daemon Ikhdathir crouched, growling as he fully recognized the danger she presented him. The girl was bright with spiritual energy barely contained by her physical form. The daemon gasped internally when he saw what she carried on her back folded into her aura, but he pressed his attack. Biting or clawing her was going to burn him. He went for her in deadly earnest anyway, the game forgotten.

Ikhdathir thought back to the teachings of his own kind: *Every daemon must know that once you start a fight with a human, you must finish the battle or die trying. If you abandon the fight, we will kill you ourselves. Humans cannot be allowed to learn that we can know defeat.*



Harry Lou squealed and jumped back, startled when the mirror in front of her shattered as she attempted to wash her hands. When she saw the dark shape materializing from the wrong side of

the mirror, she instantly remembered Ulfr and Sierra's encounters. The girl stepped back and crouched into a fighting stance.

"Damned spear constantly bringing nightmares down on our heads," Mary Lou muttered. Before it could jump on her, she grabbed a large piece of the mirror off the floor. When it leaped, the girl came up with the sharp edge slashing across its belly as she did a foot sweep to bring it down. It howled with pain but darted aside, avoiding a fall.

Forgetting the girl's allies outside, Ikhdathir howled again in an angry bloodcurdling scream, but again, he didn't go down when she hit him. He lashed out, swiping at her. Reflexes born from months of martial arts training barely allowed her to dodge the strike. Porcelain shattered as the sink took the brunt of the blow.

Seconds seemed like forever as the daemon pressed his attack, and Mary Lou fought back. She was conscious of her friends nearby and slowly backed towards the door, giving ground to the black abomination in front of her. Tile shrieked. Sparks flew as she ducked. The cement wall gave way beneath the monster's claws, and it snarled in frustration.

"What in hell are you?" she demanded. Mary Lou again knocked it back.

The light flickered in the building as thunder boomed outside. Rain pounded the roof. It made Ikhdathir back away and involuntarily look upward. Their fight had gotten the attention he'd hoped to avoid. The storm dragon was angry.

Ikhdathir briefly considered a retreat, but he knew he wouldn't be able to stop the chase. If he failed, there would be nothing left of him since his kind showed no mercy or patience with any sign of weakness.

The noise also got other unwanted attention. Loud voices sounded over the thunder. Diane burst through the door. Taking one look at the situation, Diane held her hand up and shouted a word in a language that the teen didn't understand. The medicine man's student darted forward and touched the creature. It howled again in pain and convulsed on the floor among the scattered bits of the mirror and sink.

"Thank God." Mary Lou was glad when it finally turned tail and ran back the way it came. "It's gone."

Mary Lou bent over trying to catch her breath, shaking from the adrenaline rush. She looked up at Diane, grateful that her friend had come when she had.

“You’re bleedin’.” Diane pointed to her hands and her shoulder. “Looks like it got you. We need to get you checked out and see how bad you wounded.”

“It’s mostly my hands from the broken glass. I need a bandage. The other is just a scratch. It didn’t get me solid. But... what was that thing?” Mary Lou asked in confusion.

“A spirit,” Diane told her grimly. “Used to be a werewolf in life judgin’ by its canine appearance. Now it’s a shadow of itself, literally. You could’a used magick against it yourself if you’d known its nature. Any number of blessed objects or even holy water and smudge incense smoke also works.”

“I need to file that information away for later,” Mary Lou said.

Diane nodded in agreement. “For now, it’s gone. Let’s get you outta here. Do you need help?”

“No. I’m ambulatory,” the girl answered, despite the tremors from fading adrenaline.

“Good. We need to get outta here soon as possible.” Diane opened the door.

Outside, Ken and Bryan took one look at the blood on her and ran in two different directions. Bryan headed to his car while Kenneth lunged for the ladies' room door to barge inside.

“What the!” Kenneth exclaimed. He scanned the bathroom for an intruder. He noticed the broken mirror and sink, as well as the large rips in the wall. “Oh, hell, naw! Here we go again!” He stalked angrily out of the women’s restroom.

“Excuse me!” An older lady in white slacks and a cardigan sweater glared at him. Behind her, a balding man stood beside a Buick smoking a pipe.

“You’re excused,” Kenneth quipped. “You might want to try the men’s room. That bathroom’s closed for remodeling.” He left her blinking at his retreating back.



“f I didn’t know better, I’d have thought you got sideswiped by a bear,” Bryan told Mary Lou. He carefully examined the shallow parallel cuts. “It looks like it’s got some kind of black dirt in it, but it’s not washing out.”

Bryan and Mary Lou stood behind the car while he cleaned her wounds. The medic wore a pair of latex gloves while attempting to stop the bleeding in the shoulder wound. Rain was still falling

lightly. Bryan glanced warily at the sky, then the building, and back at his patient.

"Not good." Diane glared at the back of the car, where the spear still lay. The professor and coyote were quiet but not distressed. "I don't think this time that the spear did this, or at least not directly."

"Okay, why do you think that?" Kenneth asked. "I agree with you, but I want to hear your thoughts on what attacked her, and did you see anything?"

"Oh, yes," Diane replied. "It was a shadow-walker, one of the Old Ones. What you'd call a demon, or dark spirit."

Bryan stopped scrubbing his friend's wounds to stare at Diane wide-eyed. Mary Lou grimaced and nodded.

"Yeah," she said. "It certainly looked like one. It was a big, black werewolf-looking thing, with like... long claws and four long fingers; red eyes, sort of dog-like," she told Bryan and Kenneth.

Remembering the incident at the dam, Kenneth looked back at the building with the ruined bathroom. "The spear is certainly responsible, in my opinion, but it didn't attack this time. Oddly, it didn't. This craziness seems to be something else. Something we haven't seen before."

"Whatever caused it, we have enough troubles already. We don't need more," Mary Lou said between gritted teeth as Bryan dabbed and poked at her injury.

"Just one more thing to keep aware of. Also, stay in groups 'till we can figure out how to get rid of the Spear of Chaos." Diane folded her arms over her belly as she watched Bryan continue to swipe at Mary Lou's shoulder. Finally, he sighed in exasperation.

"It's still not completely coming clean. I'm going to bandage it for now. I can clean it again after we get clear of this place in case whatever did this comes back. We should get the spear away from here."

Bryan stared closely at his friend's cuts. "It may need some mild debridement."

"What does that mean?" Mary Lou asked.

"To use a sharp surgical-grade blade to cut away contaminants or dead tissue," he told her.

"A knife." Mary Lou grimaced. "No thanks. I'm sure it will be fine." She shrank away at the idea. Shaking her head, she allowed Bryan to finish bandaging her up, and then she grabbed her drink and got into the car. "I'm ready whenever you guys are."

Mary Lou sighed in relief when they pulled out and back onto the road. As the miles rolled by under their wheels, she fell asleep.



Ilow whine warbled in the depths of Ikhdathir's throat. Thin trails of ooze dribbled from his scorched shoulder. His somewhat amorphous flesh had healed wounds from glass and porcelain easily enough, but the Lightworker's touch... He dared not even lick his wound, lest his tongue would start to dissolve as well.

Hissing and snickering followed him. Tiny slithering things followed in his wake, licking up his fallen essence. Several had already vanished, gone to report presumably. Larger daemonic flickered through the mists in the space-between, waiting, watching, scornful, and hungry. He snarled savagely at the scavengers on his trail. Intimidated, they scattered, only to return as soon as he turned his back.

Weakened and slowed, he never saw the blow coming. A massively scaled tail lashed across his chest, throwing him to the ground. The daemon was already on top of him before he had bounced twice. A massive clawed paw pinned his chest to the ground.

"The Lord Jibril has waited for long enough. I find you here with the touch of Light upon you and no spear." The urgermach grinned delightedly and laughed. "Poor, poor thing," it purred mockingly. "So terribly wounded." Its claws shifted a couple of inches deeper into his flesh as it spoke. "Looks like you started a fight you couldn't finish. You were to retrieve the Spear, not play tag with Lightworkers." As the larger daemon spoke, acid dripped down from the urgermach's jaws onto Ikhdathir's face.

Ikhdathir bared his fangs back at his tormentor. "No one said anything about the damned Spear being guarded."

"Excuses. Any true daemon would be able to steal from mortals."

"It wasn't mortal... sheathed in skin perhaps. But it wasn't mortal," the dremorzen gasped out.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It doesn't really matter. Sooner or later, others will learn that you failed. When that happens, the Lord Jibril and I will be the least of your worries. Finish the job."

Ikhdathir laughed. "The Lord Jibril will have to get used to disappointment. I will be goo before I get my hands on that Spear with this taint of Light burning through me."

The urgermach grinned mockingly. "Is that all? Easy enough to solve."

Jaws wider than Ikhdathir's waist with serrated fangs to shame a shark's bite closed on his collarbone. With a savage yank, it took half of his chest, narrowly missing beheading him, and threw his arm to the scavengers. Ikhdathir screamed, howled, and cried.

The urgermach turned to address their audience. "This one is mine. No one kills him until I give the order, or I will eat you myself." Turning back to Ikhdathir, it spoke, "Finish your task. Or, I can throw your scraps to the lowest denizens of the Pits if you prefer."

The scavengers grew bolder after the urgermach released him and jumped out of range. Ikhdathir snapped at them. They giggled at him and simply hopped out of his reach. Wounded and weary, they knew well he hadn't the strength to pursue them. He was losing essence and strength.

Despite the order not to kill Ikhdathir, the opportunity to feed on loose bits or latch on like lice was too great a temptation for the smaller daemoni. The dremorzen snapped at several more tiny scavengers who gained the courage to bite and run. His own thirst to feed had become overpowering. Too weak to jump between realms with his wounds draining his strength, Ikhdathir settled down to wait in stillness.

Lulled by Ikhdathir's unresponsiveness to small nips, the scavengers grew bolder. They drew in closer until he managed to snap up a couple of them, after which they scattered to watch from a distance. The meager amount of dark essence he gained from eating the scavengers would sustain him until he reached Earth again. A proper kill in the mortal realm would help him regenerate his missing limb. There were plenty of corrupted mortals who would make a tasty, and safe, snack.

"I'm coming for you little girl," the daemon snarled into the nothingness. "Next time, I'll have your heart for dinner even if it kills me."

The threat sounded hollow even to him, but his rage and his hunger firmed his resolve. He hissed and slaked his tongue over his shadow-colored lips. *At least, he told himself, there is none of the hated light here to burn me.* He settled down into stillness again. No outward sign showed that he plotted his next moves.



Several hours later, Mary Lou awoke stiff, groggy, and with her shoulder throbbing painfully to every heartbeat. “Where are we Bryan?” She peered out at the terrain passing by, or she tried to. Full dark had passed them by some hours ago.

“We’re near the Utah border, headed due west,” Bryan responded.

“How long was I asleep?” she asked, trying to shake herself awake hissing as she jostled her shoulder. Bryan kept his eyes on the road, but a frown pulled the edge of his mouth at the sound. “Six or seven hours. It’s just about dawn,” Bryan told Mary Lou.

“Owie,” Mary Lou complained as she moved. “Are there any rest areas or towns where we could stop?”

“You’ll have to grab a bush if you need a pit stop,” Bryan answered. “Or, in this case, a blade of grass, or maybe you can hide behind a cactus, because there’s nothing out here but flat desert and moonlight.”

“I’m thirsty.” She laid her head back. She worked her mouth. It felt like dry cotton. “Okay, I suppose.”

“Okay, what?” Bryan asked.

“Whatever.” Mary Lou felt too tired to move.

In response, Bryan reached for the CB radio. “Ken, we need to call a halt. Mary Lou isn’t making much sense, and I want to take another look at her wounds.”

“10-4,” came the immediate and sharp response. Both cars headed for the shoulder as they slowed.

By the time Bryan stopped, Mary Lou was almost asleep again. He turned the light on in his car then jostled her back awake. “C’mon, you need to wake up. Talk to me, okay? I’m going to check your shoulder, clean your cuts, and re-dress them. We don’t want them to fester.”

“M-kay.” Mary Lou nodded assent.

“What’s your name and birthday?” Bryan asked her while he dug into the first aid kit for gauze, tape, and sanitizing scrub.

“You already know that,” she muttered.

“Just checking that you do at the moment,” he quipped.

“Mary Lou, July 29. Ow!” she gasped and jumped in pain when he touched her.

Bryan pulled up her sleeve and also gasped. “Oh, hell! No way.”

“What?” The teen was suddenly wide awake. The throbbing in her shoulder seemed to get more intense as she focused on it.

Bryan reached for the radio again. "Ken, Diane, I may need some help back here. This wound looks pretty ugly."

"Coming," Diane's voice crackled over the radio.

Bryan's normally cheerful face was grim as he greeted his friends. "She should be bleeding yellow and pink pus if it were infected normally. This stuff looks like she's got an ink-stain rather than a wound."

"We had better do something about it ourselves. There ain't doctors here to fix it." Kenneth looked around with a frown. Thunder rumbled distantly, and the wind picked up. The smell of an impending storm cut through the scent of sun-baked fields and dust. "There's rain moving in, so we have limited time. That could make it more difficult. Can you hurry?" Kenneth asked.

"Probably not. This isn't going to be an easy patch and run. I think Mary Lou is in real trouble here," Bryan responded.

Mary Lou felt dizzy and disoriented. "Whu' can we do?" she slurred.

"You're going to have to get out so I can clean your shoulder properly," Bryan told her. "I can't get to you well enough at this angle."

Without the strength to object, she allowed herself to be helped to her feet. Mary Lou found that her knees didn't want to support her weight as she was led to the front of the car. Changing position made the disorientation worse, and she found that she could barely see. Nausea threatened to take hold.

"Should we take the spear out, then lay her down in the hatchback?" Diane looked dubiously at the other car.

"I ain't moving that thing, a'ight?" Kenneth declared as he gently moved beneath Mary Lou's good arm. "Let's put her on the hood. We can use a towel since the engine is hot. But we don't need to make things any worse by getting the 'old man' involved."

"The trunk would be easier, but that's a good point." Diane nodded. "What do you want us to do, Bryan?"

"Well, I'm going to debride this," Bryan told her. "It has to drain; hopefully before the infection goes systemic... if it's not too late."

"Then let's get it done," Kenneth said, his mouth drawn into a hard line.

Bryan pulled a knife and antiseptic out of his medkit. "Hold her down. This is going to hurt."

Kenneth shifted his grip and propped the girl carefully on the clean towel that Diane laid out on the car. He gently supported Mary Lou to keep her from slipping or jostling Bryan when he

approached with the knife. Kenneth caught his breath as he got a good look at the wound Bryan uncovered.

“Oh my God!” Kenneth blinked at it and readjusted, so he had a firmer grip. “Stay still, Mary Lou,” Kenneth told her. “We’re going to have to get this shit out of your shoulder the hard way.”

All she could see above her was the lightening sky and Ken’s blurry face. It felt like the world had begun to spin around her, and she couldn’t tell which way was up. She lost sense of herself and where she was inside her spinning head.

“I feel dizzy,” she told them. “Everything’s weird.”

Bryan examined the wound closely with gloved hands. It was hot and swollen to the touch. Normally, an infected wound might have red streaks down the arm, but he could see a web of ink-colored veins. The flesh around the slashes from her attacker had a gray discoloration.

“Damnit!” Bryan said softly. “It looks necrotic.”

“And,” Diane interjected from beside Bryan, “there’s no telling how much supernatural dirt was left behind. Debridement may not be enough to save her.”

“Shush, Diane. We’re not losing Mary Lou,” Bryan told her firmly. “Let me concentrate.”

“We damn well aren’t! Get on with it. Do it now. Panic later.” Kenneth shifted his grip to hold Mary Lou down a little tighter. She wiggled under his hands in response. “Stop that,” he told her. “Don’t you die on me!”

Vague but familiar whispers slipped into Mary Lou’s thoughts as her friends tried to help her. They became more insistent.

He has you helpless, little girl. They said into her mind. He’s on you. Remember the last time? He promised he’d never do it again, and yet, here you are. This time he wants to bite you, hurt you and make you cower.

“No!” Mary Lou gasped. *Ken did nothing wrong. He wants to fix it.* Mary Lou fought back against the spear’s influence. *Get away from me Ulfr!* She thought back as the spear laughed.

It responded. You can’t stop this! You can’t hide your fear from me. I remember how this goes. You are tainted, stupid, and crazy. A used plaything. An ugly dog! I am already IN you, and you won’t be rid of me!

The pain hit and with it, so did her PTSD. Mary Lou screamed and lost any remaining sense of what was happening to her. Her scream was nearly drowned in a loud peal of thunder as a lightning bolt flashed in the sky above her head. The wind began to howl

around the edges of the cars. Icy wet needles from the clouds threatened to become a downpour.

Kenneth and Diane practically sat on top of her trying to hold her still. Mary Lou fought them with every ounce of strength her spinning head and spreading demon taint allowed. But Kenneth was stronger. He determinedly held onto her.

The response from Mary Lou's gift of weather working to the confused suggestion from the spear that she was being raped was catastrophic. She resisted further. Tumbleweeds began blowing across the road and piling up against the cars which blocked the weeds' steady progress with the wind.

Diane heard a hissing sound like a thousand rattlesnakes and looked over to her left where the sound was coming from. Tumbleweed by the hundreds had begun to dance. They spiraled in a circle along the ground, and a sudden cold bolt of intuition made her look upward.

The clouds above them had turned a sickly gray-green and were moving at right angles to one another. Overhead, the dark cloud that had followed them from Tennessee started rolling and spinning. A thin needle-like finger began to spin out of the cloud practically over the top of their heads.

The newborn tornado reached the ground not fifty yards from the cars. The tail swerved their direction, hesitating for a moment.

Diane started to shout a warning, but her voice was lost in another peal of thunder so loud it rattled the car's windows. They all pulled Mary Lou with them onto the ground with nowhere else to go. The group looked up just in time to see a white and purple serpentine shape emerge from the clouds.



Furinel was still with them when the girl's panic overlaid with daemon taint yanked the weather patterns out of the storm dragon's grasp. She rode the lightning, keeping it from hitting the humans below. However, when the twister formed, she knew that she would have to break the rules and show herself to save them.

The old storm dragon proudly bore the sigil of a master of the winds on her wing. Her oath to the Prime Creator to protect the non-fliers in her territory drove her to act quickly. She would explain her actions later...

As the whirlwind moved toward the small group beneath her, Aurinel insinuated herself around the funnel. The dragon wrapped her tail around its base and yanked hard to send the tornado careening harmlessly across the plain.

The humans surrounding the wounded weather worker stared at the dragon dumbfounded. She arched her neck and spread her wings, grounding and absorbing the lightning that streamed from the cloud to the ground and back again.

Aurinel centered her gaze on the one who bore the mark of Co-Yo-Te's protection and spoke into her mind. *That one is beyond mortal medicine. Taint must be burned out, root and branch before it spreads. As the daemon fled, so too will what he left behind.*

A mighty leap took Aurinel back within the clouds. The shaman now understood what needed doing. The storm dragon could only hope that what little intervention she had been allowed would be enough.

The dragon kept the worst of the storm off of them as Diane and Bryan worked on Mary Lou. The spear, in the presence of one of the ancient elemental Powers, drew into itself and stilled. Even it didn't dare raise the ire of an elemental dragon.

"The dragon says we need to pray. Let's do this!" Diane drew energy as she had been taught, through the Great Spirit of the Divine. She laid hands on the wounds as Kenneth prayed beside her. When she focused on her 'sight,' a sickly green overlay permeated her friend's shoulder. Slowly, it faded under her chocolate brown hands as her spiritual light burned the darkness. The wound began oozing dark fluid, and Bryan helped it along by applying pressure to express it where he'd cut her.

Finally, they were satisfied. "That's enough," Diane said and wiped the sweat on her brow. "I can't do any more for now."

"I agree," Bryan said. "We're just dang lucky I guess that we have friends in high places." He eyed the clouds above them. The dragon was nowhere to be seen. The storm had abated. It appeared to him like a normally overcast morning. There was no sign that anything had happened other than his friend who stirred weakly and piles of tumbleweed which still bounced and rolled like restless woolly sheep wandering across the deserted landscape.

Kenneth brushed a tendril of hair off of Mary Lou's face as she blinked at him trying to clear her vision. "Are you okay? We need to get going," he said gently.

"Ummmm, I think so," she told him weakly. "What happened?"

"You freaked out," he said. "Then shit went crazy, and a really big lizard showed up who likes you evidently."

"Lizards are cute. I used to play with the skinks that hung out in the flower beds at Grandma's house," she said.

"Not that kind of lizard." He smiled with relief. She sounded more like herself. "But never mind. If you are feeling up to getting on your feet, we can get you cleaned up, get some breakfast, and be back on the road. We are in the home stretch of this trip. If mister uber badass undead spear keeps quiet, we might make it in one piece. I've had more than enough 'adventure' to do me for a while."

However, the spear stayed silent, biding its time for the remainder of the trip. It didn't dare cross the dragon that it could still sense watching for any misstep. Aurinel soared above and in the clouds. She stayed with them all the way to the mountain which had so devastated Washington State only a handful of years before.

8

BOOM!

WEDNESDAY-THURSDAY, MAY 7-8, 1986 MT. ST. HELENS

ink sunrise capped with gray clouds gave way to a clearing morning. The exhausted group finally pulled into the ranger station some distance from the volcano the next day. Bryan and Diane decided to drive straight through Utah, Idaho, and southern Washington State with only brief rest breaks.

Diane shook her fatigue off and went inside the Mt. St Helen's Memorial Park Visitor Center to request a hiking permit. A short time later, she emerged carrying paperwork. Diane approached Bryan's blue car and bent down to speak through his open window.

"They aren't letting many people near the mountain itself," she told them. "Mostly geologists, park rangers, and the logging company that's replanting trees in the damaged areas."

Bryan nodded. "Did you get what we need?"

"Yeah, partly. Thanks to my credentials and records as a patrol officer and park ranger in Tennessee. I told them I'm here to research volcanic activity to make a plan for geologic activity preparedness back east." She laughed. "They didn't ask many questions other than verifying my employment with the Park Service."

"That's a great idea, Diane," Kenneth said. He was out of the car and stretching in ways that made Bryan wince. "You should make a plan, and that way you didn't even lie."

"I'll do that," she replied with a smile.

"So, where do we go?" Bryan asked.

"I've a map of the hiking areas. We gotta backtrack a little bit to a campground to satisfy their permit requirements. PacifiCorp, a loggin' company, operates the nearest one. It's open from six in the

mornin' to nine in the evenin'. You can follow me there. Pretty sure I can find it," Diane told him.

Diane waved the maps under Bryan's nose. "When we come back, we'll have to enter the volcano's trail system from the less damaged area to the south. We can park at the trailhead and hike. They're sayin' that the ash is deeper and unstable to the north side. Workers cleared the south roads so it's passable. There's a trail to the summit. It's practically a straight shot up the mountain."

"Then we're good to go," Kenneth said from behind Diane. "I think we better set up camp and rest today. We can make the trek tomorrow."

"I was thinking the same thing," Bryan remarked. "Very likely, it's going to be a tough walk, and we have an injured party with us. She needs to rest someplace besides the car."

"We all do," Diane noted. "We can start early in the mornin'."

"Okay, then. I'm ready when you are," Bryan said.

Diane led the way slowly while Kenneth consulted the map. They saw elk, birds, and the occasional small ground creatures as they drove. The human observers marveled at the lack of obvious devastation on the mountain's south side.

Ahead of them, Diane slowed for a giant moose. It stepped out of the thick pine, cedar, and fir trees lining the road and wandered across the road in front of them. Its antlers were as wide as the road.

Mary Lou's eyes grew big. "Wow! That thing is huge! I've never seen one in real life."

"They'll mess up a car real quick," Bryan told her. "Worse than the whitetail deer back home. I've heard tales of moose attacking tractor-trailer rigs with their antlers and totaling them."

"Yikes! I can believe it with the size of that one being about as tall as those young trees," she said. "It's not acting aggressively though."

"We'll steer clear of him. It'll be okay as long as we don't honk at him or get right up on his tail." Bryan kept a cautious eye out for more animals after easing past the bull moose.

They continued until a sign directed them to a clearing among the stately old-growth trees. They pulled into the Beaver Bay Recreation Area and then parked after they found a good camping place.

Bryan and Diane carefully looked around the campsite for a place to set up tents. Mary Lou followed slowly. She watched them let the coyote and the professor out of the car. The others talked in low tones while she wandered off a short distance by herself. She

moved her shoulder gingerly and looked for a shady spot that would keep the sun off of her tent during the heat of the day.

Kenneth followed with her tent and bedroll. "I thought you might want these." He grinned at her. "I also thought you might need some help."

"Ah, thanks. Yeah, my dome tent can be tricky and stubborn on a good day. Today my arm hurts. What about you? What are you sleeping in?" Mary Lou looked at the single pack he carried.

"I'll be fine with a tarp, rope, and a bag," Kenneth told her.

Mary Lou wrinkled her nose at him. "Aren't you worried snakes and spiders might crawl in bed with you?"

"The more, the merrier!" He laughed at her skeptical look. "It's called CAMPING."

Mary Lou decided not to argue. Help would be needed setting up. "I prefer my tent." Briefly, she considered inviting him to join her in a better shelter, but he was already running rope next to the spot she'd chosen.

"Okay, well, when you get your tent ready to put the poles in, let me know." Kenneth busied himself with his campsite.

In the end, the coyote joined Kenneth in his makeshift shelter with Bryan to his other side in a low-profile tent. Diane set up a slightly larger cabin tent next to Mary Lou. The professor indicated he was content to bunk with Diane on a pile of soft blankets next to her cot.

It didn't take long for Mary Lou to hear snoring sounds coming from nearby. The chirping of birds and the ability to stretch out on her bedroll soon lulled her to sleep.

By late afternoon everyone started to stir. Diane was building a campfire when Kenneth joined her.

"Did any snakes come to say hello?" Diane asked him, amused.

"No, but I do have a spider moving in and making herself at home," he said with a slight smile.

When Mary Lou joined them, they were both drinking coffee. She declined when Diane produced a third cup and offered it to her. "No thanks." She huddled next to the fire with a blanket wrapped around her and shivered slightly. The peace of their surroundings seemed to seep into her awareness. It was an odd contrast to the previous days.

"Hmmm... It's awfully quiet, isn't it?" Mary Lou said. She pulled her knees to her chin, and her eyes were half shut.

"Oh my God, shut up!" Kenneth exclaimed, making her jump. "It's almost like you're trying to bring the sky down on us! Oh wait, you already did that."

"She wasn't exactly at fault for that," Diane observed. "She was delirious and in pain."

"Maybe so, but why jinx it? It's a beautiful day. Let's let it go at that," Kenneth replied with a good-natured sideways glare.

"I didn't mean..." Mary Lou's reply was interrupted by noise from Bryan's campsite.

"You okay over there?" Diane called out to Bryan.

"Yep. Just getting a visit from Ken's spiders! I've got granddaddy longlegs all over the outside of my tent," he called back and stuck his head out his tent door. "I was smacking them off. Hey Ken, I need to visit the men's room. You wanna' head over with me?"

"Yeah, buddy system. Nobody is going anywhere alone till we do the deed like we agreed." He nodded toward the cars and was deliberately vague. "It's too dangerous," Kenneth replied.

"Anybody else?" Bryan bounced on his toes.

"I'm good," Diane said.

"I'll stay here with Diane. I went earlier." Mary Lou smiled. "At least you're in a good mood. You can cheer Ken up."

"I'm not in a bad mood," Kenneth told her as he set his cup down and stood up. "I just don't want you hurt again." He patted her on the head as he passed by and headed off with Bryan.

Surprised, she closed her mouth on any reply. Mary Lou went to her tent to hide the sudden emotional reaction that she didn't fully understand. Her eye lit on her cooler. "Food would be good." She said to herself. Clumps of ice made rummaging for hot dogs and cheese in the cooler a challenge. Going back and forth to the fire pit, she fetched skewers for cooking.

When the guys returned, Mary Lou and Diane were cooking a meal for the group. The professor, resigned to wolf form until they were rid of the spear on the morrow, snuggled close to Diane and tried to look as dog-like as possible while he waited for food. Their coyote companion stared Mary Lou down till she pulled a steaming piece of meat off her skewer and fed it to him.

"You're getting spoiled, my friend." Mary Lou giggled. "Totally taking advantage."

"Yip!" The coyote told her and stamped his feet. The eager look on his face made the teen giggle again.

“Fine, you can have another one, Sir. But I get to eat the next one after that,” she admonished.

After she had eaten her fill, Mary Lou found herself pacing around their campsite, unable to sit still. She moved her shoulders and found that the soreness was gradually going away. Bryan noticed her looking at the marks on her skin. He went to where she was standing beside a sign that designated a trailhead.

“Don’t worry, I’m not wandering off by myself,” she told him before he could ask. “I was just curious how far it is from here to where we’re going and how steep a climb it is. This sign doesn’t seem to give that information.”

“This isn’t the right trail, but I didn’t think you were going to hike alone. You were looking restless. I just thought I’d come check on you. How’s the shoulder?”

“Healing a lot faster than I would have thought,” she told him. “See? Even the red marks are fading out and the skin is closed.”

“Whatever that thing was that you encountered, it did a doozy on you,” Bryan said. He examined the wound and nodded in satisfaction. “But it’s looking a lot better now. For a few minutes, I thought we were going to lose you. Ken was practically beside himself.” He gave her a piercing look. “Is there something you’d like to tell me?” He grinned mischievously.

Puzzled, Mary Lou shook her head. “No. There’s nothing to tell.”

“Huh, okay,” Bryan said with a wink. “But you two would make a cute couple.”

“As if.” She rolled her eyes and shrugged. She thought back to the prom night disaster the year before. “He doesn’t even like me much. No guys ever do.”

“You might be surprised,” Bryan told her seriously. “Maybe you just don’t give them a chance. You give all the wrong signals. Hell, I’d date you. You’re cute, smart, and totally sexy when you’re mad.”

Her eyes were wide as she stared at him. “Excuse me? Cute? Huh.”

“See, just like that!” He laughed at her retreating back. “At least now you aren’t feeling sorry for yourself,” he muttered when she couldn’t hear him, “and, you’ll never give me a chance, girl. You’re smitten with him and won’t admit it. Everybody sees it but you two.”

Bryan shook his head and followed her. When he reached the others, Mary Lou had plopped herself, predictably, right beside Kenneth. She glared at Bryan, but he grinned back at her unmoved.

Diane and Kenneth remained unaware of the emotional subtext going on beside them. Their attention had turned to making plans for the hike to the still intact portion of Mt. Saint Hellen's peak.

"It'll be rough goin'," Diane was saying. She held up the map so Kenneth and Bryan could see. "We start here." She tapped the map. "Then, we'll end up here. This is where we at right now." Her brown finger moved across the lines on the map.

"Off of 81 and south right now, I see it." Kenneth was on his knees. He stared intently at the markings and placed his own finger on the map. "According to this, we need to head northeast. We go back past the ranger outpost there and that should be the start of our trek. We enter the trail way before this path that looks like it goes around the mountain," Kenneth said.

"They call that Loowit Trail, and yeah, it goes all the way around," Diane agreed. "The trail existed before the big eruption six years ago. Parts of it are still pretty obliterated, but we'll only see that in passing 'cause our goal is to go up the slope."

"Did they give some idea of what to expect?" Mary Lou interrupted.

"Yeah, they did." Diane nodded. "There's basically three legs of the trail, and it's not well marked. The bottom part's old-growth forest. That's a relatively easy walk. The second part is a boulder field, and the top is fine ash, almost like sandy dunes on the slopes. There's gonna be a lot of slipping and sliding. We'll be stirrin' up ash everywhere we step."

"How far is it?" Bryan asked.

"A little over nine miles from the access point, which is a bit more distant than a loggin' road that dead-ends there," Diane answered him. "It probably depends on how many detours we end up takin'. I figure if we leave the campground right after the gates open and if we start walkin' around seven in the mornin', we can probably be up there at the top around noon or one o'clock."

Kenneth sat back on his heels. "Piece of cake," he said as he nodded agreement. "Sounds like a plan to me."

Mary Lou looked around at her companions. She hesitantly asked the question that was really on her mind. "Is it safe? At the top, I mean?"

Kenneth read her trepidation and the direction of her thoughts. "It's a bit late for that, don't you think? I mean, given that we came

halfway across the country to make this hike. We are committed, so whatever happens, happens. We are here for the lava, so..." he trailed off, looking Mary Lou squarely in the eyes. "That's not all you're worried about, is it?"

"No. Not everything." She hesitated. "I go hiking with my dad up in the Smoky Mountains a lot. It's steep, but not as steep as this. I usually have a tough time somewhere on the trail with my asthma bothering me. I'm also worried I'll slow us down. Maybe I should..."

"Stay here in camp?" he finished her sentence for her.

"With the 'dogs' if necessary," she told him and looked apologetically at the two canines.

"We'll not be leavin' anyone behind," Diane told her firmly.

"Exactly right," Bryan said. "While the mountain may be dangerous, we already agreed not to leave anybody alone. Bad things tend to happen when we do."

Kenneth looked sympathetic but didn't back down. "Agreed," he said. "We will go at whatever pace we need to. You are physically fit enough that you should be able to make it. I've seen your determination when you make up your mind you're going to do something." He laughed a little.

She smiled at him. "Very true."

"But seriously, don't fail to let us know if you get into trouble. You tend to try to hide it, and we can't afford for you to do that out here. You have to be able to get down the mountain under your own steam after you climb it. Okay?" Kenneth asked her.

"Yes," she told him.

Diane broke back into the conversation, "Pace yourself and don't push past what you can do, though. Heroics are one thing, but the backcountry won't forgive mistakes," she said. "You'll go with us in the morning."

"I'll watch her," Bryan spoke up. "If it comes to that, Diane, you and Ken can go on ahead. I'll stay with her if she falls behind. There's an inhaler in my medkit. It's a new thing they've come out with for asthma. She can carry that with her for if it gets bad."

Mary Lou looked around at all of them gratefully. "Thank you."

"No problem," Bryan told her.

MAY 8, 1986

Jhere and there, new growth trees or flowers dotted the ruined landscape and filled the ditches where erosion had exposed the soil

enough for new life to sprout among the ash. An overlay of gray dulled everything near Mt. St. Helens, a sobering reminder that the mountain ahead was not as calm as it seemed. They skirted most of the worst of the damage left by the 1980 eruption, parked, and headed into the green forest with their gear.

Kenneth led the way carrying the Spear of Chaos. Diane went second with the professor and the coyote ranging to either side of Diane with Mary Lou behind her.

“This area has made a lot of progress toward recovery in six years,” Mary Lou remarked to Bryan after they’d walked for a while. “It’s beautiful. I didn’t expect to find so much life here. This mountain didn’t kill everything nearby the way I thought it did from seeing it all on television.”

“You’re right,” Bryan agreed. “In fifty years, you might not know it ever erupted. That’s assuming it doesn’t blow its top again before that.”

“Let’s not dwell on that part since we’re walking up the side of it today.” Mary Lou laughed a little, but she eyed the mountain looming ahead of them. Rather than comment further, she concentrated on walking. Bryan, designated to bring up the rear, dropped back and left her with her thoughts. She could hear the jingle of his carabiners which dangled from a length of coiled rope he carried. She remembered what he said when he pulled them out at home.

“Rappelling gear for added safety in case we need it up top, or somebody slips in a difficult place,” Bryan had told her when he packed for the hike. “I’ve seen the drone and aircraft footage. We also might need it to get into the crater.”

“All of us?” Mary Lou had asked in dismay. “I don’t know how to rappel.”

He’d grinned at her response. “No. Likely just Ken. But I want the option to pull him out this time and not leave him stuck like he was in the river at the dam. He has a harness in his pack.”

“Nice. You guys are way ahead of the plan. I didn’t think about that,” she’d said.

With her mind back in the present, Mary Lou examined the scenery. The first couple of miles were eaten away by their steady progress. As they moved along the footpath, the trees grew sparser. They were also smaller the higher they went. Songbirds flitted among the branches, and a chipmunk looked for seeds among the rocks. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted. Pebbles crunched under her feet. Loose volcanic ash was everywhere.

At the end of the tree line, boulders and large pumice rocks marred the side of the mountain. Climbing became more difficult. They called a halt to rest before tackling the minefield of stones above them.

Diane shared a drink with the two canines and left the professor sniffing a tall stand of weeds to check on Mary Lou. She plopped bonelessly on a rock next to the girl where she could get a view of the horizon peeking through the treetops. “The view will only get better from here,” Diane remarked. She noted that the teen was breathing heavily but was still calm.

“I can hardly wait to see it,” Mary Lou agreed. “Except for the mountains, it all looks so flat and blue, almost like a big land-ocean.”

“When you make it up the top of this mighty hill, you’ll be above the level of the clouds and lookin’ down on ‘em,” Diane smiled.

Mary Lou eyed the trail ahead dubiously. “Hopefully, I’ll make it,” she said.

“You will don’t worry,” a deeper voice said from behind them. Bryan joined them on their rock. “You’ve made it this far, and even though it’s been slow going, you’re still with us.” He rummaged in his pack and handed her a trail mix bar. “For energy,” he told her. “But remember to use the inhaler I gave you when your chest starts feeling tight.”

“Thanks,” Mary Lou said gratefully and accepted the snack.

“Looks like the next stretch has a lot of loose rock,” Diane observed. “We’re all going to have to pace ourselves, not just you,” whatever else Diane was about to say was lost in the noise from above them near the trail.

“What the?” Kenneth exclaimed near where the noise arose.

“What on earth is he doin’?” Diane asked when she joined him. “John’s goin’ crazy!”

“Ok... wow, is Medicine Bear eating that bush or trying to mate with it? I can’t tell!” Mary Lou’s eyes were wide. “He looks like a cat who has found the best catnip ever.”

As they watched, the normally sedate and dignified college professor swallowed aggressively and chewed on the tall plants he’d found earlier. Since he looked like a wolf, it just made the situation seem more surreal.

“Bryan, you come out here every summer during wildfire season. Got any idea what the herb is that he’s goin’ crazy over?” Diane asked.

"It looks like Fireweed, but the flower color and size is way off," Bryan told her. "It has a sweet smell usually, and the flowers taste like honey. When it dries up, it burns like crazy, although some people make herb sachets out of it to make their clothes smell good."

"Given the way he's actin', I'd say it's pretty tasty." Diane waved at her mentor and his unfortunate circumstance.

The professor-as-wolf was clawing at a tree now and growling and rolling all over it. As they watched, he left a huge gash in the bark of a fir tree. When he finally looked around at the group, the wolf's eyes were glassy.

The spear, awakened from its self-imposed quiet during the commotion, pushed at the professor but found its way blocked. Puzzled, it withdrew into itself and tried again to slide into the mind of the wolf. It found the emotions and psyche of the spirit wolf, and the human mind guarded by it, were both beyond its reach. Angry, it turned on Kenneth who had laid the spear beside himself to get a drink and a snack.

Blood. It whispered to him. Hungry. Kill the beast and eat. Unnatural.

Kenneth found himself on his feet with the spear in hand before he caught himself and threw the spear down. He addressed the coyote who watched the professor with ears pricked nearly to touching.

"Guard this bloody stick," Kenneth said to him. "It's up to its old tricks. It don't control me. I do."

"What are you going to do?" Bryan asked him.

"End this." Kenneth clenched his jaw. He felt an overpowering urge to kill the wolf with his bare teeth, but he was aware of the spear's influence.

The coyote stood over the spear growling with hackles raised as the artifact attempted to manipulate him into attacking as well. He snarled louder, but the avatar of Co-Yo-Te held his place.

Kenneth went to the wolf, but instead of harming him, grabbed him firmly by the ruff and pinned him down. Under the boy's hand, the spirit-wolf gained a sense of relief due to a magical effect blocking the spear's influence. Shay's spirit partly relaxed. The professor began to shift back to human flesh and bone, but got stuck partway as a result.

Bryan couldn't hold back a snarky comment, "See I told you! Werewolf."

Mary Lou and Diane simultaneously realized what was happening. “The Fireweed!” Diane said snapping her fingers.

“I think so too. It’s caused him to shape-shift back, and the spear isn’t stopping it,” Mary Lou said. “This is great! We just found something that works!”

“Something needs to!” Kenneth said vehemently, then muttered under his breath, “Well crap! Dude, that ain’t a fig leaf, that’s a handful of grass, and now we got another problem.”

Diane shook her head. “No, Bryan. He’s not a werewolf. He’s not cursed, he’s blessed.”

Bryan looked puzzled. “How do you figure that? I wouldn’t consider turning into a wolf a blessing.”

“Because he doesn’t desire blood, and he, for the most part, retains his mind. The moon phase has no hold on him. Despite what we see with our eyes or the skinwalker legend, it’s a protection in his case. The only thing we don’t know is whether it’s a permanent effect or jus’ temporary,” Diane replied.

“Does anyone have an extra bag?” Mary Lou asked, oblivious to the conversation. “I’m going to grab all of this plant stuff I can carry,” she declared.

“Technically, that’s illegal in the park, but given the circumstances, I’m right there with you,” Diane agreed.

“An extra bag? How about some extra clothes?” Kenneth raised his hands and waved to get their attention. “Naked werewolf problem here, guys!”

“Oh. Ah. Not me,” Mary Lou said. “I’ve just got my light raincoat rolled up in my pack, although it’s extra big and might fit if he doesn’t mind a big orange UT poncho.”

“Yeah, call attention to the werewolf. That won’t get us shot at all,” Bryan commented sarcastically.

“That’s all kinda’ wrong!” Kenneth agreed, but he laughed despite the awkwardness of the situation.

“Hey, it wasn’t my idea,” Mary Lou said sheepishly. “My Mom’s the big UT fan. Mom insisted I take it when I left. I look horrible in bright orange.”

“Don’t worry, you guys. I got it covered,” Diane told them. “I always bring extra in case it rains, and I get wet. I bring ‘em extra-large to put on over my outer layer. I’m pretty sure they’ll fit... at least long enough to get this done and get outta here.”

While the jumbled boulder field was uncomfortably more exposed and strenuous to the climbers, the view became increasingly impressive the higher they went. Vegetation didn’t

grow this far up the slope of the volcano. Nothing blocked their view of the surrounding blue field of hilltops. Sharp snow-covered peaks punctuated the scene in a flat panorama as distant as the eye could see.

Sightseeing gave the teens an excuse for frequent stops to let Mary Lou catch her breath without seeming to slow the group too much. However, she became daunted by the footing about a mile from the top. It changed from pumice boulders of all sizes to fine ash and coarse pebbles that shifted underfoot and weighed them down like trying to walk on dry sand. It made upward progress far more difficult. Slipping and fighting not to glide backward downslope, they finally reached the summit of Mt. St. Helens in the early midafternoon and stopped.

"This is just absolutely breathtaking up here," Bryan said enthusiastically, hopping up and down when he finally reached the rim of the volcano. "We're standing on one of the 'three-sisters', and you can see the other two. Wow! Look, over there is Mt. Ranier, and there's Mt. Hood in the distance."

"Yeah, it's pretty," Mary Lou barely managed to say, breathing hard and bent over. Her legs were shaking badly enough that she found herself wondering how Bryan could still be so bouncy. It almost annoyed her, but she was too busy trying to get enough air to glare at him.

Kenneth watched Mary Lou, concerned, but didn't say anything. Instead, he considered how best to approach the problem of finally getting rid of the spear. He crouched down with his head in his hand to consider the terrain. His warm amber-brown eyes took in every detail.

A heavy sigh came from Diane. "I don't see any help for it. Somebody's gotta go in. It's too far to throw it from here." Diane also looked at the interior of the volcano, considering the options. "Now that we're here and can actually see it, I'd say what the aerial footage seemed to show was pretty accurate."

"Obviously," Kenneth said. "There's no other way to reach a lava shaft."

"What you gonna do?" Diane asked.

"Get rid of this thing for good this time," Kenneth said firmly. "It worked for Frodo with the ring, why not with the artifact of the undead asshole?"

"I know that. What I mean is how you gettin' close enough to be effective? There's a lava dome building up in there, probly' where a central vent lies underneath. It's gonna be hot!" Diane raised an

eyebrow. “This ain’t a ring, and it shore ‘nuff better work,” she finished with a mutter. Her stress was bringing out her southern black girl accent. Diane couldn’t help feeling uneasy and gave the spear a stern look.

“I’ll go down there and just do it. Get close, put the thing in, and the mountain will take care of melting it down. Simple, and we can all go home in peace,” Kenneth told her squinting up at her into the sun.

“At least that’s the plan.” Bryan stepped a short distance away and pointed. “There, and there, I see possible tie-off points for the ropes depending on how hot it might be. That will be close to the opposite end of the caldera from where we’re standing.”

“Okay, I see. I see,” Diane trailed off. “That rock looks big enough to hold the weight of two people on the ropes if we need to double up.”

“We’ll hope we don’t have to,” Bryan said. He was all business as he quickly and efficiently tied the ropes off. Then he helped Kenneth get his harness settled.

“All right, let’s do this thing,” Kenneth said. When he turned around with his back to the volcano’s interior, he grabbed the rope firmly, and his eyes met Mary Lou’s. She caught her breath when she saw the worried expression in his eyes. It didn’t match the surety in his voice.

“Go back,” he told her firmly. “Start now and don’t look back. Don’t come for me,” his voice changed to a deeper, serious timbre. “You don’t need to be up here for this.”

“I’m not leaving you, and I just got here,” she told him softly. *Why does it seem like we’ve been here, had this conversation before?* Mary Lou wondered. A profound sense of familiarity made the situation seem surreal. *I don’t understand.*

Kenneth took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Bryan started to interject but swallowed what he was about to say. Diane realized something was passing between the two teens on a deeper level and stayed silent.

“It’s simple. You don’t need to be up here,” Kenneth tried to reason with her. “There’s nothing you can do, and if something happens... you’ll have a head start.”

“But,” she opened her mouth to speak, and he cut her off.

“Just go,” Kenneth demanded.

“No, I don’t want to,” Mary Lou insisted.

“Oh, my God, girl! Why not?” Kenneth gave an exasperated sigh.

Because I'm afraid you won't come back. Because I'm more scared of that than anything, and I don't know why. Mary Lou shook her head. "You might need me," she settled for saying, embarrassed that she couldn't articulate the real problem and didn't think he wanted to hear it.

"I'm pretty sure I can take care of this myself," he told her. "You and Diane head back. Bryan and I will finish up here and join you back at home camp."

"But!" she objected.

"Now!" Kenneth practically yelled at Mary Lou. "If you don't, I'll knock you out and have Bryan carry you back down the mountain. How would you like that?"

"That's a bit extreme there, bud. But okay." Bryan eyed Mary Lou. "You ready?"

"I can walk!" she objected.

"Then off you go!" Kenneth gestured to their back trail. "I got shit to do!"

The girl followed Diane back the way they'd come with a defeated sigh. Going down was much faster than going up, they found. Loose ash and pebbles moved and shifted under their feet, causing them to slide in places. The two canines slid most of the way on their bellies. Professor Holderman looked like he was sledding, sending drifts of ash into the air. They waited for the slower members of their party where the ground solidified into the boulder field.

"I have a bad feelin' we better pick up the pace," Diane said. "We ain't got time to be pretty about it. Watch for fallin' rock, and don't stop."

The four of them moved as quickly as they could. The professor and the coyote led the way. A growing sense that the mountain could fall on them any second made their progress more urgent.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all," Diane said as she climbed over more rocks. "Though it's maybe a lot late for buyer's remorse."

"Yeah," Was all Mary Lou said, short of breath and struggling not to show it. She looked over her shoulder at the top of the mountain with a worried expression. *Come on, guys, get out of there.* She tried to will them to appear but saw no sign of anyone else coming down behind them.

She caught her breath when she saw smoke and ash begin to billow in a sky-high plume above them. "No!" she whispered, horrified.

Diane noticed too. “Uh, oh!” she exclaimed. “Go, go! We’ve got all the head start we’re gonna get!” she urged. They felt the rumble beneath their feet before they heard the faint sound from further up the mountain. “Move!” Diane yelled. They ran for their lives.



At the top of the mountain, Kenneth and Bryan struggled as the caldera's interior broke loose and started to collapse under Kenneth's feet. It started slowly but gradually increased its momentum. As cracks appeared, large chunks of ash shifted. Kenneth relied on the rope to keep from being swept into the hot sludge. It was turning into a mudflow at the lava vent where he had just plunged the Spear of Chaos.

Steam and smoke boiled out of the vent. “Die bitch!” Kenneth gritted his teeth and grinned savagely, showing fangs. “Good riddance.” He coughed as the smoke and sulfur clouds thickened around him.

The toxic gases emanating from the hole began to make him dizzy. In response, Kenneth took a hand-over-hand approach to pull himself up by the rope. Bryan also hauled on the rope from where he stood on the volcano's rim.

“Not. So. Fast. Warrior,” a heavily accented female voice said calmly. “What makes you think you can mess with my volcano without permission and get off so easy?”

Kenneth jumped, startled. He looked around and tried to peer through the smoke to find who was talking to him. “Who’s there?”

“I am Pele’, the rightful guardian of this mountain.” A tall willowy figure in a red and orange flowing dress appeared through the smoke. Where she walked over the flowing sludge, it cooled and hardened. Her golden-brown hair flowed in the breeze under a wreath of pink flowers.

“Another myth walking around,” Kenneth said, nonplussed. “Why should I be surprised at this point?”

“Do I look like a myth?” Pele’ smiled. “Now, quit changing the subject Warrior. You are here causing trouble, and if I don’t mitigate the damage, people will die today. Therefore, I require your help.”

“My help? I AM helping by melting down that thrice accursed spear Loki’s spawn made.”

“Noble intent, perhaps. Poor execution,” Pele’ replied at the mention of Loki. “You must find a different way.” She held her hand out toward the vent. It puffed and then popped violently as a gas bubble escaped, carrying the spear with it far into the air, only to disappear from sight in the roiling smoke and ash. Stronger lava flows followed that carried melted snow and ash sludge along with them.

“What did you just do?” Kenneth demanded, alarmed.

“The mountain was not scheduled to erupt today. I am charged by our Heavenly Father with Dominion over the Lake of Fire. A tool of Chaos in my volcanoes renders them unpredictable and dangerous. It is not yet time for them to all go off at once. I must insist you not do this.” Pele’ was still smiling.

“You crazy,” Kenneth declared. “Or I am, talking to a spirit.” He was still slowly being dragged upward, but he resumed pulling himself up by hand.

“There are innocents out and about, Warrior. Because of your actions, they have no advance information provided by the instruments on these slopes. You must give warning to them of what you have seen here.”

Kenneth thought about that for a moment. “What about the people that died six years ago?” he said, then stopped as the gravity of the situation brought another question. “How bad is it?” he asked.

“I am shifting things beneath the mountain to hold back the worst of the pressure to avoid a full eruption, though I do love a good boom,” Pele’ purred. “You will be lucky for it only to be a small lahar flow, but there will be some unavoidable heat buildup and ash.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” Kenneth glanced down at himself. Sweat stuck his clothes to his skin. His face was wet and dripping from the heat. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to leave. I can’t call anybody standing around up here,” he said.

Pele’ watched calmly as the teen made it to the vertical part of his climb. The rope, which was also suffering the effects of the heat, frayed and broke under his weight. She reached out and caught him by the wrist in a vice grip before he could fall into the flowing lava below them.

“Six years ago, they had plenty of warnings and chose of their own free will to ignore them. Today, without warning, further deaths are on you. Now. Up you get!” She tossed him easily to

within a couple of feet below the rim where Bryan had been panicking about losing his friend to the erupting volcano.

"Oh, hell!" Bryan said. "I don't know how you just did that, but grab this and grab my hand. I think it's time to go. I take it you getting rid of the spear is why it's belching all kinds of mess down there."

"Yeah, well, you see... about that." Kenneth grabbed for the offered assistance and sucked in his breath when Bryan grabbed his wrist in the same place Pele' had seized it. "Ow! That smarts!"

"What? Oh crap, Ken, you're burned!" Bryan exclaimed as he saw his friend's wrist after he'd helped him to his feet. "Hey! That looks like a handprint!"

"No time for that," Kenneth snarled through gritted teeth. "Let's go!" He preferred to avoid potentially lengthy explanations for the time being.

Bryan and Kenneth quickly slid and clambered their way down into the forest below on the south side slope of the volcano, trying to put distance between themselves and the top of the mountain. They were too busy moving to talk to one another until they were close to the place they'd chosen to meet up with their companions in the forest.

Diane had her arms crossed and tapped her toe when the two out-of-breath teens made it back. Her stormy expression as they approached was explained by the presence of the Spear of Chaos jabbed point first and hilt deep in the ground beside her. Her dark brown eyes stared a hole in the two guys as they breathlessly approached.

"What in THE name of sam-hell is this?" Diane shouted at them. "I thought this was s'posed to be up there IN the volcano! Not down here tryin' to go home with us again! What did we come all this way for?"

Bryan stared at Diane and the Spear of Chaos in confusion. "We DID leave it up there," he told her.

"It just randomly dropped out of the sky while we were waiting for you." Mary Lou shook her head. "We need an explanation. What happened?"

"I'm not sure you'd believe me if I told you," Kenneth began.

"Try me, mister!" Diane demanded.

"You see, there was this girl..." he tried to say.

"Uh, huh." Diane's eyes narrowed. "Don't give me no cockamamie bullshit story. I didn't drive no twenty-five hundred

miles to get a story about a girl. You got enough girls chasing you all over Kingston. Try again!"

"No, for real," he tried to interject.

"What girl?" Bryan and Mary Lou asked at the same time.

Kenneth drew himself up to his full height and glared back. "Maybe if you quit interrupting me, I can tell you guys!" he huffed irritably. "Okay, short version is, I got close enough to real lava I was able to put the spear into an opening. The mountain decided to go boom when I did, then Pele' showed up. She removed the spear and told me to get off her mountain. End of story."

"The volcano goddess?" Mary Lou's eyes were wide.

"I'm not sure exactly what she is," he answered. "She's some kind of spirit because she was walking on the red hot lava."

"Not a goddess." Kenneth recognized the lilting voice as the 'girl' in question spoke to them. "I am a helper, although men have called me a goddess before. I have... Dominion, anywhere the Lake of Fire rises to the surface."

"Pele'." Kenneth turned around and nodded to her respectfully.

Pele' sat serenely on a boulder among the trees. They noticed she was barefoot; an odd contrast to the flowing flame-colored dress she wore. She sat with her arms around her knees with her feet crossed.

"I have a question, though. Why did you throw this artifact in my mountain?" Pele' asked. She rose and approached the group. "What made you decide to 'drive twenty-five hundred miles' as you put it, to come here today? Loki doesn't typically play with fire."

"There's a book series. It's about an evil magical ring, and the only way to destroy it is to throw it in the volcano where it was forged," Mary Lou explained. "We have tried literally everything else, so we thought we'd put it into a volcano with fire hot enough to melt it down."

"So you took the advice of someone else's fantasy... I see." Pele sighed. "If it were anything else, it would have been destroyed, but though the Fountain of Youth also waters it, the very deepest roots of the World Tree drink from the Lake of Fire. Gehenna gives it strength," Pele' told them.

"So, what does that have to do with the spear?" Kenneth asked.

"The spear's power comes from the sacred made profane. Its shaft was crafted from the wood of the World Tree itself, and then it was forged in blood. I can hear the cry of the souls it has stolen."

"Then it's all useless." Mary Lou's face fell. "What do we do now?"

“Not quite,” Pele’ told them. “There is always a way. All that is made can be unmade. I have already pushed my authority further than I should have this day. It is not my place to tell you what in this case. The Prime Creator, however, has interest due to the innocents involved. He always watches and knows. He will make sure of a proper conclusion, however long it takes.”

“So we get more cryptic messages and no help.” Kenneth glared at her. “I went all the way up there, got burned nearly to a crisp, only to have you spit it back out and tell us there’s a way but not what.”

Diane gave Mary Lou a sideways glance. The other girl’s shoulders drooped, and her expression was pained. “Girl! When you become such a Debbie-downer, huh? You’re always the one giving us the pep talks till lately. We ain’t givin’ up!” Diane told her firmly.

“Sorry, Diane,” Mary Lou sighed.

“It’s all good.” Diane waved her hand dismissively. “You been through it all this trip, so it’s understandable. We better keep our heads up and lookin’ though cuz it ain’t over yet.”

“I am sorry for the burn,” Pele’ said to Kenneth softly. “I brought you some fresh aloe from my island as a gift. It will soothe your wrist. If you had fallen... It was the only way I could keep you from the Lake of Fire. Even immortality could not have saved you then.”

“Is that why you came back?” Kenneth asked as he took the offered plant.

“Just so,” Pele’ said with a smile.

“Then, I thank you,” Kenneth said formally and inclined his head to the Lady of Fire. He used the stem of aloe on his burn. It stung at first, but then the pain of the burn lessened. The handprint was already faded when he kept his promise to radio the Park Service about the eruption. When the warnings began to crackle out over the airwaves, they piled in the cars and returned to camp.

Pele’ walked off. By the time the people looked around again, she was no longer visible. She chose to wander quietly for a time through the forest when she happened upon an enormous red cat sitting beside the path. It didn’t matter to the cat that she was in her spirit form. The cat watched her with its tail flipping slowly. It looked faintly like a Lynx or a Desert Cat with thick tabby stripes

and spots, but it was shaped like an Abyssinian's much larger, heavier cousin. Pele' stopped to greet the cat.

"Hello, there." She bent down and held her hand out palm up. "It's always a pleasure, Bathshumet."

The red cat purred and approached. It bumped Pele's hand. A spark flew between them, but neither of them was fazed. When Pele' stood up, the cat wound around her feet, rubbing up against her.

"You are guarding them well. I approve," Pele' told the cat. "I sense great danger, but they have a worthy cause. At least they aren't likely to throw what they carry into a volcano again."

"Mere-yow," the red cat agreed.

"Okay then, off you go!" Pele' laughed joyfully as the red cat sauntered off and left her alone in the forest.

The spirit faded into the shadows at the base of the mountain. The trees and the wildlife were peacefully left to their own devices.

9

AWKWARD SURPRISES

MAY 9, 1986

" came prepared!" Mary Lou grinned exuberantly. Her hands were full of packs of hot dogs, smoked sausages, buns, and giant marshmallows accompanied by a box of Graham crackers. A stack of chocolates balanced beneath her chin. The entire precarious arrangement wobbled as she walked. "We can have a feast tonight before we head out in the morning," she announced, her eyes sparkling with good cheer.

"Here, let me take some of that before you drop it all." Diane reached out just as the teen started losing hold of half of what she carried. "I wouldn't mind some S'mores. Something sweet would be great!" Diane smiled too. Her teeth flashed white in the firelight that flickered against the backdrop of the darkening campground. With a subdued appearance the sun was fading in the distance. Light layers of ash high in the atmosphere gave everything a red glow.

"Ah, thanks Diane. Whew! I was afraid it would all fall," Mary Lou told her with relief.

"What's got you in such a good mood all of a sudden?" Kenneth asked. He glanced sourly toward the volcano.

"I thought about what Pele' and Diane said yesterday. So, I'm gonna try to be the positive person. We are all gonna see this problem through, so we just have to find the answer since there is one," Mary Lou told him. "Here, have some food and a roasting fork." The girl tossed him and Bryan both a pack of hot dogs each

and shared out the tools. She then sat down on the other side of the fire beside Diane.

"So that's what you had in that big cooler of yours. Those forks will hold more food than the skewers. Thank you!" Bryan said to Mary Lou. He turned the fork over in his hands, examining it before he pulled the tines to full length and speared two hot dogs. He scooted close to the fire and got them close enough to the flame that they immediately started searing. Diane's were nearly done, so she moved to give Bryan room.

"Well, yeah. It's not camping without dogs and S'mores," Mary Lou said agreeably. "Since this is our last night, I figured, why not splurge a little and have a marshmallow roast? Oops, I forgot plates. Does anybody need one? I have some in my tent."

"That sounds good," Diane said around a mouthful of food. "I need a place to set these down. They hot! Ow! Ow!" She fanned her mouth awkwardly and blew air through pursed lips.

"M'kay. Give me a sec." She got back up smoothly from a cross-legged position and walked off.

Bryan opened his own thermal box and rattled around in the ice. "Ah! Something cold and wet. That's the ticket! Ken, you want a wine cooler? You look like you need to unwind a little."

"Mmm. Yeah, sure. I'll take one," Kenneth told him and took the offered bottle that Bryan opened for him.

"Diane, you?" he also offered her one.

"Na, I'm good. You two go ahead. I've got my Pepsi," she answered.

"So, what are you thinking, bro? You've been mostly quiet since yesterday afternoon." Bryan sipped his brew and looked intently at Kenneth. "When you're this quiet, you always have something up your sleeve."

Just then, Mary Lou returned with a stack of plates and handed Diane one. The rest Mary Lou laid down. She prepped her food, then settled in and listened quietly.

"I'm thinking we've gone about this whole thing all wrong," Kenneth told Bryan loud enough for Diane and Mary Lou to hear. He motioned with his bottle toward the mountain. "This was never going to work, and we should have seen it in the first place. I'm mad, I guess, that I let us come this far for nothing. We're going to have to think through our steps better than this." Kenneth shook his head and continued.

"Ulfr's spear is no joke. From what we have seen, it has the abilities and attack powers of a demonic creature all on its own. I

also think that the other things that have happened along the way are not accidental. Can I prove it? Well, no. But the attack on Mary Lou at the rest stop was something different. That was more than physical. According to what Diane and Mary Lou saw, it was a creature that fits the classic description of a demon. That's a spiritual issue beyond the artifact itself." Kenneth looked straight at Diane and back at Bryan.

"I see what you're sayin'," Diane said. "It WAS a spirit, a nasty one. It concerns me that the demon was fully and physically present. That takes somethin' not only strong-willed but powerful to boot. For the most part, according to John here, spirits aren't allowed to be seen by human eyes, and they ain't s'posed to interfere with us."

"I get that," Kenneth acknowledged. "If it were a hard and fast rule, they break it often enough. My point, though, is that we've approached this purely physically, but the spear's spiritual aspect is untouched this whole time. We need a way, just like when we fought Ulfr and kicked his ass, to deal with both the physical and spiritual."

Kenneth paused to sip his drink and continued, "I don't know where the demons are in this for sure, but I'd betcha' it has something to do with Loki. This thing belongs to him, right?"

"Good point. I s'pose you could say that technically the spear is his property," Diane agreed. "But no way 'm I gonna let him have it," she declared. "It already cost us one friend, and prob'ly two, cuz I think Rachel has just lost it. She's so paranoid she's jumping at every shadow."

"Yeah. Rachel doesn't need to be around the spear at all." Bryan shook his head with a worried expression. "She's even starting to accuse everybody of stuff that never happened, including stuff they never said. I don't think Rach' can tell anymore what's real and what's not real."

"And," Kenneth added, "I know it affected Mary Lou when she was wounded. We can't afford any more accidents either. So far, those of us that are here have been strong enough to resist the worst of its effects, but from here out, one of us has to stand guard on it at all times with the necessary backup."

"There's something else. I can hear a 'but' coming," Bryan said.

"Actually, there IS a but, or a what-if," Kenneth replied. "What if the demon who attacked Mary Lou were to be influenced by, or even worse, get its paws on the spear? Was that what it was trying to do?" Kenneth bared his teeth and hissed through his clenched jaw at the thought.

"Like maybe distract everybody, and while they were tending me, it snatch the spear?" Mary Lou sat up straight with her eyes wide.

"It also could have been a random attack of opportunity," Diane pointed out. "We can't assume nothin'. Still, I agree we better watch our backside a lot better cuz if your guess and mine'r correct we'll see more trouble. I told ya yesterday we gotta be runnin' with our eyes wide open. While we do, we don't give up, and we don't get mad."

"Get glad?" Mary Lou quipped.

"No, we get vigilant and don't get surprised again, smart-ass," Kenneth said, raising an eyebrow at her. "Puns and commercials aside, remember we are dealing with something sentient, magical and spiritual with inherent power of its own if we are listening to Pele'. I believe Diane is understating the situation. We aren't just going to have trouble, no. We're going to have to fight, maybe to the death, before we're really done."

"And by now, we aren't strangers to that. I hope what you just said is not a prophetic statement." Bryan gulped his beer to try and drown out his friend's comment.

Mary Lou looked around at the grim faces of her companions as what Kenneth said slowly sunk in. Bone-chilling quiet seemed to drop around them like a curtain walling them off from the rest of the world. Goosebumps tingled up her arms to her neck. She tried to shake the feeling.

"Well? We can't do anything else for now. How about some chocolate and marshmallows?" Mary Lou grabbed one of the two bags of marshmallows and tried to pull it open. It resisted, then gave way with an explosive pop that sent marshmallows not only into her lap and plate but flying everywhere.

"Uh. Oops!" Mary Lou half smiled, half gritted her teeth. She picked up as many stray marshmallows as she could save. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"You could have asked for a knife. Here, give me that!" Kenneth got up, snatched the unopened bag, and handed it to Bryan. "Let the experts handle it."

Bryan grinned at her when she huffed at the two of them. "What? I like mine without dirt on them." He pulled out a knife and neatly sliced the second bag open without dropping any. He carefully pulled out a supply of the bag's contents and handed it back to Kenneth.

"Well, so do I," Mary Lou admitted.

“Don’t mind me,” Diane told them. “I got plenty right here on this plate.” She proceeded to stuff as many white puffy balls on her fork as would fit and held them close to the fire. “A little dirt never hurt nobody! It’s all good.” She winked at the girl sitting next to her.

When her marshmallows were close to black, Diane grabbed a chocolate bar and a package of Grahams. Mary Lou followed suit, quickly blowing out the flame on the end of her fork and making a gooey mess that she popped into her mouth.

“Yum! That’s perfect. I’m glad I thought of it,” Mary Lou said with half-closed eyes. She reached for more and happily made a second batch. She licked the sticky coating off her fingers.

“It was a good idea,” Bryan agreed. “As long as you don’t dump them all on the ground. Hey!” He said as a marshmallow flew through the air at him. In response, he threw one back.

Soon white puffy balls were flying back and forth across the campfire as they let off steam. Having fun lightened their mood and let them briefly forget the threat hanging over them. Their coyote companion chased down stray treats and happily snatched them up.

“Good boy!” Diane told him, laughing. “We have a cleanup crew!” She deliberately tossed the coyote a marshmallow which he snapped out of the air and swallowed in one gulp.

“Great catch!” Mary Lou told him. He yipped enthusiastically, and she too threw one at him, which he also neatly caught.

As the evening wore on, the close-knit group filled up on treats and talked late into the night. Mary Lou was the first to give up and go to her tent to bed. Sleepily, the girl took her shoes off in the light of her flashlight, fluffed her pillow, and tried to settle where a stone wasn’t digging into her hip. Mary Lou drifted off to sleep listening to her friends still muttering by their campfire. The quiet peace she felt earlier seeped in and helped her to a solid dreamless sleep. Eventually, the others also went to their respective shelters to rest for the night.

Kenneth and the coyote were still awake, guarding the campsites, when the screaming started. “What the heck!” Kenneth jumped up. The coyote ran to Mary Lou’s tent with the young man right behind him. He looked around at Kenneth with a questioning expression in the dim light. “What now?” Kenneth muttered.

“Yip!” came the reply from the puzzled coyote. He sniffed the zipped tent fly and sat down.

The coyote’s ears pricked to attention as he listened to the squealing, bumping, and rustling from inside the tent. A flashlight came on and illuminated the inside of the tent. The fabric walls shook.

Concerned for his human pack-mate, he sniffed around the exterior walls of the tent but didn’t smell anything amiss. He went back to Kenneth, who stood outside her tent, making human noises at the girl through the fabric. Not sure what was wrong, he sat half crouched with his hackles up. The wild canine prepared to attack whatever was threatening her.

The coyote watched Kenneth kneel in front of her tent, unzip the door and address the tent’s hapless occupant. Nearby, he saw that the other tents also had lights on. People were opening their tents to poke their heads out in sleepy puzzlement. The coyote didn’t leave Kenneth’s side, however. Instead, he shoved his canine head in beside Kenneth so he could see and sniff inside.

“What on earth is wrong with you?” Kenneth demanded of Mary Lou.

“Oh, my God! There’s a squishy thing!” she answered, frantically rustling through and lifting her blankets.

“A what?” Kenneth’s voice went a tone higher. He wasn’t sure he heard her correctly.

“A squishy thing!” she said louder.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! Just stop. I said stop!” Kenneth told her, putting a hand out to halt her frantic pawing of the blankets. “You obviously aren’t dying, so calm down and explain.”

Mary Lou sucked in her breath and let it out. “Okay. I was sound asleep. I rolled over and put my hand down in the dark, where I couldn’t see. I felt something, and it woke me up. It was squishy, like a big fat horn-worm or a snake or something! It moved under my hand,” she said. “I don’t want it crawling on me in the middle of the night! Only I can’t find anything.”

“Are you serious?” He glared at her. “You woke up the whole campground for that?”

She stared at him. He didn’t sound sympathetic at all. “Did I?” The teen leaned over and looked out the door of her blue fabric dome tent. She had to squeeze past the coyote to do so. “Uh, sorry.” Mary Lou withdrew and picked her pillow up to look under it too. “Where is it? I swear to you there’s a squishy thing in here!”

"I have no idea." He looked at the coyote and shrugged his shoulders. "I think she just lost her marbles!" Kenneth addressed him, pointing his thumb back inside the tent.

The coyote started to push his way inside. Kenneth halted him with his hand and gently pushed him back. The wild canine sat back on his tail and moved to the side. "Hold. Back up, sir. Your big hairy head is in the way," Kenneth told him firmly. "I can't see through you."

"First of all, shine your light," Kenneth addressed Mary Lou. The coyote watched the light flash around the tent some more, but at least Kenneth was calming the girl. His hackles settled.

"I don't see anything," Mary Lou said.

"Probably because there's nothing here," he declared. "You were asleep. You probably dreamed it. Go back to sleep."

"Uh, uh. Not till I figure out what that was." Mary Lou resumed pawing through her blankets.

"Fine. Get out," Kenneth said in a deliberate low tone.

The coyote watched Kenneth offer his hand. The coyote nosed the girl with interest as the boy helped Mary Lou up, out, and to her feet. He wagged his tail like a dog. She didn't smell injured. Footsteps approached from behind. Recognizing Diane's smell, the coyote didn't look around.

"Is everything okay?" Diane asked slowly. Her words slurred a little bit as she rubbed her eyes and firmly pulled a pink throw blanket around her shoulders.

"Yeah, you can go back to bed. I got this," Kenneth told her above the furry gray head that attempted to push forward again. Sniffing further, the coyote recognized another faint aroma. He licked his chops with a sudden gleam in his eye.

"What's wrong?" Diane asked.

"She thinks something got in her tent," Kenneth replied, translating the girl's confused frustration into more understandable meaning. "We're going to pull the blankets and shake them out."

"Whatever it is, you'll be sure to find it that way," Diane said quietly and nodded. She retreated to her tent. The coyote could hear her talking to Bryan in low tones. He laughed and then zipped his tent.

With the coyote stuck by his side like a burr, Kenneth pulled each blanket, pillow, pillowcase, and piece of clothing out of the tent. He shook them out while Mary Lou held the flashlight with chagrin when nothing out of the ordinary appeared.

Finally, the open tent door allowed the coyote to enter and nose under the last blanket. Sniffing enthusiastically while the humans were outside shaking another item of clothing, he found what he was looking for nestled deep in a fold, unnoticed. He snatched up his prey. GINGERLY holding it in his mouth, he slunk out of the tent with his head down.

Kenneth watched his coyote friend walk over to his shelter, barely illuminated by a small lantern. There he laid down, made some chewing noises, and swallowed. With his head on his paws, the coyote sighed and watched the rest of the proceedings with his eyes.

The teen had a sudden suspicion as to what the coyote had just found in the tent and thought he knew the source of the commotion. Kenneth eyed him sardonically. "Uh, huh. I didn't see a thing," he laughed a little.

"I didn't see anything either," Mary Lou said, oblivious. She quietly glared at her tent.

"I think your squishy thing is gone. I believe you can go back to bed," Kenneth told her as they held up the last blanket. "You have to put everything back. Here ya' go. I'm done." He grinned unrepentantly and handed her the pile of cloth that they had dragged out of her tent.

"But... what the heck?" She wrinkled her brow in confusion. Shrugging her shoulders, she set to putting it all back in order so she could sleep what little was left of the night. "I swear there was something in here!" she muttered softly to herself. Whatever it was, she assured herself, it had to have been scared away after all that.

The coyote and Kenneth sat companionably side by side, watching the girl get resettled. When all was quiet again, Kenneth stroked his soft ruff.

"I could have told her. But why?" the teen whispered to him. Kenneth reached into his pocket and pulled out a marshmallow. "Here, you want another one?" The coyote accepted it gently and thumped his tail, chewing carefully till the sticky sweet puff melted across his tongue. "Don't expect more. That's the last one," Kenneth chuckled to himself.



MAY 10, BEYOND THE VEIL

chor still oozed from the gaping wound that had been Ikhdathir's shoulder, though it had lessened. Black droplets rained down as he fled. The scent of his blood attracted small imps who were practically only smiley faces with fangs to dart around him and gleefully lapped up his essence.

The daemon snarled and snapped at the flying nuisances. Tiny serpentine shadows with only enough mind to know fear and hunger crept ever closer. They waited for him to weaken enough that they could feast.

Hatred curdled in Ikhdathir's ruined chest at those who had eluded him. His limbs trembled with fear and anticipation as he contemplated the hunt ahead of him. The lightworkers were dangerous prey and might be his end, but far greater terror of the fallen angel, his enforcer, and Loki held him to his course.

The dremorzen bared his teeth at the images in his head. He knew his job. He had torn and clawed his way to his high position among his brethren, only to be reduced to an errand dog. His particular talents as a Spirit of Sadism were wasted on this endeavor.

Greed however, pushed Ikhdathir where the threat of harm failed. There were too many opportunities in the mortal realms for him to stray from his purpose. *Blood will be plentiful and beautiful with the spear in hand!* He practically sobbed at the thought.

Tremors wracked Ikhdathir's frame as he stumbled and almost fell. Shrieks and cries sounded along his backtrail as those who hunted him sensed vulnerability.

Ikhdathir drew on his rage at being thwarted. It drove him, wounded as he was, to keep his feet. He hadn't the days and weeks it would usually take to fully heal and regenerate if he were to catch his prey. It would be *now* or else risk the urgermach or Jibril coming for him for his failure.

No, he told himself. Feed. Feed and grow strong. Then kill. He would start with the girl with the blazing light, then go for the shaman and kill her, and when she was a sticky spot on the ground, he would... Ikhdathir stumbled again shakily and lost his train of thought.

The daemon, unsure if he could tear a hole in the veil in his present state, gave up on the idea of jumping. He quested for an

established path to a stable gate into the mortal realm. Finally, in the confusion of the mists where lost souls wander, he found what he was searching for.

Turning aside onto the curving path, the daemon ran with renewed vigor, hoping to slip past the Guardians of the ether without being noticed. The risk of being caught by one of them was typically too great of a risk because it would mean instant and permanent death if seen. Out of options, Ikhdathir took the direct route and exited into the mortal world.

Ikhdathir crept deadly silent from shadow to shadow, questing for the spiritual presence of emotional misery that would enable his unique attack style. He shrank away from those whose psychic 'scent' burned with light. The daemon had no wish to bite into a soul with the mark of spiritual protection upon them. He also ignored the lesser beings as beneath notice. Instead, he hunted that which would give his darkness strength; someone like him, without faith and too weak to fight or even recognize his presence.

An exceptionally dark place behind a thick tangle of brambles beneath a fir tree provided him a place to wait and watch. The daemon grew still. This position was a good vantage point beside a lightly graveled path.

No one noticed the inky black presence or faintly glowing eyes as they passed by. Ikhdathir watched patiently. Some potential targets strolled in pairs, some jogged alone, and an occasional human passed by with a leashed dog.

The only indication anything was amiss in the park was the cold area along the out-of-the-way section of walkway. Some passersby shivered and scurried off.

A young girl of about fifteen who pushed a bicycle sensed something more. She stopped and tried to peer into the bushes, wondering why she felt a sudden creeping fear. She rubbed her goosebumps, shook her head, and walked off muttering to herself.

All of these people, the daemon left alone. He waited for something specific. The sun needed to travel further away so that the absence of light could provide better cover for his purpose.

It grew colder and began to get late when Ikhdathir's patience bore fruit. Past the neatly mowed field beyond the path he stalked and beyond the families relaxing at picnic tables or throwing a ball, a new arrival set off the daemon's alarm bells. Anticipation tingled along his spine. He licked his fangs in glee. *There. Hunt. Kill*, he thought.

The dark spirit flowed from shadow to shadow. He hid yet moved steadily closer to his goal. This human appeared to be alone.

Ghe pristine white, red, and blue pizza delivery sign contrasted with the rusty top of Vincent Kovitch's '72 Ford Pinto Wagon. Sometime in the past, the car had been blue. However, rust showed through in mottled patches, it had a rattle, and the seats held together with duct tape and hope. The car's occupant opened its squeaky door, got out, and slammed it.

"Piece'a shit!" he snarled at it. "Soon's I can afford it; I'm getting a Mustang!" He pulled out a pack of cheap dime store cigarettes and lit one. "The girls will be all over a nice guy like me driving one of those," he muttered to himself as he ground the butt between his teeth.

A young boy who ran by chasing a ball was enough for the man to feel a quick flash of distaste. "Damn kids and the brats' welfare moms," he paused, feeling superior. Vincent considered going for a walk and changed direction. Slowly he strolled toward the big oak where he usually met his drug dealer every Saturday. He checked his watch and the pager on his belt.

"Late again," Vincent grumbled. "I gotta get back to work, asshole."

The pizza delivery man walked further out in the grassy field where a bright red flying disc with the word 'Frisbee' in white lettering plopped at his feet and rolled. Grinning, he chased it down and picked it up. Instead of throwing it back to the kid who had overshot her mark with her throw, he took aim and threw it into a fir tree instead. It got stuck on a branch. "Sorry, kids," he grinned, pleased with himself. A small girl who looked to be no more than three tried to shake the tree's trunk and began to cry when the toy failed to come down.

Ikhdathir watched the man interact with the other humans in petty cruelty. *Too easy.* The daemon bared his fangs in his version of a grin. *Think you are sadistic human? Let me teach you what that means,* he laughed.



Another shadow, blacker than night, stalked along Ikhdathir's backtrail. The drops of darkness where the other daemon had bled attracted the attention of a very specialized daemon who was adept at tracking. Where Ikhdathir was vaguely dog-like, this daemon was all cat in appearance.

Tiamor're was large and graceful. He was reminiscent of a panther in size and appearance, and his long fur was spiky and stiff. Unlike the spirit who previously came through this area, Tiamor're blended and displayed no hurry.

Ultimately, he had no use for other daemoni and no loyalty to his own kind. He hunted alone. Today, though, an urgermach had demanded that he follow the wounded daemon. It suited Tiamor're to see what was going on, so he agreed.

Quietly, Tiamor're followed the trail to the Gate and beyond. When he emerged on the other side, it didn't take long for him to find Ikhdathir. The wounded daemon was watching a human who provoked a crying child. Tiamor're tasted taint in the air long before he came up beside Ikhdathir, joining him under a large rusty car.

"Mine!" Ikhdathir snarled aggressively.

"You can have him," Tiamor're replied. His golden eyes were calm, and his long tail flipped casually. "The child is mine."

With their territory staked out, they both watched and waited. When the child ran crying partway back to her mother, who was distracted by her older sibling, she turned around and tried once more to dislodge her Frisbee. The two daemoni saw that no one was watching her.

Tiamor're struck swiftly. He pounced, and the child tripped and fell. He held her down with his paw on her back and purred to her, pulling the kinetic energy of her emotional sorrow into himself. "*Let go of your fear and your unhappiness, child. Give it to me,*" the black cat projected his thoughts into her open mind. In her innocence, she responded with a giggle.

"*Go back to your mother, child, this is no place for you,*" he told her, withdrew from her thoughts, and let her up. She turned around and SAW him. "Kitty!" she exclaimed happily and clapped her hands. She completely forgot about her toy. In response, Tiamor're sat down and pretended to wash his paw and ear like a normal cat. "Pretty kitty!" Tiamor're was amused and wandered deliberately away. By the time the child brought her mother back to see the 'pretty kitty' Tiamor're was gone.

When Tiamor're rejoined Ikhdathir in the shadows of Vincent's car, he felt satisfied and well-fed. Ikhdathir, however, spat at him. "Shall I kill her for you so you can have a proper meal?" the dremorzen laughed at him disrespectfully. "That was a pitiful display 'Tears of Sorrow'! Pathetic!" Ikhdathir snarled. "I don't know why the others tolerate you, mortal born filth."

In response, Tiamor're swiped dagger-like claws across Ikhdathir's snout in warning. "MY prey!" the cat hissed. "Shall I kill you for your insolence? You are sloppy, wasteful, and foolish. I have no need for your petty games," he insulted the dremorzen daemon.

Ikhdathir attempted to bite his opponent. Lightning fast, Tiamor're calmly swiped his claws across the other side of the spirit's face.

"I can do this all day," Tiamor're purred. "You, however, are running out of time and strength."

Ikhdathir drew himself up with hackles raised to intimidate the other daemon. Tiamor're stood and stalked closer until he was eye to eye with Ikhdathir. There he stood, motionless but for the tip of his tail, and waited silently. Ikhdathir looked down and backed away a step.

"Just wait, I will get you later," he growled, trying to save face.

"You are welcome to try." Tiamor're sat back down, unimpressed. "Besides, there's an urgermach Enforcer that will likely end you before you get the chance."

hile the two daemoni argued, crickets began to chirp in the gathering dusk. Most of the human families were leaving. Except for some young adults lingering in the park, few people were still around. Vincent had exchanged what little tip money he had for the expected drug delivery and neared the car with purposeful footsteps.

Ikhdathir and Tiamor're stilled and grew silent. The man hesitated and threw his cigarette down next to the car. Ikhdathir launched himself inside the open car door when Vincent wasn't looking. Satisfied, Ikhdathir noted that the interior was big enough for a body to fit. The daemon examined the man more closely.

He was white-skinned, with a narrow face, mid-'30s with greasy brown hair, and the beginning of a paunch. Ikhdathir could smell faint traces of beer on him and beneath the seats.

Vincent's aura was simple to taste and smell. The spirit snaked his tongue out and read him. Hatred. Sadism. Greed. Impatience. Laziness. Dishonesty. Did he have any redeeming qualities? Ikhdathir snaked his tongue out again. He loves his Grandma, who raised him. She was in a nursing home dying, and the man hadn't been to visit her. Another tasting; he also wanted a girlfriend but wasn't willing to clean himself, had no ambition, and was an addict. Ikhdathir waited as he saw clearly the man's intent. The man was not a lightworker, so this human posed no risk to him.

Ikhdathir whispered to the man, purposeful but gentle with his suggestions. The man would think they were his own thoughts. *Go ahead and do it. You know you want it. You can call work and tell them your car broke down. It's only a tiny lie.*

"Fuck work," the pizza driver said explosively. "I hate those assholes! People never give me enough tips, the stingy bastards."

Take the drugs and get high. Oh, look. What a beautiful young lady that is over there. Go talk to her.

Vincent popped a couple of pills in his mouth. He then opened a paper with a white powder and snorted it. A young lady passed by, walking toward the park entrance with a bicycle. The front tire had gone flat.

Take the screwdriver. Offer to help. She'll be impressed, Ikhdathir needled the human. The drugs were taking effect already. It was getting easier to go deeper in his mind with the power of suggestion. *Might need a knife too,* the daemon whispered when the man had the screwdriver. The man reached for a butterfly knife he kept in his glove box in response to the thought. He stopped to admire the deer antler handle.

There. Catch the pretty lady before she gets away, the daemon snickered. *What a beautiful girlfriend she is.* Ikhdathir kept up the commentary as he crept along behind the man who hurried after the girl with the bike. *All for the taking.*

Tiamor're watched the following events unfold dispassionately. The result was a foregone conclusion the moment the drugs were in the man's system. Ikhdathir was going to eat well this day.

Catlike, Tiamor're delicately sniffed the cigarette Vincent had discarded on the ground. He took the psychic scent of the man from the mostly burned roll of paper and tobacco. The Spirit of Sorrow turned away. He would be able to track the human later. Remorse was a powerful sorrow. Once Ikhdathir was done with him, it would be his own turn. Such a rich and vulnerable meal would never again know peace but through redemption or death.

The small daemonic, who had little intelligence beyond the desire to feed swarmed here. They favored human prey with a drug-induced lack of self-control. These Tiamor're ignored and went about his own business where he could no longer hear the screams.

Tiamor're was aware that it was almost unheard of for a daemon such as himself to have concern for humans. In truth, he didn't care what others thought of him. He slid carefully back through the Gate where he could jump and make his report, thus discharging his job. It would be inconvenient to have an Enforcer on his tail if he didn't make sure the fallen angel was informed.



Vincent awoke disoriented in the predawn hour. He slowly and stiffly sat up from where he was laid over on something cold and hard. His clothes felt sticky and damp. He felt dissociated from himself and emotionless. It was as if he distantly watched a movie that he was directing.

The man groaned without recognizing where he was. He attempted to move but his hand hit something soft and still. He pulled his hand back. "What the... am I dreaming? Oh, hell!" he exclaimed. "What? What happened?"

Vincent finally realized that he had been asleep on top of the girl who was twisted up like a broken doll. Her blood covered them both. She was stone cold and not moving or breathing. "Oh, My, God!" The pizza delivery man began to scream and cry. No one heard him. He was alone on a Sunday morning. Hardly anyone was up and about their business yet.

"What do I do? Oh, God, what do I do?" he sobbed hysterically. "The cops! They'll be after me!" He started to stumble to his feet but tripped over the bicycle and fell. He grabbed the bike with bloody hands and leveraged himself to his feet, where he swayed weakly.

Ikhdathir sat watching. The daemon laughed at Vincent contemptuously. Delicious blood and death had filled him as the sweet girl brutally died. She was too pure of spirit to be bitten by the likes of himself, but he could still use her to feed through the actions of a corrupted human.

Deliciously cooperative, the taste of Vincent's sadism as he committed the murder had been wonderfully filling for the daemon. Only someone filled with that much rage over the feeling of denial

for something owed could allow the severely wounded Ikhdathir any control.

Ikhdathir hadn't even needed to suck the man dry. So much dark energy filled him that he began healing immediately. No more black blood dripped from his wounded arm and shoulder. Slowly regeneration came from his shadowed core.

Ikhdathir was ready to discard this particular human. Maybe he would be back later for another episode. He didn't really care. Ikhdathir turned his back, still laughing gleefully at the ruined lives behind him. It was time to chase the other teenage girl to redeem his pride and reputation. He could vaguely feel the wrongness that traveled with her and fixated on it.

Darkness and speed was his ally. Ikhdathir ran swiftly and surely toward the spiritual taint which exposed the presence of the Spear of Chaos in the fabric of the mortal realm. Anyone who might have seen him in the darkness assumed he was a large dog running past and paid him no mind.



MAY 11, LIMON, COLORADO

"**J**ey Bryan, you got your ears on back there, bud?" Kenneth carefully held the steering wheel of Diane's car with one hand and supported the CB mouthpiece with the other as he drove. "Go ahead," Bryan's voice crackled through the radio in reply.

"I'm powerful hungry. The Limon exit is coming up. I'm going to pull off at the next convenience store with sammiches. Diane says she'll buy us all a late lunch, and she's filthy enough to want a proper shower and bed."

"10-4! Sounds good to me!" Bryan answered and hung up the radio.

"Food and a bath sound great!" Mary Lou was awake and alert. "I'm still stiff from sleeping on the ground and the car ride. A break should help."

"I think I'm ready for some coffee," Bryan told her. "You want some?"

"Ewww! Thanks, but no thanks unless you can find some that tastes as good as it smells fresh ground," Mary Lou replied, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

"I don't know about that," Bryan replied. "I have to be up sometimes all hours if we get an emergency call-out on the ambulance or to go work a fire. I'm not sure I could make it without the bean juice," he laughed.

"You're welcome to it," Mary Lou joked. "I'll stick to the simple stuff."

Bryan considered what she'd said. "Maybe some electrolytes would help if you're all that stiff. You want some Gatorade or something?"

"Hey, that's not a bad idea," she nodded. "I was thinking juice and some salty crackers, but that would hit the spot."

Bryan flicked his turn signal on and followed Kenneth off the road into a large parking lot. He saw that his friend had selected a convenience store that backed directly up to a field with many thick trees.

"This will work!" Bryan said enthusiastically and pulled into the shade. He parked the car close to the trees. Bryan addressed the large wolf in the back seat. "This looks like a good spot that you can get out too, professor. We'll take care of you first, then you can wait in the car for us and lay low while we get the food and drinks."

"If you got this handled Bryan, I'm going to go on in and make a pit stop myself," Mary Lou broke into Bryan's somewhat one-sided conversation.

"Yep. We're good! Ready John?" Bryan took hold of the professor's leash just for show and walked briskly to get behind enough cover to hide them. Diane followed with the coyote.

Kenneth found Mary Lou in the store browsing for her drink and snacks. "They've got a good selection of Sub sammiches too," he told her and pointed when she looked around, craning her neck to see where he meant.

"Ah. Thanks. I wonder if they've got roast beef?" Mary Lou walked off.

"Bottom shelf!" Kenneth called behind her. He adjusted his grip on the food he'd selected and also grabbed chips and a chocolate candy bar.

Diane and Bryan came in the door just in time to witness an altercation at the checkout counter. A man and woman were being confronted. The man wore an unusually heavy brown coat over his dirty overalls. His clothing was out of place for the pleasant weather.

"Take it out! I can see you're hiding it under your clothes!" the clerk demanded.

"Hey, I ain't doin' nothin'. I'm offering to pay," the man objected. The short dark-haired woman with him kept looking toward the door.

"You've got a lot more than that in your jacket," the clerk replied angrily. "You're stealing. I'm tired of this shit! You're the third one this week! Give it back, right now, and get out of my store!" she challenged.

"I don't have it!" He shifted his weight from foot to foot and wouldn't look at the store employee.

"Liar! Put it down now, or I'm calling the cops!" the clerk raised her voice and shouted.

Kenneth deliberately handed Mary Lou his food. "Bryan." He gestured with his head to the couple at the counter. Bryan immediately understood and handed his lunch to Diane. "Here, hold these," he told her. They both walked up behind the shoplifters.

"Hey, need some help?" Bryan asked, bouncing on his toes. Kenneth grinned and blocked them from exiting.

"Not if they put that stuff down and leave," the clerk told them.

The man in the brown jacket looked around. Finally, he started pulling things out of his clothes; bread, hot dogs, two drinks. "There."

"And the rest of it. I can see it," the clerk said tightly.

A pile quickly formed on the countertop as more followed the previous items. After candy bars, chips, and a bag of donuts, the clerk was satisfied. "Now get out! Out! Don't let me catch you in here again!" she told them.

On the way out, the man dropped a package of condoms but didn't stop to pick them up. He scurried out to a black Chevy truck with the woman right behind him. They jumped in and sped off.

The clerk looked at Kenneth and Bryan gratefully. "Thank you," she said. "I'll be right with you as soon as I get these out of the way. It's unbelievable how people just want to take shit for free. It makes everything more expensive for everyone."

"I know, right?" Bryan winked at the clerk, who raised an eyebrow. Her expression was still stormy. He continued unfazed, "Can I have your phone number? You're really cute."

Mary Lou rolled her eyes. She stepped forward, shaking her head before things went downhill from there. "Hey, I'd be glad to put that stuff back on the shelf for you if you'd like. That way, you can assist your other customers, and they won't have to wait."

“Thank you. If you could do that, I’ll go ahead and ring you guys up,” the clerk told her gratefully. The woman determinedly ignored the guy who was gracelessly trying to flirt with her.

“You’re welcome,” Mary Lou told her. She picked up several items and carried them to their shelves.

As they were leaving, Kenneth was a little behind the rest of the group. He walked over to Bryan’s car with a big grin on his face. He held up a torn receipt paper with hastily scrawled numbers.

“What’s that?” Bryan asked him as he was getting in his car.

“Phone number.” Kenneth laughed. He wadded it up and shoved it in his pants pocket. Still smiling, he went to Diane’s car and got in the passenger seat.

They pulled into a motel parking lot about a mile down the road and stopped again. Diane went inside and came back out several minutes later with two room keys.



Tiamor’re slid back through the gateway opening and onto the Moonpaths. He immediately saw another daemon’s severed head and splattered remains. A spike impaled the head. Flickers of silver fire still burned in patches, gradually evaporating the tainted blood into the ether of the Moonpaths. A powerful presence flared to his left, giving Tiamor’re only enough time for a flash of foreboding before he was hit.

A sharp-edged bar of light whistled through the air and slammed into his head, snuffing out the vision in his left eye. Tiamor’re was knocked sprawling. He yowled in agony as the wound sizzled and spat from the radiant heat. An armored boot slammed down onto his throat, pinning him in place.

“They are under MY protection, daemon. You shall hunt them no longer,” a steely feminine voice snarled in old Aramaic.

Tiamor’re’s one remaining good eye watered in the being’s radiance. Crystalline armor sheathed her from shoulder to heel, shimmering in the light of the burning draconic wings behind her. Silver-grey eyes caught between dragon and cat stared down at the pinned form of the daemon pitilessly.

Tiamor’re desperately reached up and hooked black talons in the joining of the crystal plate and leather armor. His paw smoked and sizzled as he struggled to escape. The being shifted her armored boot just enough to allow her prey to speak.

"I hunt but one Great Lady. I know not whom you refer to," Tiamor're replied formally in like tongue.

The armored woman scoffed. "Daemoni are very good at lying with the truth. Tell me then, the name of the one you hunt."

"IKHDATHIR," the trapped daemon choked out in the native language of the daemoni. "Another daemon then." The lady furrowed her brows, puzzled, and then shrugged. "The politics of the daemoni are of no interest to me. You trespass on sacred ground. The Moonpaths are reserved for the dead and the dreaming. You will die, as my duty demands."

Despair curled around Tiamor're's core. The worst fear of any daemon who dared traverse between worlds was realized. The lady raised her dual-pointed spear and struck down. Her aim was true. The spear-point stabbed straight through his shoulder and into his very core. Just before it reached the center and immolated the very essence of his being, the spear-point halted and withdrew. The pressure of the armored boot pulled back.

Trembling, Tiamor're barely had the strength to raise his head the few inches it took to look at his persecutor. She stood a few feet away. Her brightness dimmed as she folded her wings within her being. Her head tilted as she contemplated the downed form of her prey.

"Not a daemon after all then... a fragment or forgotten sorrow. You are grief shed so the soul could begin again. I SEE you; all you have been, all you have done." She folded her arms and shifted her weight to one hip. "But what do I do with you? Hmm..."

She tilted her head back and shouted to the clouded sky above them. "ABU!"

True terror pierced Tiamor're's core much as the spear-point had. *Father? Father who!!! Father the Creator or her father, any which gave to this creature's birth will be terrible indeed!*

In response, a second Gate opened on the path. With a tearing slice, it appeared as if the ether in front of Tiamor're twisted when it was pulled back like a curtain.

The first thing the dark cat caught sight of was a golden staff topped with a giant pair of scales. Tiamor're let out a squeal of terror as he recognized Anubis. Instantly, he realized who had caught him. *Khebechet!* He curled in on himself, shaking. *Why did she not kill me outright?* Tiamor're wondered in confusion.

"You called, my daughter?" Anubis asked. His voice was loud and echoed like thunder in this place. He nodded at the daemon,

noticing the quivering black shadow form at his daughter's feet. "I didn't think that you would require my assistance with executions."

Khebechet stood over the downed daemon, suddenly guarding and protecting the one she had tried to kill moments earlier. "The trouble is, this one has done nothing worthy of execution," she told him. "He has not killed an innocent."

"There is much harm that can be committed without killing," Anubis murmured thoughtfully. He waved his free hand over the dark creature. He also sensed what Khebechet had SEEN. "Interesting... and rare. A cast-off shadow of pain. Set would have interest in this," Anubis said softly.

"This is truth." Khebechet nodded. "Thus, I called you to weigh his heart."

"This can be done," Anubis agreed. "Though Set carries the true heart. I shall weigh what remains against the Feather of Truth."

Tiamor're tried his best not to look. Instead, he kept his nose tucked under his tail. The scales creaked ominously close. He didn't move when he felt Anubis' touch, knowing it would do him no good to attempt to flee.

Anubis took Tiamor're's core by the simple expedient of closing his claws around it and lifting that part of the cat's essence free without killing him outright. The guardian was undecided how this would conclude, so he placed the dark core onto the scales. Surprised, Anubis saw the scales balance ever so slightly in the daemon's favor.

"Congratulations, spirit. You may live," Anubis pronounced. "Your fate is undecided. This will be reported to the Prime Creator in the Court of Heaven. Khebechet will finish with you, and I shall allow you passage henceforth. But know that you shall be watched," Anubis concluded ominously and stepped back through the gate to his temple.

The aftermath of Anubis's departure felt anti-climactic, and the resulting silence was deafening. Tiamor're uncurled. He was surprised to find himself intact, including the return of his sight. He blinked both eyes. *Are they letting me go?* Tiamor're wondered. He looked Khebechet directly in the eyes. He realized the lady's eyes had shifted to green in color with her mood change. In contrast to their initial confrontation, she wore a pleasant expression.

"What are you going to do with your freedom?" Khebechet asked.

Tiamor're thought briefly on his response, knowing he'd better be both clear and truthful. "I am to report to Jibril's enforcer, an

urgermach class daemon, the whereabouts and actions of Ikhdathir,” he began.

Despite telling Tiamor’re earlier that she wasn’t interested in the politics of his kind, she realized she needed to know more. “The daemon at the park,” Khebechet said in a level tone.

“Yes,” Tiamor’re confirmed.

“I saw him earlier attack a group of people under my protection,” Khebechet revealed. “What do you know of this?”

“I only know that Ikhdathir was assigned to procure an item in their possession,” Tiamor’re answered. “I only just caught up with him. More wasn’t given to me to know, and I didn’t care to ask.”

Khebechet laughed. “It’s typical of daemonic not to tell their underlings anything.”

Tiamor’re didn’t have a response to her statement. He just shrugged.

“Fine. I will let you be about your business ‘Tears of Sorrow.’ Call my name if you have need of me. But know this. I am not the only guardian of these paths. If you wish safe passage in this place, you will need to take my mark.”

“Lady,” Tiamor’re began formally. “If my brethren see your mark upon me, they shall tear me to shreds and devour my remains,” he tried to refuse gracefully.

Khebechet smiled at him gently, her green eyes shining with mischief. “It will take one with the Creator-given gift for discerning of spirits to SEE such a mark. Your ‘brethren’ will be blind to it.”

Tiamor’re considered her offer carefully. This ordeal had been terrifying enough to go through once. He had no wish for a second incident with another who might not be so understanding.

“I accept,” Tiamor’re said. Echoes of a past he barely remembered in the mortal world pushed him to trust her. He rose and gracefully came to her hand, which she placed on the top of his head.

Silver lines and tick marks appeared on the daemon’s forehead, with a brilliance that lit up the space around them. Tiamor’re instinctively shrank away from the contact first but soon realized the terrible light was not burning him. When Khebechet removed her hand, the light faded. Still visible to the discerning eye, there remained a circular cartouche with the Lady of Cooling Water’s name etched inside it.

“I have placed my name on you. Only one who is my personal agent would carry such a mark.” Khebechet crouched to eye level and held his gaze. “I warn you not to commit offense against the

guiltless as your true nature dictates. I will know,” she told him firmly. “Because I let you live, I am also answerable for your future actions to the other powers of the Lower Court. Do not try me.” She rose to her feet. “Now go make your report, cat, and be careful. I have others to hunt.”

Khebechet’s sudden absence left Tiamor’re alone on the path, wondering if the mark on his face was truly invisible. Resolving to see for himself, he sought a reflective fountain or gazing pool along the Moonpath.

In an out-of-the-way corner, the sound of water over rock drew the shadow figure aside. With creeping hesitance, he moved closer. He lapped the clear water, relieved at first that he could see no light reflected in the pool. Moments later, he realized that he could see the faint outline of a silver disk with Assyrian writing shining in his midnight black fur. He briefly studied his reflection. Tiamor’re, just for a moment, regretted allowing Khebechet to place her mark upon him. *Only one with discerning of spirits...*

Unable to change his mind or circumstances, he accepted his lot with a shrug. Tiamor’re leaped into motion. Flowing along the Moonpaths, he sped to a jump point. Although he was viewed with distrust by watchers tasked with the safety of travelers, he went unhindered. There was no trace left behind when he jumped which indicated that a shadow creature had lingered on sacred ground.



Merrily wrapped in a moist towel with her wet hair draped and combed down her back, Mary Lou relaxed on the edge of the bed at the motel. Diane had followed up on her promise to rent a couple of rooms.

The guys were next door to them. Mary Lou presumed they were also resting and showering. She looked around for something to do in the crisp, clean room while Diane occupied the bathroom. Her eyes lit on the television and the remote sitting on the dresser in easy reach.

“Hmm, I wonder if there’s anything good on the tele’.” Mary Lou retrieved the remote and poked its buttons until she got a response from the TV. She clicked through a couple of channels and landed on the Weather Channel. Looking at the weather map, she saw there wasn’t much going on along their route to get home. “Smooth

sailing all the way... supposedly at least," she muttered to herself. Another click turned on the news.

"Oh my God!" she said to the talking box in front of her. "Why? Just, why?"

"Why what?" Diane had finished her shower and came out of the bathroom in pajamas with a towel wrapped around her head. She paused to test the knob of a door between their room and the guys' room.

With its overall occupancy nearly full to capacity, the motel's double suite was the only space available. Satisfied, Diane nodded when she found it locked. Patting the towel, she pulled it off and worked on drying her hair. She walked over to where she could see the TV screen.

"They found some girl dead in a park in one of the towns near where we were up in Washington," Mary Lou said and pushed the remote until the volume increased. "Listen. They've got her family talking to the reporters."

...have identified fifteen-year-old Lacey Skillen, found dead in Riverside Park by a woman walking her dog. Police sources say they are looking for a suspect driving a Ford Pinto station wagon. Witnesses recall last seeing her alive riding her bicycle and talking to a pizza delivery driver that they say frequents the area. We go live with her mother next, but first a commercial break..."

"Damn," Diane said and shook her head, looking at the smiling picture of the dead teenager from happier times. "What a waste. Honestly, what is this world coming to when you can't even go to the park in peace these days?"

"I dunno. We've had some close encounters ourselves, though," Mary Lou pointed out. "Just lucky that's not one of us lying there with a police escort to the morgue."

Diane pursed her lips sadly. "I had to do that too many times when I was on the force. Lives snuffed out before their time over jealousy or stupid pride or greed; precious babies lost through neglect; women beaten to death by the men they thought would love and protect them." She shook her head. "Bryan could tell you some stories too. He knows. We get way too many calls. It's a good day when we're bored," Diane concluded. She paused, "or manage to get there in time to save somebody."

Mary Lou sighed. "Yeah, he told us," she said.

Diane went to the mirror, pulled the towel off her head, and grabbed a comb. "See if there's anything less morbid on. Turn on something sedate, like golf or birdwatching, or anything

nonviolent. I don't want to think about or see anything more strenuous."

Mary Lou pointed the remote at the TV again to pull up the main menu. "Okay. Let's see. There's fishing, comedy reruns, a dog show, an ocean exploration documentary, history documentaries on Noah's Ark. It looks like they're claiming to have found it a couple of years ago."

"That'll do for some background noise," Diane said. She picked up a large container wrapped in plastic. "I'm going to go fetch some ice for the coolers. Do you want to come?"

"I'll get my ice later. You go ahead. I'm going to watch TV for a while and maybe catch a nap," Mary Lou responded. "The guys are next door. I should be fine."

After Diane walked out with the coyote at her heels on his leash it was quiet enough to hear the program. Mary Lou changed into blue jeans and a T-shirt then folded herself cross-legged in the center of the bed. She watched the archaeologists explore the site of the Ark till the program concluded. Another show followed on the life and death of Jesus.

The girl clicked through the stations again and put it back to where she had it. Deciding she was hungry, she fetched the rest of her lunch and sat at the table where she could see the TV.

Mary Lou took a couple of bites and dropped her sandwich. She stared at the TV in stunned excitement. "No! Could it possibly be that easy?" She started to move and bumped the table. "Oh, shit!" an epithet escaped her lips when her Gatorade wobbled precariously. She had to simultaneously grab the small round table and her drink to keep both from tipping over. She paused.

"The Spear of Destiny? That's a thing?" Mary Lou said aloud to the empty room. Then she grabbed her room key and ran, nearly tripping on her shoes as she exited the room. She failed to notice that the door didn't shut behind her.

"Ken, Bryan!" She knocked on their motel room door practically hopping up and down with excitement. The numbered heavy wooden door opened to her second knock.

"Oh hey. What's up?" Bryan asked her. He came through the door and closed it behind him, but not before she saw Kenneth on the phone. She furrowed her brow. *Why did Bryan just close the door like he's hiding something?* She wondered briefly and shrugged.

"The Spear of Destiny. You ever heard of it?" she asked him.

"It sounds familiar, but I can't say I have for sure," he told her. He waited for his friend to explain.

"Oh, okay. Umm... according to this program I'm watching on cable, it's the Roman spear used to pierce the side of Christ at the crucifixion. It has an actual name."

Bryan's expression brightened. "Ah, yes. Now I remember. I knew it sounded familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it," he said.

"Do you remember anything else about it?" she asked him. "Is it a real 'thing' for sure?"

"I can't say I remember a lot about it. I remember it from church and some of the Masonic teachings, but can't remember anything else about it." He gave her an intent look. "I'm sorry I can't help. You're going somewhere with this," Bryan stated.

"Yes. What they're saying is that people believed that if you carried it into battle you can't lose, like, ever. Maybe if we could find it, we could use it somehow?" Mary Lou wondered.

"Maybe. If it's real, and if you could get your hands on it," he said.

"Is Ken," Mary Lou trailed off.

"Busy? Not too busy to run this by him. He might know something I don't. He's the walking Encyclopedia. Let's go see what he says." Bryan turned, opened the door, and left it open for Mary Lou to follow him inside their room.

"Where's Diane?" Bryan inquired.

"She went off to get ice for the coolers. She's not back yet," Mary Lou said.

"By herself?" Bryan looked concerned.

"Negative. Coyote went with her." Mary Lou nodded at the open door.

"That's better than nothing, but not ideal," Kenneth said while looking down at the table and writing on a paper. He looked up at her and gestured at the spear propped in the corner. "That thing causes way too much trouble."

"By the way, if you girls are hungry here in a little bit, we ordered pizzas," Bryan told Mary Lou.

Her stomach turned thinking about the report of the girl murdered by the pizza man. "Nah, I'm not really in the mood for pizza. My sandwich covered it for now, but I'll get something else later. I've still got a little money so dinner isn't a problem. Food is not why I came to your room, though."

"Okay? And?" Kenneth gave her his full attention.

“I was just watching a program on TV, and they said something about an artifact called the Spear of Destiny.”

“The spear the Roman commander Gaius Cassius Longus used to spear Jesus at the crucifixion according to texts associated with Pilate,” Kenneth nodded.

“I was thinking if it’s a real thing, we could use it,” Mary Lou told him.

“Yeah, probably,” Kenneth agreed. “Finding it would be like hunting a needle in a haystack. Nobody knows where it actually is. The spears that have surfaced have largely been debunked as fake replicas.”

“Maybe Skuld would have some knowledge of it?” Mary Lou sounded hopeful.

“She might. If she’d be willing to tell us anything,” Kenneth said, huffing a little. His expression was dubious. “The Immortals are not very forthcoming most days.”

“It’s worth a shot to ask her,” Mary Lou insisted.

“Oh, we’ll ask her. Just don’t expect much,” Kenneth agreed.

Mary Lou thought about what he said with her arms crossed. She leaned against the wall with her hand on the knob of the door between the two rooms. Mary Lou was surprised when it popped open. “Oh, this unlocks on this side,” She remarked and shrugged. “Having this divider door might be useful. We could open this up between rooms without going outside. It might be safer.”

“It might,” Bryan agreed. He plopped in a chair near the exit door of their room. “I’m just glad to have a break from driving so I don’t feel picky about the room one way or another.”

“That’s for sure.” Mary Lou started to step away from the door when the hinges squeaked behind her.

Kenneth jumped to attention as the door slammed open with a thunderous crash against the wall. He wasn’t able to reach her before a long, black, clawed arm extended through the door over Mary Lou’s right shoulder. It hooked long dagger-like talons under her collarbone from behind.

“The demon!” Bryan rolled out of his chair across the floor and grabbed for the lowest drawer in the room’s dresser. With a gun, he came to his feet and slammed a clip home at the ready. He watched grimly for a good target.

Kenneth wasn’t idle as he watched the inky black creature attempt to pull his friend back into itself with its jaws wide open to bite. Mary Lou squealed in pain and dug her heels into the floor to keep from being pulled backward. She saw Kenneth remove his

leather belt and loop it in his hand, but he couldn't get to their opponent with Mary Lou blocking the doorway.

She grabbed for the daemon's arm above where it locked in her flesh and deliberately went to her right knee. Ikhdathir's jaws snapped a hairsbreadth above her head as she hurled him over her shoulder and onto the floor in front of her at Kenneth's feet. The daemon's claws scored bone as they came out of her flesh in a shower of gore. Mary Lou screamed in earnest as the muscles tore and her arm went dead.



Ikhdathir was injured again from the physical contact. His claws sizzled, and her blood felt like acid on his skin. Kenneth came forward to curb stomp the daemon while it was on the floor. When the dremorzen swatted at the teen, Kenneth was knocked off his own feet.

Snarling savagely, Ikhdathir leaped up and threw himself on top of the girl who was standing again. He intended to dispatch her quickly by simply snapping her neck before grabbing the spear and running. Instead, he looked directly into her face at close range and froze as he saw her eyes shift from blue-green to the icy blue of a stormy sea.

To Ikhdathir's spiritual sight, the girl's brightness increased to nearly blinding. The silver light around her terrified and fascinated him at the same time. He realized that killing her flesh would not make him safe from her wrath. It would only unsheathe the bright being underneath to finish him.

With the two boys behind him, Ikhdathir shoved the girl to the wall and wrapped his long claws around her neck to buy himself some time. He knew from experience the humans wouldn't act while he had the girl helpless. He grinned in sadistic glee.

"Now you get to experience what it's like to have your arm torn off, human queen," he hissed into her face, grabbing her deadened arm by the wrist.

"Get off me! Now!" Mary Lou gritted her teeth against the pain. Her gaze slid to the side where Kenneth came up behind the daemon with the belt.

"Let her go!" Bryan demanded. "I will shoot you!"

Ikhdathir laughed, and half turned. "Your bullets don't work on me, human. By all means, fire your weapon."

Bryan's eyes glittered with focus. "Try me bitch! I came prepared! I'm always prepared. These are dipped in holy water."

A low, throaty growl emanated from the wolf standing beside Bryan's leg. Mary Lou remembered their hike up the mountain. In the excitement, she had forgotten his presence. *The professor!* She struggled through the pain to do what she had to.

In the moment the daemon was distracted Mary Lou slid her one good arm behind her back and put her left hand in her right back pocket. She came up with a sandwich bag full of herbs partly open.

Ikhdathir laughed in her face with the realization that she hadn't blasted him outright. He lost his fear of her.

"You have no idea who you are or what you can do." He shoved his face closer and pushed the point home. "Human spells don't work on me either, little girl. You're finished. There's nothing you can do to stop me from killing you now," Ikhdathir gloated.

"My spells don't HAVE to work on you, asshole!" she spat back at him defiantly. "They just have to work." Raising her leg, she kicked him off her and threw the bag at him left-handed. Kenneth finally got the angle he needed to grab the daemon by the neck with the belt and yank him backward.

Satisfied, Mary Lou saw the daemon swipe reflexively at the bag. The thin plastic gave way, and the bag exploded, spraying the herbs within all over Ikhdathir as Kenneth dragged him to the floor.

"Have some flowers," Mary Lou said tightly. She slid down the wall as she felt a familiar weakness grip her. Before she lost consciousness from the pain and contact with the darkborn taint she watched hell break loose on the daemon. It vainly tried to fight its way free of what now appeared to be a huge hairy werewolf who grabbed hold of it in a vice grasp with teeth and claws.

Howling and fighting the mighty strength of the wolf as it jumped up and down on him clawing long gashes into him, Ikhdathir finally broke free. A single shot rang out and grazed the daemon's foot. He gave up and ran. Ikhdathir howled in pain and rage as he was yet again forced to flee without the spear.

A few blocks away, the daemon stopped in the shadows. He was limping badly. Part of his foot was blasted to shreds. "I will get what you have," he hissed at them. "I'll be back, and the spear that you carry will be mine. It calls me. I hear it whispering."



“ go down to get my pipe, and suddenly you guys got a commotion,” Diane said, trying to slow her breath and calm herself.

Sirens wailed down the street and got louder as they approached. Diane and Bryan held pressure on Mary Lou’s bleeding shoulder while they waited for the ambulance. Red and blue lights flashed a few yards away, lighting up Kenneth’s face as he tried to explain the violent attack in their room to the authorities.

Bryan shook his head. “That thing went for her again. This time the rest of us saw it. But we can talk about that later. I can hear the ambulance Diane, and they aren’t going to know what to do with that black dirt the demon leaves behind. They’ll just stitch it all up and bandage it, so we better make sure this wound is clean before they get here.”

“I’m on it,” Diane told him with her mouth set in a firm line of determination. “The bleeding is helping the cleansing of the wound quite a bit, but as fast as the last wound went necrotic when it was just a scratch, I’m going deep to make sure I get all of the demon taint. Keep everybody off of me while I work.”

“Do what you have to,” Bryan told her and looked down the street. “I got this part.” He got up and strolled off to meet the emergency responders.

The ex-cop turned park ranger, and shaman-healer spread her chocolate brown hands out across the pale, freckled skin of the girl’s chest and shoulder. She closed her eyes and hummed some low tones. Diane could feel the teen’s flesh and bones under her hands, and winced at the damage. However, to her mind’s eye, her concern was the familiar sickly green overlay of energy that she chased with her gifts and divine intervention.

Finally, Diane sat back and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet by the EMT’s. Getting out of their way, she moved aside to speak in soft undertones to the guys.

“Mary Lou will be ok,” Diane said as she watched the professionals work on the girl. “She’s strong. But what I don’t understand is why the demon keeps going for her specifically. It makes no sense. Ulfr is corralled in the artifact and he shouldn’t have any more of a grudge against her than us.”

“That... is the big ten-dollar question,” Bryan agreed. “She’s getting the brunt of it now that Sierra’s not here. More importantly, though, is if and when it will be back. This suggests that it’s following us.” Bryan sighed.

"And the other question, what we're going to do about it!" Kenneth added. His amber-brown eyes glittered black with suppressed rage. "You're right though, Diane, there doesn't seem any reason for it unless what Bryan is saying is true and what I already suspected. Because of the spear's presence, we are being hunted."

"Like we talked about when we camped, maybe it really does want the spear, and she's the distraction?" Bryan jammed his hands in his pockets and nodded his head, looking at the ground. "Well, I am going to assume that's the case, and I'll be ready for it. I have holy ammunition." Bryan bared his teeth in a grim mockery of a smile.

The EMTs put Mary Lou on a stretcher to take her to the nearby medical center. Bryan walked over to talk with them and returned as they loaded her on the Ambulance.

"They're taking her to let the doctor look at the wound and stitch it up. She should probably be fine to travel tomorrow if they let her out early enough," Bryan told them.

Che motel manager found them when they were on their way back to their room. "I'm really sorry, folks. I've got housekeeping cleaning your room, but it's going to take a while to get that done. I can get you set up in a different room if you like. We had guests leave and create vacancies because of the disturbance. We are cleaning a couple of them."

"Great idea," Diane said with relief. "Do you have security camera footage of the person or thing that came into the room?" she asked the manager.

"We do have some of the cameras on. We can pull the images and give them to the police tomorrow morning. It will take that long to go through the films," he said. "Do you have a better description than what the officers said you saw? Who are we looking for?"

Kenneth, always quick to think on his feet answered. "It looks like some wild beast, although it could have been somebody in disguise that wandered into our room. He, or it, tangled with our Alaskan husky mix who chased it off and protected us."

"Nice dogs." The manager nodded. "My boy has two huskies. Come by the office, and you can see some pictures of them."

"Certainly, I'll do that." Kenneth reached out and shook the man's hand. "Name's Ken."

"Josh, here. Excellent, we've got free coffee and donuts you can get too! If you want, you can go ahead and move your things to the new room. I think the authorities have everything handled out here. I'll be in the office if you need anything." The manager handed two new room keys to Kenneth. He turned and headed away.

"Well, you heard the man. Let's get to our new digs. We need to be back on the road early as possible, so we better try to get some sleep rather than worry about anymore ifs, whens or maybes," Diane suggested as she yawned. "I'm for goin' to bed, lockin' the doors, and I'm not gonna move 'til mornin'."



Late in the afternoon the next day the bright sunshine had turned to partly cloudy and breezy conditions. The cars were on the road traveling east. Mary Lou was patched up again with her back propped against pillows.

Between repeats of 'It's a Kind of Magic,' 'Manic Monday,' and 'True Colors' pop fashion music, the radio blared updated reports on the manhunt for what the media quickly dubbed 'The Pizza Killer.' Two more new bodies turned up, and Kenneth reached for the dial to click it off.

"Thank you," Mary Lou said. "I've about heard enough. I just hope they catch him."

"He's being careless. They'll nab him," Kenneth said and popped some gum in his mouth. "There are too many dead bodies in quick succession. Somebody's bound to see something."

"He's sure got people running scared up in Washington State. I'd say we're lucky to be going the other way, but so far, that doesn't seem to be helping us." Mary Lou looked out the window and sighed.

"Nope. But you're missing something important." Kenneth glanced sideways at her from the driver's seat. "You. Are. Alive." He emphasized the point by shaking a finger at her. "You came a long way from the scared girl I met in school a couple of years ago and became a real fighter. That wasn't all Bryan and me back there at the hotel. You kicked ass, girl. That THING had every intention of killing you. You outfought it and outsmarted it. Just like in our fight with the undead monsters, you rose to the occasion when you had to."

"I'm still scared, sometimes," she admitted. She got quiet while she thought about what he said.

“Maybe,” Kenneth acknowledged. “But you don’t let that stop you, and you’re real. It’s called courage,” he grinned with a mischievous gleam in his brown eyes, “even if you are scared of squishy marshmallows!”

“Wait, what?” Mary Lou’s eyes grew big, and she stared at him. “You found the squishy thing.” She slapped her forehead. “Seriously?”

“Technically, no,” Kenneth laughed. “Our coyote friend chased down your midnight nemesis and ate it. Heh, and no, I’m not going to ever let you live it down.”

“Now I’m really embarrassed,” she said but laughed.

Slowly the miles wore away under their tires. When they finally reached Kentucky Mary Lou took the wheel. “I’m familiar with the territory. My dad’s from this State. I’m not too stove-up to drive and Ken needs a break,” she told them and drove the rest of the way home.

Seeing the downtown Rockwood mix of brick and old boarded-up buildings was a welcome relief. At Professor Holderman’s house, they set to unpacking, split up their gear, then returned to their respective homes. They decided that the Spear of Chaos would go home with Diane in the meantime.

“We will regroup later and figure this out,” Diane told them. “For now, go home and rest. Bryan can come by and check on Coyote and me. We can help keep it under control, and it’s still safer with me than at Carly’s house. We can’t afford mishaps.”



Deputy Brett Mulligan, a veteran of the United States military and long-time veteran of the Roane County Sheriff’s Department, sat calmly behind the reception desk at the jail. He wasn’t bothered by the demotion from patrol officer to desk jockey. Neither was he bothered by the sheriff’s regular bouts of ranting. He maintained his professional demeanor on the job even when the sheriff occasionally pushed to try to find out more about what had happened the summer before. Deputy Mulligan kept his information and opinions firmly behind his teeth.

“No good will come of anything from that place,” he told Sheriff Wilson. “You have all the information you need. There’s nobody to arrest or convict for anything. Deputy Diane Stanley already gave you a report.”

"Gave me a bunch of bullshit, you mean!" the sheriff scoffed.

Deputy Mulligan just stared at him. "You will either believe it or not. I can't help you with any more," he told him serenely and shrugged. The sheriff's red face didn't move his veteran officer in the slightest.

"We shall see about that," Sheriff Wilson blustered. "I've got connections, and I've got my ways."

"So you've said," Deputy Mulligan responded and nodded. "Feel free to use them. I'm just the receptionist these days, after all." The corner of his mouth twisted slightly in a half-smile as the other man let out a throaty growl.

The door to the sheriffs' office slammed shut. Sheriff Wilson's heavy wooden chair creaked in protest when he plopped down behind his desk fuming. "I'll show you, smart-ass!" He picked up the headset of the black rotary dial phone on his desk and dialed a private number.

"I need a warrant... you'll do that.... great, okay! I'll be there in an hour." He hung up the phone with satisfaction. "Impeding an investigation, conspiracy, something will stick!" he laughed. "I'll get every one of you that was involved!"

In the open area in the next room, Deputy Mulligan didn't bother to let Sheriff Wilson know that the room's acoustics made it simple to hear what was said beyond the door. As the clock ticked to the end of his shift, he watched the sheriff leave and not return. When his shift relief arrived, Deputy Mulligan signed out and slid behind the wheel of his dark blue pickup truck. For a moment, he paused with his key hovering over the ignition.

Memories came flooding back into the deputy's mind. He shuddered while it played out for him again.

The scent of rot and death filled his nose. He remembered the grabbing hands, and above all an ancient evil so vile that a normal person could never imagine the horrors. He recalled his panicked reaction as he fired his service weapon with shame. It was a mistake that nearly killed the only non-human help they had received. He would have died if not for the intervention of the coyote pack and Diane's sheer unwavering bravery.

Tears filled his blue eyes and came unbidden to his face. The only African-American cop on the force had more mettle than the rest of them combined! Then there were the lost children that Diane attempted to save. His knuckles were white from gripping the steering wheel.

"We couldn't save those kids! Dear God, I hope you have gathered them all to you, so they are at peace. Thank you for giving us help and sparing our lives," he prayed. "But why couldn't you spare the littlest ones instead of this old Marine?" he sobbed, broken-hearted. "Let me be the clay and you the potter so that I can make a difference in this world. Help me so that it becomes a better place, Lord Jesus. Use me, Amen."

His hand went to the silver cross and fish he wore hidden under his uniform. For a moment, he fancied that an invisible hand laid itself on his shoulder in blessing and comfort. It gave him the strength to dry his eyes and start his truck.

He headed out down Race Street and then stopped at the White Stores grocer around the corner. He left with a steak in a brown paper bag a few minutes later. Mulligan drove toward Midtown, where he knew Diane lived alone with the coyote these days. He smiled, thinking about them. He hoped Diane would be home.

After a short drive, Deputy Mulligan was rewarded by the sight of Diane's car. An old blue car he didn't recognize also sat parked in the driveway of her small house. His face brightened to see she was home. The door opened to his knock.

"Oh hey, Brett! I saw you comin'," Diane welcomed him with a slight smile. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company today?"

"I thought I'd stop by and bring our little coyo a present," Deputy Mulligan responded. "Also, to warn you that Wilson is on the warpath again." He handed her the paper bag with the steak.

"Well, come on in! You don't have to stand there in the door like a big lug." She motioned him to enter. "Sheriff's on the warpath, huh? Why'm I not surprised? When's he NOT on the warpath...? Oh hey, do you remember Professor John Holderman from the college?" Diane nodded at the middle-aged Native American man smoking a pipe with a heady sweet floral scent at her kitchen table. The man's eyes were slightly glassy as he extended his hand for the deputy to shake.

"How could I forget? It's a pleasure, sir!" Deputy Mulligan responded and took his hand briefly. He sniffed. "Is that honeysuckle and tobacco? That smells amazing."

"No, but you're close!" Diane smiled. "It's a subspecies of Fireweed, a rare special blend of flowers. It comes from the Pacific Northwest. We're holdin' a medical issue at bay." Diane laughed, but her expression was serious. "It's shall we say... transformative, in a good way. It only provides full effect by smokin' it."

Mulligan sniffed the air again. "It smells good enough to eat. It kinda smells like cinnamon and chocolate too."

Diane grinned. "Nah, you're smellin' the cookies in the oven," she said. "Chocolate chip and snickerdoodles will be done soon. I'm makin' plenty. You can have some to take home with you."

"You look a lot better than when I saw you last." The professor slid the pipe to the side of his mouth and spoke around it. Wisps of smoke rose around his face. "Tell me, are there any lasting effects from your injuries?" he asked the deputy and looked him up and down.

"Some stiffness in my left leg is about it. Overall, I'd say I got out unscathed compared to some of the others in that hell-fight," Deputy Mulligan told him.

"You have been blessed by the Great Spirit with life. Your work here is not done," the professor said.

"That I have," the deputy agreed. He noted the neatness of the old Indian's clothing and the sleek, simple braid of his salt and pepper hair. He'd aged, Deputy Mulligan realized, but he still looked strong and none the worse for wear. "You look pretty good yourself, and Diane is gorgeous as always. One of these days, I might get a summer tan as dark as hers," he joked and put his arm around her.

"Now, Brett Mulligan, you'd have to spend your whole summer in a tanning bed, and you'd still be red, not black. You a pale-face." She poked his ribs, and he let go of her with an "Oof!"

"Probably true," the deputy acknowledged, grinning and rubbing his side. He grabbed a chair, turned it around backward, and sat down with his arms propped up.

Deputy Mulligan's expression turned grim. He took a deep breath and sighed. "In all seriousness Diane, Wilson has something up his sleeve. Today I heard him calling in some favors and getting warrants. You know the judge will give him whatever he wants and not ask questions." He shook his head thoughtfully. "He's like a dog with a bone refusing to bury it."

Diane rolled her eyes at her guest. "For what? When does Wilson investigate anything for real himself?"

"He doesn't. Just sends his detectives out into the field unless there's something that makes him look good and will show up in Kingston's newspaper. We need somebody who would do better than that." Mulligan sat suddenly erect in the chair.

"When the next election comes up Diane, why don't you run for sheriff? We need somebody with some integrity and talent at the

helm.” He looked at the professor, who was sitting silently still smoking. The professor’s eyes were half-closed. Deputy Mulligan wasn’t fooled. He knew his friend was watching and listening.

“Sheeww! I don’t think people ready for a black woman as sheriff in this county,” Diane responded. “And I don’t want it. I’m beginning to enjoy my freedom. Since I’m with Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency and the Park Service, I’m now technically state police. Still, what I have to concern myself with is simpler; a few fishing license violations, wildlife rehab, and presentations. Then there’s patrolling the state park to keep an eye out for poachers or rednecks spotlighting deer. Life’s better.”

Diane gestured at the deputy. “There are other people with know-how and ethics on the force besides me, though. What about you? Why don’t you run? You have the experience.”

“I know I can do the job,” Deputy Mulligan responded. “But I don’t want it either. Anybody honest will face the same mentality that took Sheriff Buford Pusser out some years back. It will take a while to clean up the bad element of the good ole boy network, and I got kids. I’m not going to risk them in a local war.”

The professor spoke up, “Your intentions are in the right place, but you shouldn’t ask her to do something you aren’t willing to tackle yourself.” He pointed the mouthpiece of his pipe at the deputy. “Leadership is something you both possess. You just have to decide where your priorities lie. Notice the same thing you’re criticizing the current sheriff for is your excuse not to act? Yes? Maybe you are correct, but it does no good if you don’t learn from it.” He looked straight at Deputy Mulligan.

Mulligan squirmed a little in his seat under the withering gaze. “I see what you’re saying. I will think about it. I heard Clower may run. I’d be running against him if I do.” He was relieved when Professor Holderman nodded, satisfied. He looked at his watch, shook his wrist, and tapped the timepiece with a frown. “I should probably go. My wife will have dinner on and be wondering when I’m going to come eat it,” he said.

“Don’t keep the lady waiting,” the professor told him with a smile and dismissed him with another wave of his pipe.

Deputy Mulligan rose and stuck his hand out. “It was good to see you again, John. I owe my life to you guys as well as God’s providence. If you need anything, you name it, and I’ll be there.”

The professor took his hand firmly for a moment, sealing the offer. Deputy Brett Mulligan was shown out holding a bag of fresh

cookies and sent on his way. He left satisfied that his message had been received.

Diane was no stranger to investigation or a stakeout. She noticed the unmarked navy blue SUV with tinted windows that seemed to always show up over the next several days. Diane shook her head and watched them watching her. Since Deputy Mulligan's warning, she remained alert, knowing that the situation would have to result in a confrontation eventually.

After the fifth traffic stop over minor or made-up charges by local city and county patrol officers, Diane steeled herself and kept a tight grip on her steering wheel. Her jaw hurt from gritting her teeth in anger.

The officer approached her car with his hand on his pistol. His uniform labeled him as Officer Bennett. "Ma'am, do you know why I pulled you over?" A slight smile turned his lips up as he attempted to look pleasant.

"No, Mark, I don't," she said tightly. "I'm not doing anything wrong, and you are impeding my progress. So why don't you tell me what the problem is this time? We have worked together at County, so why don't you come straight up with it? Why the harassment? Is it some plan the sheriff has concocted to get even with me for quitting, or is my crime now being the wrong skin color and driving through town?"

"You have a headlight out." He grinned at her. "I need to see your license and registration."

Diane was shocked. "What? It's bright daylight, and there's no way you'd know if they work or not! Clearly, I don't have my headlights on as there's no need."

"Ma'am, your license and registration, please," the officer insisted with a deadpan tone.

"Of all the..." Diane started. "Fine. I'm going to reach in my console, where my service weapon is, and get my wallet," she told him.

"Do you have a carry permit for that weapon?" the officer asked. "If so, I need to see that too."

"Excuse me? Officer, do you not see this uniform and badge I'm wearin'? Of course I have a permit! We've been out at the gun range together qualifyin'. Have you lost your marbles?"

"Get out of the car," the officer told her.

“I’m fine right where I am. Now, are you going to write me a ticket or just keep on harassin’ me? Because if you are, I will call my boss up in Morgan County so he can find out why. In fact, I think I’ll do that as soon’s I get home.”

“You know, I’m from Morgan County. Up there, we don’t allow your kind. You ain’t nothin’ but trouble.”

“Ah, thank you for answerin’ my question, finally. It’s ‘cause I’m drivin’ black that you pulled me over.” She reached into her console and pulled out her wallet to find a gun pointed in her face. She raised her hands to show she wasn’t holding a weapon.

“Now, get out of the car,” the officer sneered.

Diane started to comply and was gratified to see a state trooper vehicle pull in. Officer Bennett turned and saw the trooper’s car. He blanched with a deer in the headlight look when he realized that the other responding officer was also black. He was well-muscled, a head taller, and outweighed Bennett by about a fourth.

“I’m Trooper Collins. I saw you had this fine lady pulled over, and I thought you might need some help,” he said. “What’s the problem?”

“Me and Stanley here were just having a discussion,” Officer Bennett said. “There’s not a problem.”

“Well, since you got a gun in her face, I’d say then that’s a problem. Officer, why did you pull her over?”

“She has a headlight out,” Officer Bennet said.

“What?” the state trooper asked incredulously with a frown.

“She has a headlight out,” Officer Bennet sneered as he repeated himself.

“I know what you said. She’s driving legally. It’s a bright sunshiny day!” Trooper Collins glared. “Put your service weapon away and act like a professional,” he told Officer Bennett. “Miss, I know you’re legal, but I’d like to know who you are. Would you kindly let me see your license?”

“I’d be glad to,” Diane said. “I’m Diane Stanley with TWRA wildlife rehab and State Park Service.” She handed him her license. “I’m headed up there now. We have some school kids coming for a presentation on conservation. I’ve got some animals that I do live demonstrations with.”

“Do you have them with you?” He craned his neck to see inside the car.

“No, they are at the center in comfortable, familiar surroundings. I don’t transport any wild animal just before they

need to be on their best behavior. It's stressful for them to be moved," Diane answered.

"No snakes or small animals I can't see?" he laughed. "I'm afraid of snakes ever since my brother put a bull snake in the bathtub with me when I was a kid," he said.

"None of those either," Diane smiled.

"Good. Good. Would you mind Miss Diane to flip your headlights on real quick so I can examine their working status?" Trooper Collins asked respectfully.

"Sure," she reached for her dashboard and flipped her lights on.

"Just as I thought," Trooper Collins said under his breath. "They work just fine. Ma'am, here's your license back. You are free to go," he said loudly. Officer Bennett had gone to his patrol car and was pulling out. "But just between you and me? I'm going to report this incident. We have a new boss and a new affirmative action plan in place." He leaned closer. "What he just did will get him fired."

"Different jurisdiction, so I'm not clear on how that works, but if it did, maybe that will improve things a bit," she said. "I ain't walkin' on eggshells every time I leave for work or go to the grocery store."

"We don't have to involve ourselves in local politics," he said. "We just have to know who to drop the information to. Let me know if you have any more problems. This is my new territory assignment at the Department of Motor Vehicles based out of Rockwood. It's temporary while they decide if they want to move it to a new location or build onto the existing building and add a Tennessee Highway Patrol Office."

"That place? Nah, that building is way too small, and there's not any room to expand unless they buy up the surrounding properties, tear it all down and start new," Diane said. "It's not really big enough for a good driver testing center, much less anything additional."

"I agree with you," he nodded, tapped her car door, and turned to go. "I won't keep you any longer. I'll be seeing you around. You have a good afternoon, miss," Trooper Collins bade Diane farewell.

Diane pulled away and onto the road with mixed feelings in her heart. While she was gratified by a fellow officer showing up and disrupting what she felt had been a potentially disastrous encounter, she was seething with disappointment and rage.

Tears of anger soaked her face. Diane pounded her steering wheel. She found herself grateful that Crossville as a metropolitan city was more liberal than the rednecks close by across the county

line. Officer Bennett had not been kidding. Morgan County was 100% white, and she had heard stories.

They would let blacks move through and be gone, but nobody stayed after sundown if they had any sense. She shook her head sadly and pulled herself together when she got to the Wildlife Rehab Center.

Diane decided to focus on the positive part of her day and leave anything else for later. If she walked in upset, it would affect her job.



Ghe dashboard lights illuminated Sheriff Wilson's face as his instructions crackled over the radio late in the evening. These were the casual-sounding ones. He had dealt with the important stuff earlier, and his expression was a mask of calm satisfaction. He waited at the boat ramp where the Clinch and Emery River meet across from the Kingston Steam Plant for his 'special team'.

He didn't have long to wait after his arrival. Center's Ferry was closed for the day, so Sheriff Wilson felt gratified to note that nobody was around except for a couple of unmanned pickup trucks with boat trailers attached. He looked around for the few minutes he waited on the others.

Birds circled over the mostly placid lake. Dotting the surface, rings of ripples marked where bass chased baitfish. Pairs of ducks swam close to the shore, occasionally diving under the water for food. The green and white painted ferry with its eight-car pontoon barge was docked just around the curve of the shoreline.

The ferry was quiet except for the sound of lapping water, where it bobbed in the shallow wake of passing boats. Sheriff Wilson regarded it with annoyance. It broke down so often it barely worked three or four days out of any given week. County maintenance would need to be called again, he noticed. The barge was listing to the side and taking on water again where the pontoon drug the shore each time it stopped. The sheriff made a mental note to call for it to be fixed the following day.

Quiet engine sounds pulled his attention back to matters at hand, so he dismissed the problem of the ferry. Three unmarked black Mercedes with blacked-out, tinted windows slid smoothly in beside him. This was the team nobody in Roane County knew about. Too many officers in both city and county were honest,

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upstanding citizens and might report their activities to State or Federal Authorities.

He pressed his lips together as Officer Mulligan's face showed up in his mind's eye. "I'll deal with you later," he told the image. "I should just fire you and chase you out of the county," he chuckled quietly. "I need people that do what they're told."

The sheriff rolled his windows down, waved his hand in a circular motion, and pointed. "Let's go!" Less than 10 minutes later, they had Diane's house surrounded.

10

COPS AND ROBBERS

Tor a moment, Sheriff Wilson sat in his Interceptor patrol vehicle and eyed the green truck in dismay. The doors had a Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency logo painted in big white lettering with the telltale seal. A light bar was attached to its top. Diane's car was parked beside it.

"Damn!" the sheriff said out loud to himself. "I hope Holladay isn't here. That could complicate everything. That sonofabitch would snitch out his own grandma."

He fought the urge to call his boys back. Bill Holladay, one of the county's longest-serving TWRA Officers, was a crack shot and known to be a hard-ass. He was ex-military and willing to shoot first, ask questions later. The sheriff picked up his radio tuned to his private channel.

"Do you boys know where Holladay is this evening?" Sheriff Wilson asked. "If he's here, don't tangle with him, you hear?" Static came over the radio handset as he paused with it close to his face.

"Yeah, boss," came the answer. "I saw him in town earlier, but it looked like he was headed out to his farm."

"Then why is that TWRA truck parked in Stanley's driveway?" the sheriff inquired. Staring hard at it wasn't making it go away as he wished.

"She's working for them now, Sir," another voice said.

"That you, Bennett?" The sheriff pushed up his hat and wiped his forehead. He shoved his hat back down on his head and leaned back in his seat.

"Yes, sir," Officer Bennett replied.

"Aw, hell! When did you become aware?" The sheriff held the radio close to his mouth. There was no way to deny the identity of the truck.

“Earlier today, Sir,” Bennet’s voice crackled over the radio.

“Okay, do not abort mission. Take Stanley into custody. If she resists, give her hell,” Wilson told his men.

“Boss?” the radio crackled in reply.

“Diane got some of my boys killed and started giving me bullshit stories. We’re through playing. She’ll either come quiet-like, or we’ll end it the old-fashioned way,” the sheriff ordered smugly.

“Roger that,” came the immediate reply over the radio.

“Rough her up a little and add resisting arrest.” Sheriff Wilson bared his teeth in a grim mockery of a smile. “Whatever you feel like. Maybe she’ll talk with some ‘justified’ force.”

Sheriff Wilson watched the well-oiled machine he’d created from his hand-picked men with pride. A wave of deep anger simmered in his heart. He’d lost people, good friends, and nobody could or would give him answers. He knew that there were answers to be had, but nothing made sense. He wanted things to make sense, needed them to. The idea that what Diane had told him might be true brought out his worst childhood fears. All of it had to be lies. Today, he determined, he would have his neatly boxed, logical explanation.

“Now,” Sheriff Wilson said simply. He found himself holding his breath as he stared at Diane’s house and the green truck in front. He exhaled slowly.

He saw the task force team gather with helmets and blast shields at the ready. Moving quickly, they hit the front door and yelled. “Police! Open up!” They slammed the door open when there was no immediate response, breaking the hinges. With rifles drawn, they entered the home and disappeared inside one at a time.



Diane’s evening had started like most. She showered, ate dinner, and sat down in her air-conditioned living room to relax and read a book. A stack of suspense and fantasy novels graced her coffee table. A pungent aroma filled the room from her steaming cup of coffee, freshly brewed. Cautiously, she set it on a coaster in front of her, away from the books.

Across the room, the Spear of Chaos lurked in the corner. It was still carefully wrapped and bound with the blood ruby pendant and chain. The whispers stilled for the time being. Silent and unobtrusive, it sat. Diane knew it waited for its next opportunity.

and next victim. She did not allow herself to be lulled by its apparent lack of offense. She guarded her mind and maintained peace in her home at all times, lest she give it any opening to attack.

Nearby on the fireplace mantle, a framed smiling photograph of her grandfather sat next to another frame with a folded American flag. The African-American man pictured wore a heavily decorated airman's uniform. A newspaper clipping of the Tuskegee Airmen sat tucked into one side of the photo. Diane was proud of his accomplishments as a WWII war hero. She kept his memory alive and refused to sell his collection of captured Nazi weapons and other war memorabilia he had passed on to her right before he died.

Diane sighed. She let the quiet soak into her bones and let her tense muscles unknot. Something, however, was bothering her. She found her mind was not on the words that seemed to float along on the pages without penetrating her understanding. She closed her book and set it down to figure out what had her so distracted. It felt like the heaviness of an approaching storm around her.

Later she wasn't sure if it was a noise she barely heard or a sudden premonition that got her attention. Nearly before she could think about it, she jumped up, grabbed her gun, then slammed a clip home. Diane felt her spirit guides humming and her angel's protection. She waited with gun ready, sight trained on the front door. When the door slammed open, she didn't flinch.

"Police! Put your gun down!" came the orders.

"What the hell are you doin' in my house!" Diane shouted back. "Identify yourselves! Produce your warrant, or get the hell OUT! This is my private property. You can leave now!"

"You are under arrest!" came the shouted reply. "Put your gun down! Put the gun down now!"

"You are trespassing! I've done nothing!" she spat back at them. "What are the charges?"

"Conspiracy, murder, assault on an officer, resisting arrest, and there's more where that came from," Sheriff Wilson said silkily while he shoved past the officers blocking the doorway and came to a stop behind the man in front with a shield. "Put your weapon down Diane, and come peaceably like a good girl down to the jail so we can discuss it calmly."

"Calmly." She laughed bitterly, "You didn't see fit to calmly just come talk to me! You sending yo' bully boys to do the dirty work again." Diane lowered her weapon. "Where's a signed warrant? Let me see it, and I'll go nice and quiet to a better place to discuss these fake charges."

Diane wanted to glance over her shoulder at the Spear of Chaos. She was becoming more acutely aware of its presence by the second. The ex-deputy realized she desperately needed to get them out as soon as possible, even if it meant accepting a false arrest.

Tension tightened her shoulders as she laid her gun down. Silent prayers passed under her breath that Ulfr would remain docile and quiet until she could call someone to get the accursed artifact.

Paperwork with the judge's signature was waved under Diane's nose as Officer Bennett handcuffed her. "You have the right to remain silent..." She didn't bother to listen to her Miranda rights. Her eyes were on the Spear, which had started whispering just below the level of audible hearing now that she was no longer in control.

Dread locked her throat, knowing how bad this could turn. She worked her mouth and tried to swallow. Diane couldn't speak and didn't try. She could only hope that common sense would prevail among the officers who had rudely barged into her home.

Sheriff Wilson looked around the room and followed Diane's gaze to the wrapped object in the corner. He incorrectly interpreted the cause of the look of sudden fear in her eyes. *Aha!* The sheriff gloated to himself. She was hiding something!

"Search the house. Take any weapons or drugs for evidence," Sheriff Wilson ordered. In response, the officers spread out and began going room to room, opening drawers, lifting cushions, knocking papers onto the floor, and going through filing cabinets. In the living room, one of the officers threw the photo of her grandfather into the floor and stepped on it, shattering the glass and taking the WWII era pistol off the mantle from behind it. Another officer opened a cabinet where more memorabilia was stored and dumped all of it unceremoniously into an army-style canvas sack.

Diane found herself able to utter an objection. "You have no right to take my private property!" she said. "Stop! Those are family heirlooms! My grandfather was a war hero!"

Sheriff Wilson didn't answer her as she was shoved roughly out the door to one of the unmarked police cars. Deputy Bennett stayed behind when the other officers went to wait in the cars for further instructions.

The boss' attention was on what Diane had been so interested in. He ignored Bennett. Drawn to the wrapped object in the corner, he came close, curious about the odd bundle.

"What have we here?" he said aloud. "More evidence?" Laying hands on the object, he examined the jeweled chain that held the wrapping and whistled. "I bet this is worth a pretty penny. Let's see what's under it." He slipped the pendant into his pocket, leaving the chain dangling in his haste.

A gleaming light-colored shaft came smoothly to his hand. Intricate interlocking engravings wrapped around the haft of the weapon. Further unwrapping revealed a razor-sharp, finely forged spear blade covered in Celtic knot-work and runes. "Beautiful." Sheriff Wilson let out his breath slowly. "This will make a fine addition to our 'evidence' collection. Maybe I'll keep this one piece after we get a quick, easy conviction for maintaining an illegal arsenal, and we'll sell the rest at auction. Even with the judge's kickback, we'll still make a killing on this one confiscation, right Bennett?"

"Yes, sir!" Deputy Bennett answered. "And Stanley will be out of our hair. Two for one deal," he smiled.

"Got that right!" Sheriff Wilson laughed. "I'll be able to pay off my new truck. This stuff is valuable."

"You ready, Boss?" Bennett looked around at the mess they'd created. "This one was quick and easy. We got the loot, and Stanley went down easier than I figured. We can find out what she knows when we get her to lockup."

"Yeah, I'm ready." The sheriff waved his hand dismissively. "Diane's a puss. I wasn't worried about her. Women are cowards and don't need to be on the Force. As for TWRA? Holladay can handle this county by himself. They don't need her. Let's go." Unnoticed by either man, the fine gold chain of the ruby necklace dangling from the passing sheriff's pocket snagged on one of the pair of rocking chairs on Diane's porch. There it stayed as the police left, twinkling in the half-light of dusk.

Ten minutes later, they arrived at the Roane County Jail. They parked on Race Street next door to the deserted county courthouse. Diane was brought to the small white building just off the darkened street and taken unceremoniously through the front entrance to the reception desk.

Sheriff Wilson grinned as he followed them inside. Out of spite, he'd arranged to have Deputy Mulligan on duty. The deputy's stunned look made it worth it. The sheriff followed them in carrying the Spear of Chaos and the sack of 'evidence' from Diane's house.

Deputy Mulligan froze when he saw Diane escorted in wearing handcuffs. He stopped with the handset of the black rotary dial

phone next to his ear. The still chattering man on the line at the other end of their conversation didn't realize he was no longer being listened to.

"Hold on reverend, I'll be with you in a moment." Deputy Mulligan held the phone away from his ear.

"Reverend?" Sheriff Wilson furrowed his brow. "What's going on?"

"Someone went into his church and stole his holy water," Deputy Mulligan replied. "The whole bowl and all. But they left a \$100 bill for a tip according to the note left behind."

"What-the-WHAT? He's complaining?" Sheriff Wilson burst out laughing. "Just tell him to buy a new bowl!"

"He says that he wants the disappearance investigated, sir," Deputy Mulligan replied. His face was a serene mask, but he too had been struggling not to laugh. "It's a theft. Um, ah, out of the Lord's house."

"Oh-ah! Oh geez!" The sheriff wheezed and tried to catch his breath as he wiped tears. "Stole his holy water! Now I've heard it all, oh lordy!" he laughed louder. "It was probably a kid in the church playing a practical joke!"

The reverend, able to hear and realize he was the butt of a joke, started yelling loudly into the phone. His words became incoherent, and Deputy Mulligan held the phone further away.

"Reverend, I will call you back. We have an emergency that we have to take care of," the hapless deputy tried to say and was interrupted.

"Emergency! This IS an emergency..." the caller's words faded again to hysterical incoherence.

"I'm very sorry. I understand, reverend. We will have someone check it out, and I'll get back to you." Deputy Mulligan hung up the phone.

He stared down the still chuckling sheriff. "Now, care to tell me why Officer Stanley is here in cuffs?" He shifted his gaze to Diane and saw her mask of fear and stoic refusal to talk. The sheriff moved forward and shifted what he carried from his back to the side. He rested the green canvas bag on the floor and took a good grip on the spear.

Deputy Mulligan's shocked response at seeing Diane in handcuffs and his rising rage at the insult to his friend paled by comparison when he realized what the sheriff had in his hands. He froze again. He barely dared to breathe. The sheriff placed the spear on the counter in front of him. Mulligan jumped away from it,

sending his chair clattering across the floor. “Keep that evil thing away from me! Get rid of it before you regret it!”

“It’s going to the evidence locker,” the sheriff said smoothly. He pretended to be unfazed, but he was inwardly puzzled by his deputy’s reaction. “For now, though, I’m taking it to my office so I can record and catalog everything. We have to keep it all nice and legal like.”

The deputy was insistent. “Take it back wherever you got it. Let Diane go.”

“You got a good reason why I should listen to you? Something you want to confess?” Sheriff Wilson asked. His cheeks reddened, and a nasty expression stretched across his face.

“No. I have nothing,” Deputy Mulligan replied stolidly. “I haven’t done anything wrong, and neither has she,” he said. Looking at his friend, he saw that her horrified expression mirrored his own trepidation.

“We will see,” Sheriff Wilson sneered. “Now check this stuff in. Do your job, or you’re fired.”

Diane slightly inclined her head and gestured with her eyes. Deputy Mulligan got the hint.

Both of them knew he couldn’t help her, or anyone, if he left the jail. He sent a silent prayer up and quietly did as he was told. Inwardly though, Deputy Mulligan desperately searched for a solution. He waited stoically while Diane got checked in and her belongings taken into the sheriff’s office. Finally, the sheriff slammed his office door shut, taking the Spear of Chaos with him. Deputy Mulligan was finally free to grab a moment to slip back to Diane’s cell to talk to her.

“Damnit Diane, I warned you,” Deputy Mulligan said quietly.

“I know. I half expected it. It was my fault, my mistake, for not sending the artifact to a safer place for the time being. I didn’t think the sheriff would grab the Spear and take it though.” Diane leaned against the bars as she spoke.

“What should we do?” Mulligan asked.

“You’re going to have to call in the cavalry. I’m stuck,” Diane replied. “No way we’re getting out of here without an incident. The only question is how many people are getting hurt in the meantime.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. Who do we have able to come to get it?” He asked with a tight frown.

Diane thought for a moment. “You’re going to have to call Bryan Crawley. Otherwise, we are on our own,” Diane whispered. “Mary

Lou and Ken are busy looking for solutions to our little problem and don't know what's going down. Bryan's the only other person solid enough to come in under active threat, but Brett, it gets worse." Diane swallowed and paused.

"We have been attacked by some dark demon creature trying possibly to get its hands on it. It's vicious, and the monster may be attracted here. The sheriff removed the lock we put on the spear. The entity that controls that artifact is loose." Diane said.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" Deputy Mulligan blanched. "What the hell has he done?"

"I suspect we are about to find out!" Diane shook her head grimly. "Hell might be the right term for it. You better start praying."

"I started praying the moment that cursed thing walked in the door," he replied. "Alright, stay watchful. I'll page Bryan the emergency code. If it gets bad enough, we may have to break you out of here." Deputy Mulligan went back to his station, grabbed his private pager, and sent two carefully coded pages to Bryan's number. He also sent up a silent mental plea for Bryan to get his message quickly.

Busying himself with the rest of the necessary paperwork he tried to focus on something besides the artifact in the next room. He braced himself mentally and emotionally for what he sensed coming.

Luminous hands inside an oversize round clock on the wall audibly ticked away the seconds. The noise, usually just background, seemed to curl up the deputy's spine and raise goosebumps. Deputy Mulligan looked around. Nobody else seemed bothered. All he could do was wait.

The deputy shivered from an imagined chill as the room seemed to get colder. He noticed his cup of coffee suddenly had frost on it. His eyes grew wide, and he wished he could run. Fear threatened to choke his breath. "Stop, Brett. She didn't run. You're not going to leave her in danger after she had your back," he told himself.

He hunched his shoulders but pretended to keep working. "Dear God, please help us with your hand of protection," he fervently whispered. "We need you, Lord, right here in this jailhouse."

Deputy Mulligan found himself again hoping that Bryan would get his message in time. Was he enough cavalry as Diane had suggested? He acknowledged to himself that he would feel much better with an army at his back right about then.



Behind the main office's closed door, the whispers in the sheriff's head got stronger. He started muttering to himself unintelligibly. Rather than put the spear in an evidence locker as he'd planned, he propped it in the corner behind his office door. Anyone entering wouldn't be able to see it or realize its presence. Satisfied, he sat down behind his desk to admire his prize.

Light gleamed off the razor-sharp spear point and reflected across the room. More shadows than usual seemed to move oddly around his office. It seemed to speak to him. Knowing that was not possible, he shook his head to clear it.

"I must be getting tired," Sheriff Wilson said out loud. "I'm imagining things. It's a nice replica of a medieval weapon, that's all. Mulligan and Stanley are trying to spook me and it isn't going to work! This ain't no damned horror movie!" he huffed.

Reaching into his desk, he pulled out a stapled set of paperwork. The sudden onset of ringing in the sheriff's ears made him shake his head and wiggle his fingers in his ears. He worked his jaw, but that didn't make it stop. It grew louder instead.

The bitch! This is all her fault! The thought echoed in his mind. *Make her pay. She's a manipulative worm. A mere woman. Not worth anything. Keeping things from you. Your rightful property.* The buzzing subsided somewhat. Focused on his paperwork the sheriff tried to ignore the white noise in his skull. He found himself talking out loud conversationally to the spear that sat alone in its corner.

"I'll make her pay, alright," he told it. "She won't get you back either. You're mine now." Sheriff Wilson laughed and shook his pen at the inanimate object.

He imagined it laughing. *Good. That woman doesn't deserve the power here.*

"Power alright. I've got the power, and she's in a cell," Sheriff Wilson replied to his imaginary friend, the spear.

The buzzing grew louder again so that he clamped his hands over both of his ears at the volume of inaudible static that no one could hear but him. *There's so much MORE!* The voice practically roared.

Creeping fear rose in his gut. The sheriff looked at the spear with watering eyes. Insidious, seditious, and corrupt, it continued to speak to him. *Can have. Can be so much more*, the voice wheedled.

Wealth beyond your wildest dreams. Control. Admiration. Master armies. Be a God!

"What ARE you?" he whispered back. He slowly stood up behind his desk. His eyes were wide, and he found himself shaking.

The means to an end. World domination. Together we will kill man, gods, and beasts of the earth. In his mind's eye, he saw fields running with blood as swords and maces rose and fell. Horses lay crippled and bellowing. Camels were cut to pieces by missiles. Atomic bombs fell, and people everywhere burned. Even giants walked the battlefield and died with the rest. The smoke scorched his nostrils, and he saw himself walking untouched with the spear held high in his hand. *Victorious.* The voice concluded and went silent.

Sheriff Wilson tasted bile. He struggled not to heave with sickness at the sight of so much blood and viscera. "It's all in my head!" he shrieked desperately. "It's not real! No! I don't want any of this! I just want to retire rich where nobody is going to bother me. Leave me alone. LEAVE ME ALONE!" he practically sobbed.

Ah... but you did not leave Diane alone. It laughed in his mind. You took her freedom while you gave me mine. She had me bound and in her control. But because of your greed, you will DIE!

He felt his heart pulsing. It seemed like his energy started draining away like water pouring out of a vessel. "Oh my God!" Sheriff Wilson's chest hurt with a sharp cramp. He fell back in his chair squirming in pain. He found himself too breathless to call for help. His chair was violently thrown backward by an invisible force, and papers flew off his desk. Filing cabinet drawers flew open so hard they fell out, spilling their contents everywhere. The spear fell over on its own accord, and his locked office door flew open. When it did, everything stilled.

There was no one near the door when the sheriff, still gasping but no longer in pain, managed to stand up. All he could see was Mulligan's white face staring at him from the reception desk.

He left the spear lying where it landed and limped into the other room. The sheriff's expression screwed into a mask of fury. Though he shook with adrenaline Sheriff Wilson drew his gun and hurried to the cell block in the back of the building.

"Boss? What's going on?" one of the female deputies in the room inquired.

"Where are you going? What are you doing?" Deputy Mulligan left his station to look in the office. "Oh, crap!" he exclaimed. When he saw the wrecked office, he turned and ran after the sheriff, who

slammed the door in his face, leaving the deputy outside the cell block.

The prisoners were going crazy. Many of them banged their heads on the cell bars or moaned, thrashing on the floor. Some prisoners tried to reach one another to fight. Outside the door, Sheriff Wilson could hear the police scanner suddenly chiming every few seconds as dispatch was overwhelmed with calls from Kingston and the surrounding areas. Several accidents, fights, and a shooting occupied his patrols.

The sheriff took hold of himself firmly, went directly to Diane's cell, and pointed his gun at her. She was calm and still, seemingly unaffected by the chaos.

"Talk!" he yelled at her. "You hid this shit from me! What IS that, THING, in my office that just now wrecked it?"

Unfazed, Diane walked forward and looked her former boss directly in the eye. "I hid nothing. You chose not to believe what I told you. I told you to leave things alone. I had it under lock and controlled. You decided of your own volition to barge into my home, steal it, and set free the evil it contains. So don't blame *ME*, sheriff."

"This is your fault!" Sheriff Wilson insisted. "You have no business with such a dangerous object! You shouldn't have it where someone could find it!" he shouted.

Diane stared him down. "You are shameless. So you know what? I'm not interested in this tit for tat. Let me out of here so I can fix your screw-up," Diane demanded. "We don't have time for more blame or head games. You have no idea what you're up against."

Sheriff Wilson sneered at her. "You do? You think you're such hot-shit. What can you do? Nothing! You can stay there till you rot!"

The buzzing in his ears increased again. *Fire your ranged weapon, the voice said. Kill. Take control. It will be easy, and no one will care.*

"Ahhhh! No!" His finger tightened on the trigger involuntarily. Diane saw what was happening. She ducked and waved her hand to spoil his aim telekinetically just before the gun went off. The report of the gun firing was excessively loud inside the cell block. A chunk flew off of the painted cinder block wall behind Diane.

"You crazy? Snap out of it! Sheriff, stop!" she tried shouting. She recognized the glazed look in his eyes and the paralyzed face from past incidents with the Spear of Chaos.

He moved the gun around again, trying to draw down on her. Impossibly, it twisted in his hands and began to turn around to

point back at him. *Just like Skinwalker's death*, Diane remembered.

"Dammit, sheriff, wake up!" Diane screamed desperately.



Outside the cell block, Mulligan found the extra keys and began to unlock the door. The sound of gunfire on the other side of the entry to the jail cells gave him pause.

A voice spoke from behind him, "What's going on?" Deputy Mulligan glanced behind him. Reverend Dean Woody stood at the reception desk open-mouthed. He had left the door open. The view of the street behind him revealed Bryan parking his car.

"Oh, thank God!" Mulligan muttered when he saw the blue car with the red and white light bar. Bryan got out of his car with his equipment and ran across the street.

Deputy Mulligan felt a short-lived sense of relief when the key finally turned in the lock to open the door. Diane was shouting. He looked in to see Sheriff Wilson with the gun nearly to his temple.

"Oh, God!" Deputy Mulligan rushed him just in time to ruin the attempt on the sheriff's life. The resulting shot hit the ceiling and punched a hole in the drop panel of the hallway. It was enough to jar the sheriff out of his stupor.

The spear let go of the man's mind, and it changed tactics. *It's time! I'm here!* It pulsed with energy as it again sent a blast. Everything, to the perspective of the humans present, went haywire.

Chairs fell over, and paperwork went flying as stacks of documents were swept off desks. The Deputies and the reverend held their hands over their ears. Everyone ignored Diane's shouts to let her out. Shocked white faces tried to process what was happening.

Most of the eight or so deputies in the room could not see their foe. However, the few that could SEE who had known death weren't happy about the black shadows that raced through the door. Fewer still understood.

Ikhdathir stayed true to form. Rather than grab the spear and run, he found Diane locked in her cell, frantic to escape. "Not so big and bad now, are you?" the daemon gloated at her. "The spear is mine, and you can't stop me. I'll kill them all on my way out and

feast on their marrow.” He grabbed the bars and shook them. “It talks to me. Loki’s spear wants me.”

Diane snarled at him, “Let me out of here, and we shall see.” She changed her approach and steeled her expression. She could see beyond the open door. “Oh, you mean THAT spear? The one that the other demon just grabbed? I think it’s heading out the door.” She pointed back the way Ikhdathir came in. “You just lost your chance! If you have such a romantic relationship with it, you just got cheated on!”

Ikhdathir snarled at her with fury but jumped away and ran out. On his way past the sheriff, the daemon took a swipe at him where he was crouched with his hands on his head sobbing. The sheriff howled in pain as the daemon laid a set of gashes down his arm. Blood dripped on the floor and soiled the boss’s uniform.

The good reverend, however, wasn’t idle. He bravely blocked the only exit, determined to face the kind of living nightmare the cleric always thought of as a metaphor. He waved his arms, trying to remember the proper words of exorcism. Unfortunately, he’d not paid much attention to that portion of his studies in seminary. Under pressure, he was nearly, but not quite panicked. “Oh Jesus! Help me!” he cried, gasping.

Behind him, Bryan tried to come in, while the daemon in front of him tried to leave. Reverend Woody found himself trapped in the middle. The daemon had a gleaming weapon in its hand that looked to the reverend like a spear. “What did I walk into?” Reverend Woody coughed as he spoke.

“Don’t let it escape!” Bryan said urgently. “But don’t let it touch you either!” He drew his sidearm from the holster he’d hastily grabbed from his car and shoved an entire clip into the gun. With the safety off, he aimed upward but held his fire.

Close behind him, Bryan tried to get into a better position. “I need a clear shot reverend! There’s no way to help you unless I can get past you for a better angle. I can’t risk hitting anyone else!”

Finally pulling himself together with the help of a solid presence at his back, the reverend shouted at the daemon. “I rebuke you in the name of Jesus Christ!”

It stepped back, stunned at the power in the words, but the execution was clumsy. Suddenly it was unsure. Not accustomed to being opposed by humans, it considered its next course of action.

The daemon stood and stared at them defiantly, baring its dagger-like teeth. It appeared to be a half-shadow, partly misshapen humanoid dwarf to the humans. The daemon opened

itself to attack by standing still; it paused a little too long for its own good. Ikhdathir launched himself from across the room and knocked the smaller daemon sprawling sideways, growling. “Mine!”

Bryan took the open opportunity to duck under the reverend’s outstretched arms. “I believe you have something that belongs to us!” Bryan told the two squirming daemonic as he came in. He took steady aim at the rolling daemonic on the floor as they bit and clawed at each other to each get possession of their prize. Bryan kept his physical distance, mindful of the poison that came with getting clawed. The mad whirl of violence reminded him of a catfight.

Behind Bryan, Reverend Woody gathered himself together again after realizing there was not one daemon in the jailhouse, but two. He shouted louder and with more determination, “I rebuke you in the NAME OF JESUS CHRIST!”

In response, the two daemonic rolled apart. Ikhdathir’s attention turned to the humans.

Bryan saw him tense to jump at the reverend. “C’mon bitch, try me!” he yelled in challenge. “We have a date to dance, remember?”

Instead of stepping aside when the dog-like humanoid shadow leaped at him, Bryan smoothly dropped to one knee and opened fire upward from underneath.

The sanctified ammunition struck Ikhdathir’s core and blew the daemon in half. Black blood spilled across the floor and splattered over the ceiling. Bryan rose uninjured and satisfied. “You won’t be going after Mary Lou again, nor any of us, now will you?” he addressed the scattered goo with grim satisfaction.

“Holy moly Bryan! Now I know where that holy water went!” Deputy Mulligan stared, blinking in shock.

The reverend spared a glance at the other man as the lone surviving daemon squealed in real fright. “Oh, really?”

“Watch yourself reverend,” a female voice said. Diane came up behind them without handcuffs on. “Now, how about my spear?” she addressed the remaining terrified daemon who was attempting to scramble away from them. She held her hand out expectantly.

It grabbed and held onto the spear tightly. “Mine!” it practically sobbed, hugging the dark artifact to its chest. “Get away! Get away! Loki wants!”

“IN THE NAME OF JESUS... Get behind me, Satan!” Reverend Woody yelled.

Responding to the reverend’s shout, it ran. The daemon did not bother to try to attack them. Solely concerned with escaping the

dangerous humans, it dodged, doubled back, and ducked under Diane's snatching hands. "No! I'm leaving! I'm going!" It rammed into the reverend, knocked him down flat, and fled out the door. The spear went with him. Darkness covered its clumsy escape.

"Damnit!" Bryan was furious but helpless. He holstered his weapon on his belt.

"I'm sorry, Bryan," Diane told him apologetically. "We both tried."

Bryan nodded and sighed in frustration. He gave her a worried look. "Yes, but we failed to keep hold of the Spear of Chaos, and that's the worst outcome. How do we explain this one?" He held his hand out to help the reverend to his feet.

"We can't," she told him. "We have to hope Mary Lou and Ken have a solution up their sleeve, can get it back AND destroy it. They went to see Skuld, but I haven't heard from them in a few days." Diane's brows furrowed in worry.

"Now about my holy water..." the reverend said.

11

A NEW WAY

SEPTEMBER 30, 1986

"Well? We need an answer on this one. I mean, we have tried every other means we can think of to destroy Loki's Spear of Chaos, and there doesn't seem to be anything else. Does the Spear of Destiny exist, and can we find it?" Mary Lou sat on Skuld's couch with one of the dusty books in her library of antiquities collection laid open on her lap. A bookmark divided a faded and cracked page. "Is this picture real, or is it just somebody's fanciful imagination?" She tapped the leather-bound tome for emphasis.

"You do not understand what you are asking me for, child." Skuld's intense gray gaze bored through the teen. She inclined her head in assent. "The human race is not ready for this information. The Spear of Destiny is one of the greatest artifacts known to your human species. Once the world recognizes it, it will become the focus of much controversy and bloodshed."

"So, it's real," Mary Lou observed. "It says that anyone who carries the spear will be victorious in battle."

Skuld smiled slightly and shook her head. "It is not that easy. But you are correct in thinking that the power of the two artifacts would cancel each other out."

"So, where is it?" Kenneth broke in. "We know that the spear we possess must be destroyed. You were clear about that in the beginning. Trouble is the damned thing just won't burn, break, melt, or anything else. We're stuck with protecting it until we can find a way to deal with this. We are out of ideas and out of options. We might as well have a big target painted on our backs with everything that's come at us since we got the thing."

Skuld turned to him. "And it would be no better were you to possess the Spear of Destiny. Understand this, the spear that

pierced the side of Christ, the son of our Father God, the Elohim, was hidden and hidden well for a reason. I cannot tell you where it is, on a higher authority than mine. We Powers who are still loyal to God the Prime Creator prefer that its location not be revealed. Mankind has not evolved to the place where anyone can be trusted with a sacred object of that magnitude."

"But yet ultimate evil can be allowed to exist in the world?" Mary Lou said with disgust.

"We have discussed this, have we not? The human race has free will. Without it, humanity cannot evolve past the evil of which you speak," Skuld answered.

"But neither spear belongs to you, does it? The gods; Powers, I mean. Because both of them were made by men, for men to use." Kenneth observed quietly. "Evil exists when people do nothing to stop it, and in this case, we have a problem on our hands that you saddled us with." Kenneth glared at the 'Person' of Fate herself.

Skuld stared at him for a long moment. "If you do this, even your ill-gained immortality may not save you. Ragnarok threatens. Prophecy foretells the deaths of gods and man alike in the coming war. The spear that you already possess can unleash this chaos."

"Then, please help us," Mary Lou said. "Please?"

"Again, I cannot tell you where the Spear of Destiny is," Skuld sighed. "That is a level of interference in the affairs of the development of a younger race that I am simply not allowed." She shook her head. "You would have to go find it yourselves."

"But where?" Mary Lou began. Skuld held up her hand to stop Mary Lou in mid-sentence.

Skuld smiled at the girl. "Where would you look? All I can say is you will never find it by digging or searching. You have to go directly to where it is, and you have to have God's authority. By that, I mean God the Father, not any of the lesser powers, angels, or elementals representing either good or evil. It is not here."

"What do you mean, not here, exactly?" Mary Lou asked.

"Not on this world," Kenneth guessed. "Then we are screwed."

Skuld turned her intense gaze on him once again. "Not necessarily. There is a way that the two of you could accomplish retrieving the Spear of Destiny where no one else can. But, I warn you it would be dangerous, even to you, and more dangerous for her."

"Then I should just go by myself," Kenneth declared.

"You cannot," Skuld told him firmly. "You would never reach it without her help. And it would have to be returned and hidden from

the sight of those who would abuse the privilege of carrying it should they get their hands on it. I should also warn you. Armies have risen and fallen, and the course of your history changed on my very loom when sunlight and air touched the Spear of Destiny.”

Kenneth immediately understood the implication of what she said. “Your loom doesn’t create fate, it records it like a history book, or it reflects reality.”

“Exactly so,” she nodded.

“The one who carries the Spear of Destiny also carries the authority of the Greater Divine in their hands,” Skuld continued. “Only someone with pure intent would be able to find or reach it to take it from where it lies. It is not for the self-righteous or cruel, although it can be misused in that manner. But, good intent doesn’t protect the person who possesses it from having it taken by anyone who can. It is a beacon and a magnet for trouble. Once you had it, you would likely have to fight to keep it in order to return it safely.”

“I thought it guaranteed its wielder victory?” Mary Lou was puzzled.

“Yes. It does,” Skuld said. “It’s a bit of a paradox. It’s not impossible to take, which is why it disappeared from public sight long ago. It has to be done indirectly and not as it is held in authority in battle. The Spear of Destiny cannot be stolen by force from the hand that wields it like the Spear of Chaos can be.”

“So, what do we do?” Mary Lou asked. “We want it not to lead an army with, but to stop a world war before it starts. We have to do something. We can’t carry Loki’s Spear of Chaos forever.”

“Which is the one reason you may be successful,” Skuld said. She nodded at the girl before her. “But consider that the presence of the Spear of Destiny itself would be enough to start a worldwide war as well.” She looked at them both. “And, once you had it in your own hands, you will have to examine your hearts, yet again, for that will be the true test.” Skuld smiled at them both fondly, “You both have a long way to go before you even understand your hearts.”

“That’s not an answer,” Kenneth observed.

Whatever else Kenneth was going to say was interrupted by snarling outside. Echoing loudly, a sudden peal of thunder shook the walls and floor. It made the mortals jump. The snarling outside stopped.

“It sounds like the storm dragon took care of a stalking spirit,” Skuld observed quietly. She stopped and thought, then sighed heavily. “Come, let’s go to the barn, and we can continue this conversation there.”

On their way to the barn where Bloodwine and Icewing waited, Skuld continued. “Things are getting real,” she said. “With Ragnarok on the horizon, I must move. I cannot stay here.” She opened the door to the barn, and they were met with the smell of fresh hay and leather.

Mary Lou inhaled the odors in delight. Skuld’s barn always smelled clean and well-kept with detectable fresh pine, leather, and the sweetness of molasses in the air. The girl plopped down on a hay bale across from the stalls and admired the beauty of the white-gray and chestnut stallions. Their heads hung over the chains casually placed across their stall doors, chains that served as more of a suggestion than a real barrier for either horse. She relaxed while Kenneth followed Skuld into the tack room. They returned carrying brushes.

“One of the modern contrivances that Bloodwine and Icewing are particularly fond of.” Skuld smiled. She handed one to Mary Lou. “Bloodwine likes a good scratch over his withers,” she told her and brought the horse out into the aisle.

“Kenneth, you can bring Icewing out and tie him over there at the other ring,” she told him. “While we are here, we maintain the fiction that they are normal horses.”

Kenneth raised one eyebrow. “Normal?” he asked. “I would say most people would notice the wings on this one. That’s not exactly normal. You don’t normally see pegasi running around in people’s pastures.”

Icewing snorted and turned an ear back. Mary Lou could almost perceive the horse rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, whatever.” Kenneth grinned. “You’re a freak of nature.” Icewing’s eyes were already half closing, and his upper lip wiggled with pleasure as Kenneth began using the brush to good effect along his back. “Besides, real horses don’t like vampires. I think the apple cursed me. I only want my meat rare these days, and that god-awful spear nearly had me tear into the professor.”

“All a matter of perspective,” Skuld answered cheerily. “Normal is a way of seeing what’s truly there rather than what you are told to see. You know that. You are more observant than most,” she said. “Except, you are not a vampire.”

Skuld continued, “You have the gift of immortality; that’s because you ate an apple from Yggdrasil. However, that didn’t curse you. It is the evil taint you are guarding that has caused your current difficulties.”

“Ulfr and Loki are bloodthirsty. What do you think might happen with constant contact with the most cursed object to be created in the last 5,000 years?” Skuld pointed out. “This is a question of how resistant you are to the constant whispers to kill or release the chaos and destruction of the darker parts of yourself. If you had not eaten the apple, you might have fallen completely by now and become one of the daemoni. As it is, your mind is still your own.

“It also cannot take you over completely without your consent, nor can it without your soul’s prior bonds and connections being released. Those for whom you mutually care about have a larger claim on your heart than evil ever will.”

“I see,” Kenneth said. “Put that way, it makes more sense. But what about Mary Lou, Bryan, and the rest of them? What about John’s little problem? That’s just wrong on so many levels. They have contact with the Spear of Chaos too, and they didn’t eat any of that apple.”

Skuld shrugged and looked at Kenneth as she brushed Bloodwine’s tail. “They are different people, and as you have already seen, it has affected all of you differently.

“Mary Lou’s gift for weather working has gone haywire with the proximity of the spear. Typically she is less affected by its whispers in her mind due to her nature. But daemoni see her inner light and want to destroy that. This has been so for thousands of years.”

“What do you mean?” Mary Lou broke in. “Is that why the demon grabbed me at the hotel rather than going after Kenneth? I thought he tried to get me for a hostage because I’m not as big, strong, or good at fighting as Ken, John, or Bryan.”

“Again, a matter of perspective, and you are looking at it as a human. If you were facing a man, perhaps that would have been the case. But you were not. You were facing sentience and absolute evil. He went for you first because you were the greatest threat to him, and he wished to neutralize the strongest enemy first. The daemon went for you because HE was afraid, not because Kenneth is weaker or stronger than you.

“Among their kind, the females terrorize their male kin, and he knows who and what you are, even if you do not know for yourself. He saw beyond the flesh and through your human persona. The mask of flesh you wear is not who you truly are.”

“Oh,” Mary Lou stopped and looked into the distance, then asked the question on her mind, “Then who or what am I?” She leaned in to hug and stroke Bloodwine’s nose. “I love horses,” she

whispered into his mane. "And you smell good." She stroked his silky neck. His upper lip trembled with pleasure.

"Bloodwine knows that. It's why he allows you to be close." Skuld smiled. "Otherwise, he could take your hand off with his teeth."

"As for your question, you know I can't answer that. You have to discover that part for yourself. But think about it, Mary Lou," Skuld said, "the daemon could not let you think you were strong because his goal was to defeat you, break you down with intimidation and make you think you were powerless. Showing his own greater weakness would be counter to that goal."

Mary Lou nodded, thinking. She wanted to ask more, but she realized Skuld wouldn't say more on the subject. She settled for brushing and detangling the red horse's mane. "I'm glad he likes me. I wish I hadn't been forced to sell my horse," she sighed.

"It will make it easier when we ride, that he likes you," Skuld told her. "Otherwise, this could get ugly quick."

"I'm going to get to ride him?" Mary Lou asked with her eyes widening and stepped back.

"Not exactly," Skuld said dryly to her puzzled look. "Your reputation precedes you."

"What are you talking about?" Kenneth asked. "What are you up to now?"

"Giving you exactly what you asked for," Skuld told him, amused at his sudden suspicion. "I told you I can't tell you where the Spear of Destiny is. To a limited degree, I can aid you with your search."

The two teens jumped again as thunder rumbled close by, and the small south side door opened abruptly. When the door slammed open with a crash, the light became brighter in the barn.

"Skuld, my girl! Are you causing trouble again?" A large man silhouetted against the light greeted the lady and nodded each to Kenneth and Mary Lou, acknowledging them.

Mary Lou blinked against the light. It was hard for her to see his features with the light behind him like that. Kenneth, who was closer to the side door grooming Icewing, could see him more clearly, and he caught his breath. Kenneth could see the furs and leather. The newcomer's armor jingled slightly. He looked like someone that had just stepped out of Viking legend. Kenneth was close enough to see that not all of the light was coming from the sun. Kenneth dropped the brush at Skuld's response.

“Greetings, milord father. Welcome as always,” Skuld told the newcomer.

“You haven’t been to see your doting Dad lately, girl!” He laughed at the expressions on the teens’ faces. “My Valkyries don’t visit me near often enough! Ah, nice to see you again too, Kenneth.”

“Again? Do we know each other?” he asked the huge grey-bearded god.

“Of course. You don’t think I’d forget one of my best and brightest warriors, do you? I miss you at my table, boy. Ah, but you have work here, and soon you’ll be up to your ears in it.”

Kenneth retrieved the brush. He didn’t have a response to that. He chose that moment to find a spot on Icewing’s pristine white hide to brush out and kept his mouth shut.

“Hi,” Mary Lou said shyly when he came close.

Odin grinned at the girl, his laugh lines deepening. “Greetings to you too, lady.” His easy manner put her at ease. “I haven’t forgotten you either. You have my thanks for your efforts on behalf of all Valhalla. When you get that thrice-damned spear taken care of, we will all be more at ease, and my warriors will put a stop to all the nonsense! Hie!” Odin slapped his fist to his chest and looked fierce.

“I am trying,” Mary Lou said.

Odin just winked at her in response. He suddenly reminded her of everybody’s grandfather, or maybe Santa. She tried to stifle a giggle at the thought. His laugh at the direction her mind was going wasn’t quite the ‘Ho! Ho!’ She imagined, but it was close enough. He winked at her again. “There ya’ go, girl. Lighten up a bit!” She couldn’t help giggling louder.

Odin turned to Skuld and spoke more seriously, “The omens all point to the movement of the dark ones. They are preparing. We will need to ride three nights hence.”

“The half-moon will give us the proper energies to make it easiest for the mortals to pierce the veil,” Skuld nodded. “We will need everything perfectly balanced for the Hunt. But you knew that and didn’t come all that way to tell me this either.”

“The dogs are ready, but I wanted to see how our mortal friends are faring and check my horse before we go,” Odin said.

Kenneth laughed and shook his head. “This conversation was all formality. You wouldn’t be here except you already planned for this.”

“Correct,” Odin said. “It’s not only a formality. You also had to ask, and you have to face what lies ahead with informed consent.”

Bloodwine shoved his face hard into Odin's chest. The Norse ancestral power ran his hands over Bloodwine. In response, the horse's red hide shone with a light Mary Lou hadn't seen before. She backed away with the brush in hand, sat back down on the bale of hay, and tucked her knees under her chin with arms around her legs. Mary Lou admired the beautiful horse and wistfully wished she could ride him. But, she realized, the immortal Bloodwine wasn't for the likes of her.

Odin turned to look at Mary Lou, perusing her thoughtfully as he scratched Bloodwine's withers. "There's a strength here that is unseen, and it must be allowed to flourish in its right time," Odin told Skuld. Now it was his turn to be serious. "Fate is not enough, daughter. Choices make fate, and there is much testing necessary before they know themselves. They will be pushed to their limits and beyond and are not ready to face what comes. Yet, they must."

Mary Lou wondered if they shouldn't discuss destroying the Spear of Chaos or fetch the Spear of Destiny. She started to speak up, but Skuld forestalled her with a raised hand.

"Shhh. Not now. All will come clear," Skuld hesitated. "If you are determined and you both choose of your own free will, you must come three days from now about the same time as your arrival today. Perhaps you will prove yourselves worthy to carry the Spear of Destiny, if only for a short time."

12

RECLAIMING BUCEPHALUS

OCTOBER 3, 1986, ROCKWOOD, TENNESSEE. HALF MOON

Ghree days passed quickly while the two teens made arrangements for another vacation. Arriving back at Skuld's barn, they noticed a warm, moist heaviness in the air.

"Feels like rain is coming," Kenneth remarked as he exited his blue car. "Roll your window up, so my seats don't get wet. I'll go look for 'Lady Fate'."

Kenneth found Skuld cleaning the barn floor. Mary Lou followed right behind him.

"The Spear of Chaos? Do you know where it is?" Skuld inquired.

"We left the spear with Diane a few days ago," Mary Lou told her. "I also called Diane and left a message on her answering machine to be on the lookout for trouble. Coyote is at the rehab center, I believe."

"It is best served with all of you guarding it, but you would not be able to take it with you," Skuld said. "You will have to trust them to do their job while you do yours."

"Which is what?" Kenneth asked. "We are here on faith, but I'd like to know what I am getting into."

Skuld responded, "We ride the Wild Hunt tonight. We will follow the hounds. Once they are put on the scent of something, they cannot be deterred by earth, by air, or by space. Nothing can escape them. They are elemental creatures of magick. Whether the Spear of Destiny is here or there or anywhere, they will lead us there if it still exists. But, as you already observed, we Powers cannot take it, nor use it ourselves. It is for mortal hands, but to one that must prove worthy. Once you have it, then you will have to fight the forces of darkness to keep it."

Kenneth stood and stared at her. "I'm supposed to ride? I don't exactly have a horse, and the only two here are taken."

"Yes... and not exactly," Skuld said, shaking her head. "Give it a bit. We are waiting for the others to arrive. Come, let's go outside. I need to get this process rolling. The light is shifting toward afternoon, and we need plenty of cover to pass unnoticed by ordinary mortals."

Curious, Kenneth and Mary Lou watched as she returned from the tack room with a ram's horn and followed Skuld outside. For several moments she stared at the tops of the mountains to the west. Skuld then raised the hunting horn shofar and held it to her lips. She first blew one long airy note, followed by three short notes, and ended with a long note that seemed to gather in the air, increasing the wind.

As the wind rose to blow their hair, the teens could see clouds begin to appear over the top of the mountains. Quickly the light dimmed with the gathering storm. A vast serpentine shape slipped through the mist in a shimmer of light on dark, momentarily seen before disappearing.

"Aurinel will help drive the storm." Skuld smiled in satisfaction. "The storm dragons seem to like the two of you. They will help as they may."

As large drops of water began to fall from the sky, they returned to the barn, where Skuld started the process of removing tack from the tack room. "Here, Kenneth, carry this one." Skuld handed him a black saddle and purple saddle pad. "You can put it over there on the racks by the back wall. It looks as though it should fit you."

"There's no horn on it," Kenneth observed. He looked at it sourly but took it and hung it where Skuld indicated.

"You won't need one, warrior," Skuld replied.

"A bridle?" Kenneth asked dubiously.

"You won't need that either," she said with a small smile.

Kenneth plopped down on a couple of bales of hay stacked beside the rack. "So there's no steering on this horse I'm supposed to ride. Oh, great. I'm not the horse person," Kenneth said. "I don't even like to ride horses. Mary Lou is the horse person. Where's her saddle?"

Skuld just laughed at him without answering and returned to the tack room. She returned carrying an armful of folded shimmering fabric. "This is for her, should she decide that she wishes to take it."

"Why do I suddenly get a bad feeling about this?" Kenneth looked at the material suspiciously. He knew what Skuld held. "Nothing from your loom is ever simple."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Skuld said. "It is still your choice and hers."

"Lady Skuld, what is that?" Mary Lou felt oddly drawn to the fold of cloth. She found herself wanting to see and touch the material.

"Your past and your future, should you take it." Skuld looked into her eyes and gently told her, "You will not be able to speak with words, but you will still be yourself." Skuld held the material out. "This is the only way you can retrieve the Spear of Destiny. It will not be pleasant, nor easy. You will have to trust Kenneth to lead you and have faith, or this will not work."

Mary Lou tensed up inside. Trust, absolute trust, in anyone was hard, even with her best friend. She still struggled with her skin crawling with objection when any guy was too close. Her scars from abuse trauma were invisible, and she wanted to be rid of them, yet they were there. She considered for several long moments. If there was anyone she did trust, it was Kenneth. "What do I have to do?"

Skuld watched the girl closely. She could see her soul searching and didn't miss when her spirit shifted to acceptance. Mary Lou's soul knew who she was and who HE was, even if her conscious mind did not. Fate knew she wouldn't refuse even as she gave her a choice. But, she also knew success wasn't guaranteed. It all hedged on memories and how deep the girl could dig into herself.

Quietly, Skuld sat briefly on a bale of hay. With the tapestry laid in her lap, she searched carefully and found a blue thread with its end protruding out and a gold thread nearby. Without tying the threads together, she intertwined them and wove them back into the weaving side by side, where together they appeared forest green. "There," Fate's voice was tinged with satisfaction. "That should do it."

The tapestry shimmered and shifted colors on the dark background common to Fate's weaving. It was as if the characters depicted there moved against the night sky. Where Skuld hung it on the beam between saddles, it glowed silver and provided additional light in the grayness of the afternoon thunderstorm. It depicted a huge black horse and a small boy standing in front of it with his hand outstretched.

The beauty of the weave and the black horse captured Mary Lou. She followed its outline with her eyes as if she were trying to draw

the equine. She committed it to memory so she could paint the depiction later on paper.

Thunder outside heralded Odin's arrival back in the barn. He stepped up silently to Skuld in contrast with his arrival a few days earlier. He winked at Kenneth, who noticed Odin now wore dark gray riding Leathers and carried a spear of his own. Odin laid his hand on Skuld's shoulder, and they watched Mary Lou be drawn in by the magic of the tapestry.

"You must remember!" Skuld told her urgently. "Draw it around you like a second skin. You have forgotten because you must live your life free of the past, but it is still YOU. No one can take away who you are. You must claim your right to your name and let that part of your soul free."

"Can I... touch it?" Mary Lou felt as if she was beginning to float and reality shifted as she was drawn to the tapestry.

"No!" Kenneth voiced his rising foreboding. "Don't touch it. Remember what happened to your sister Carly when Skuld gave her the necklace!" He quickly stepped forward, intending to pull his friend away. He could sense a prickle of electricity in the air that he knew was more than the electrical storm outside. "With all due respect, Lord Odin, whatever you are about to do to her, is this really necessary?" He couldn't understand his rising panic and struggled to damp it down and distance himself from whatever was causing it.

Odin motioned him away. "I understand your feelings, but this is her first test. Yours comes after," he said grimly. "I advise you to back away."

Kenneth refused. He forced himself to stand beside Mary Lou and look at the tapestry. It caused echoes within him too that he couldn't put his finger on.

"It's okay, Ken," Mary Lou said softly. She turned to look at him and he recoiled, startled. One of her eyes had turned dark while the other was pale, nearly blue-white. His intake of breath drew a sad smile from his friend. "It's okay. It's just me."

Mary Lou reached out and laid her hand on the horse. She brightened, so bright he could no longer bear to look at her. Kenneth finally did as Odin bade him and began to back away. He felt as if he'd suddenly plugged himself into an electric current. He was pushed back and found himself approaching the open end of the barn. He stopped. He wouldn't leave her, not knowing what was happening. He planted his feet stubbornly in determination and rising anger.

As Mary Lou was immersed in the magick, she felt her perspective twist and spin. When she touched the horse, he touched her, and she saw herself laid bare as lifetimes she had lived flashed before her eyes. For a moment, she recoiled, and then she touched the center of the horse, felt his rage, his hate, heard him bellowing and the sound of metal clashing on metal, the screams of the dying. She shook her head and knew those were the echoes of the past.

Going deeper, the girl allowed herself to feel the rage wash over her, and she shifted in mind and body while the hunger of a predator filled her with an old, nearly forgotten familiarity. She could be magnificent again. Dangerous. No one would touch her.

She screamed as she remembered everything. The daily struggle. The knives. The whips. The taste of blood in her mouth. The pain. But also, the half-remembered touch of someone who cared managed to pierce the hate. She became ALL and let it flow freely. She found herself thrown backward out of the magick of the tapestry transformed and screaming, but it was a new sound, deeper and challenging.

Kenneth gasped as he watched his friend rear to full height, with nostrils flared and bugling her willingness to fight the other stallions. She dropped to four hooves and stood panting and snorting in disorientation as the evening lightened. The sun chose that moment to break through the clouds, and sunlight reflected on the glossy coat of the full-grown horse standing in front of Kenneth. A red tone highlighted the black hide, and a full mane and tail fell heavy. The horse had a large white star sliding over to the side, and his left eye was pale blue. The horse was also inexplicably, and noticeably, a massive stallion.

“There is your mount.” Skuld smiled sweetly. “I think you will find that the saddle fits.”

Kenneth looked at Skuld incredulously. He closed his open mouth with a snap, and his dark brown eyes turned nearly black. He breathed deeply to control his urge to snarl. “What the fuck did you just do to her?” he demanded. “Change her back! Now!”

“I cannot,” Skuld declared. “It is done. She has decided on the skin that she wears. Bucephalus is who she is. Her service helped bring about the dawn of a new age, which neither she nor Alexander ever saw for themselves. It lasts even today, in pockets of the Middle East and the enlightenment of history. I did not make her Bucephalus; she IS Bucephalus. Will you honor her sacrifice and loyalty, or are you just going to stand there?”

"Claim your horse!" Odin commanded. "Her body looks different. He is now male on the outside, but the soul is the same! Bucephalus is yours to command, but best watch yourself there," Odin nodded at the horse.

Kenneth turned his attention from the powers to his friend once more. He admired the easy play of sleek muscle and catlike movement. Kenneth didn't enjoy riding as Mary Lou did, but he knew what a good horse looked like. Bucephalus in the flesh was simply breathtaking.

The horse was still blowing with furiously flared nostrils but sniffed the air, taking in the scents which were much richer to him as a stallion than a human girl. Everything smelled green and fresh. He could smell the human standing in front of him and scented even the large red cat sardonically watching the goings-on from the rafters of the barn.

However, the perspective of everything changed. Bucephalus could see to the sides and rear with an oddly split vision due to his eye placement on the sides of his head. Light and shadow had depth with odd overlays and underlays of energy.

Kenneth took two steps forward with his hand outstretched, oddly mirroring the tapestry. Then, from the teen's perspective, all hell broke loose.

Despite the still falling rain, the brief break in the clouds lit up the barn from the outside. The light caused Kenneth's shadow to fall long on the floor in front of him as he jumped back a step. He hadn't expected the furious scream as Bucephalus jumped to the side, eyeing the moving shadow on the barn floor. The horse snaked his head low with teeth bared and every muscle tensed.

Kenneth moved again, and the stallion again jumped to the side. A furious sound that Kenneth didn't know a horse could make came from low in his throat that sounded half like a growl but much louder.

Bucephalus plunged at him without warning, stomping the moving shadow on the ground and swinging around to kick him.

"What the... Mary Lou! Wake up!" Kenneth yelled as he dodged a flying hoof, and Bucephalus came at him with his teeth snapping shut with a loud clack as Kenneth barely managed to avoid a vicious bite. The big horse reared and attempted to come down on top of Kenneth with slashing front hooves, and he barely rolled out of the way in time.

"Goddammit, are you trying to kill me?" He found himself trapped against the barn wall as a back hoof came at him, and he

ducked again. Kenneth's quick fighter's reflexes saved him from having his skull caved in from the kick. Kenneth realized he was trapped with not enough room to maneuver in the barn and backed away toward the outside. The sight of his shadow moving made Bucephalus leap backward and then come at him again.

"Why is she doing this?" Kenneth demanded. "She's gone crazy!"

"She's a stallion boy! You're going to have to prove yourself!" Odin chuckled deeply.

"It's not funny!" Kenneth yelled back. But Odin's answer finally penetrated, and he started thinking rather than reacting. He observed the horse's movements. Bucephalus' ears were plastered back against his skull. There was no light of intelligence left in his friend's eyes, only anger and maybe a flicker of fear. He began to ask himself why. He tried to remember the little he'd read about Alexander's horse. The shadows, he recalled. Alexander turned him away from his shadow.

Kenneth watched Bucephalus repeatedly jump at the long shadows on the ground. He backed out of the barn into the rain with the horse following, stalking stiff-legged practically on his toes. The horse's ears were flat, and he kept shaking his head. The stallion plunged at him again. Kenneth rolled underneath the railing on the arena's edge, barely out of reach. In response, Bucephalus rose to the height of a full rear just over the top of Kenneth and held himself there for a long moment, pawing the air.

The horse was practically directly over the top of him. The rain falling on the horse's face looked like the very tears of the gods. When he saw the underside of the magnificent animal up close, the drama of the thought combined with the roadmap appearance of raised scars covering the horse's belly made him draw his breath in shock. "Oh, my God!"

Kenneth quickly got to his feet on the other side of the protective railing and stared with new eyes at his friend. His gaze took in every detail of the horse in front of him. Okay, he thought. She's a horse, at least for the time being. We will deal with what we've got here.

"I'll kick your ass later." He spat and glared at the stallion, who snorted at him. The horse slung his head, tossed his mane, and galloped to the other side of the paddock.

Bucephalus reached down and started tearing off mouthfuls of wet grass. The rain, which fell more lightly, now made his coat glisten.

"Where did all those horrible scars come from?" Kenneth asked Odin as he joined him by the rail. "He doesn't have those on his back or sides, so those can't be all battle wounds. I thought Alexander took care of him."

"He did," Odin said simply. "Bucephalus was thirteen summers in age when Alexander won him with fearless respect and a firm hand. They were a year apart in age, the horse being slightly older."

"Then... Ah, I see." Kenneth realized what he was looking at. "That explains a lot," he said thoughtfully. "Alright then," he told Odin, "I can handle this."

Kenneth walked around the outside of the railing, maneuvering himself to where he could approach from the side. He eyed the clouds in case the sun broke through again. He was mindful of the distraction of the moving shadows reminding his friend of some past trauma. They could set him off again before he could get close enough to touch his mind.

"Mary Lou..." Kenneth began, then hesitated. "Bucephalus," he called gently. The stallion turned his head toward him and took an involuntary step toward the sound of a familiar soothing voice. Kenneth threw caution to the wind and entered the arena with the horse again. When he drew close, this time, the horse didn't move. His ears came up as Kenneth approached, talking softly but with command.

When he drew close, however, Bucephalus' ears went flat again, and his skin shook as if flies were biting, but nothing was there. He tensed up, and Kenneth eyed the bared teeth.

Up close, Kenneth could see the ropy scars around the horse's mouth and lips, whitish gray-colored against the night-black tender flesh of the stallion's muzzle.

"What did some asshole do to you?" Kenneth whispered. He projected the question to the horse mentally.

Kenneth received a mental image of a spiked ball in Bucephalus' mouth and fish hooks in the tender skin holding his mouth closed with blood dripping. It flecked his neck and front legs in red. As the horse trembled in front of him, mind touched, he could see the whips; the blade wielded by a cruel hand in the delicate portions of his chest, belly, and legs as the horse fought his restraints until white foamy sweat coated his body. He saw the curved blade driven up into the horse's mouth from beneath his jaw. All of it was carefully calculated to cause pain but never in a place that would spoil the horse's magnificent beauty.

Kenneth saw the memory of raw wounds on the angry stallion as the sun shone on his paddock at an angle in the late afternoon. He watched the long shadows approach from behind as they did every day when the abuse began. The horse took hold of his tormentor. Bucephalus crushed flesh and bone to rip the cruel man's arm from its socket. In his mind's eye, Kenneth saw the quick sale and the hushed transaction as the man's wife sold the horse to a trader who then brought him to the King of Macedonia, where Alexander found him.

"Ox-Head," Kenneth whispered. "That's what your name means, Bucephalus. Stubborn. You never quit fighting. Then you carried a king across most of the known world and changed history." He stepped forward with purpose and slid his hand gently across his friend's muzzle, feeling the scars.

"These no longer show on the surface when you are human," Kenneth observed. "But yet you still have them, and they still hurt, don't they? And you mostly don't remember how you got them, except you still shy away from contact, never realizing that this life's harm is not all that sits on your soul."

"You are correct," Odin told him from the rail. "If you want more than a horse now that she's locked into this portion of herself, you need to draw her mind back to the surface. At this moment, for all intents and purposes, she is only a horse, but you are going to need more of her than that for your task. You are the only one who can do this for her. Then you will have both Mary Lou, your friend and your warhorse."

Odin again fell silent. He allowed Kenneth to figure the rest out. Bucephalus was calm now that Kenneth gentled him with his hands and voice. "Only a horse? No, you were never just a horse," he told the stallion. He pushed the hair off Bucephalus' forehead and rubbed his white spot. "Now, you've taken enough of a vacation, it's time to come back. C'mon, I can't do this without you. We got somewhere to ride girl, and you gotta help save the world," he told the stallion. "I'll be with you the whole way."

Kenneth felt the tension leave Bucephalus as he laid his head along the horse's jaw for several minutes, projecting into Mary Lou's mind, past the stallion Bucephalus, drawing her out as he had done during meditation.

"That's better," he said gently. "Now, if you are ready to lead the way to the barn?" He gestured to the open door of the barn behind him. "Skuld says that saddle will fit. I don't relish trying to stick with you bareback."

Bucephalus snorted at him. A bright intelligence was back in the horse's eyes. Instead of following, Bucephalus dropped heavily to the ground, looked at Kenneth expectantly, and then at his own back.

"Are you kidding?" Kenneth almost laughed at the contrast. "You were trying to kill me half an hour ago. Don't think I won't kick your ass later." He considered briefly, shrugged, and threw a leg over the horse's back.

"Might as well get this over with, bareback or not." He gritted his teeth as Bucephalus rocked back and then forward to be able to rise. "Easy now," Kenneth said as he settled himself just behind the stallion's withers. He slid slightly on the wet hair of his horse's back and adjusted position to grip with his legs. It was a seamless fit.

Once on Bucephalus' back, Kenneth realized how tall the horse truly was. He wove his fingers into the thick black mane. "Alright then. Let's see what you've got." He gently nudged the horse into a long-striding walk, getting the feel of how the horse moved beneath him.

"Are you going to jar my teeth out at a trot?" Kenneth asked and then grinned as the stallion squealed but broke into a ground covering two-beat gait. It felt free and easy. The forward propulsion was smooth rather than bouncy.

"Don't you dare buck me off!" Kenneth said and dug his heels in. He got an instant response. His horse practically coiled into a tuck underneath him. It felt like a spring releasing as Bucephalus came off his powerful hindquarters in a dead gallop.

Kenneth's brief surprise turned to excitement at the speed and feel of the powerhouse underneath him. "Yeah!" he shouted. He forgot he didn't have a saddle, forgot the rain, and forgot Skuld and Odin were waiting as he pointed Bucephalus at the fence. He guided him with his hands, which were wrapped in hair. "Hell, yeah!" He mentally calculated his horse's speed and distance and knew the stallion could make it over the rails. "Let's go!"

They sailed over the fence and kept going. The teen settled with the long stride and marveled at how easily they moved together. He shifted his weight slightly, and the stallion shifted under him, keeping him balanced. Light leg pressure or a gentle touch on the neck was all it took for Bucephalus to respond to direction. If he sat back and down slightly, the horse slowed or stopped. It felt like they had been doing this forever. They stopped in the middle of the expansive pasture with his horse barely breathing heavy.

Kenneth lay forward on the stallion's back and put his arms around the heavily maned neck. "That was awesome." Kenneth grinned into the horse's thick hair. "Maybe we should just keep you a horse. You don't get so winded with Asthma." Bucephalus snaked his head sideways and nipped at his leg, and Kenneth tapped him on the nose with his toe. "None of that," he told him. "I was kidding. It was a joke." The stallion snorted, and Kenneth laughed.

"I wonder how you would do running barrels," Kenneth mused on their way back to the barn. In response, Bucephalus crow-hopped, nearly unseating him. "What?" You wouldn't want to pit yourself against the immortal Bloodwine and a stopwatch?" Kenneth laughed, and Bucephalus squealed. "Guess not." He grinned. "You're the one that asks me all the time 'where's my sense of adventure?'"

When they arrived back at the barn, Skuld handed Kenneth a bucket. "Fetch your horse some water. There's a water source outside. I'm getting his food, and you will need to feed him. We have a hard ride ahead of us. When we leave, all you will have is whatever you can carry with you. Your mount needs sustenance." Skuld indicated two more buckets lined up against the wall. "He will be expending a great deal of energy following the hounds and not only has to carry you but may have to fight as well."

"Can she do this?" Kenneth asked Skuld when he returned with a bucket sloshing water. "She's not Bloodwine or Icewing to be able to..." he trailed off, looking at the other stallions.

"Bucephalus is not only your mount. He is an extra weapon and will fight to the death to protect you. He was nearly 30 when he died and made it through countless battles with Alexander of Macedonia, who led his forces from the front. Your best and only chance to make it through the veil and back in one piece is on the back of Bucephalus."

"This was not an accident, was it?" Kenneth asked Skuld. "You are Fate. You know things before they happen. The fact that we met at all had a purpose."

"I have indeed known all along who she is, but both of you still have free will, and so not everything is predetermined. However, putting the two of you together ensures that the choice can be made. You are both warriors of a rare breed," Skuld assured him. "But, I will warn you once she returns and becomes the Mary Lou you know in this lifetime, she may well not remember any of this. You will know. She may not, simply because of the physical form she is

wearing.” Skuld shook her head. “If she does remember, however, to give her peace afterward, we can offer her some Lethe.”

“Lethe? I’ve never heard of that.” Kenneth frowned in thought.

“The water of forgetting,” Skuld answered him. “The Lord of the Dead offers the drink to those who must return to earthly life so that they can start life anew without the trappings of past lives and accumulated trauma.”

“Then why do I have some memories?” Kenneth asked her. “I can see snippets of myself here and there, Greece, Egypt, Rome sometimes a man and a fighter and sometimes as a woman.”

“It is imperfect,” Skuld answered him. “The older and more advanced the soul, the more the memories stick despite the Lethe. It can also depend on how much you drink, how soon you return after death, and if there is a purpose to remembering a place, a time, another person,” Skuld said. “In your case, you are stronger than most, not only because you are an old soul, but because of who and what you are, and the fact you were once trained as an Oracle.”

Kenneth turned to look at Bucephalus, who was munching on the grain Skuld offered. “What about her, err... him? Has she been anybody else besides a famous horse?”

“You have both lived many lives, some of them together. In some lives, you both had wealth and privilege, and in some lifetimes, you did not,” Skuld said. “In some, there was war and conflict, and in others, peace. The two of you are always positioned to shape the events of conflict and change, but more than that, I cannot say because it is not time yet for you to know more. Your memories will have to provide the rest, but only when it is proper, and you are ready to deal with whatever those memories may show you.”

“So I’m running around with amnesia,” Kenneth observed.

“Essentially? Yes,” Skuld answered. “But your soul remembers, and you are still the same person even when you are needed back on this earthly plane to do your job or settle past personal issues in another situation, place, time, and mortal shell. Yet, you develop and evolve through each experience. Lethe allows you to start life with innocence. You cannot be held accountable for what you cannot remember. It also reduces the impact of past trauma.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a multitude of high yips and barks. “The hounds have arrived, so you need to expedite,” Skuld said. She continued talking as she returned to her tack room. “Roxie gets impatient for the hunt. She will not wait on you once we

get started. It's your responsibility to follow her and the pack and keep up."

"Here, when you finish saddling up, put these on." She dropped a large pack at Kenneth's feet when she returned. Skuld was robed in crisp pale gray leathers with gold banding. Her cloak billowed around her like a cloud, and a broadsword glinted at her hip. "Because you are flesh and not just spirit, your scent will attract feeders even though most of them will not attempt to grab you. If they touch a soul of light, it burns them the same as you putting your hand in a bonfire. Yet, some will try who find it worth the risk," Skuld said. "Your proximity to the Spear of Chaos has disguised your aura with taint. Also, the scent of evil around you from the spear will draw trouble. These will help protect you."

When Skuld turned to saddle Icewing, Kenneth opened the bag. He caught his breath. "This is worth a fortune!" He whistled. "Is this stuff for real?"

"Yes," Skuld told him. "That is Bucephalus' old equipment and Alexander's. The saddle is not, of course, since Alexander rode without a saddle, but you will need to keep your seat. Where you're going, you'll need to stick with your horse at all times. The armor is Linothorax, made of white layered linen cloth used by the Greek and Macedonian armies. You should put that on over the leather pants and linen shirt you will find as additions to the bag".

"What about this?" Kenneth held out the gold-colored bridle. "I thought you said I don't need it."

"You don't. That equipment is your choice and his." Skuld nodded at his horse, who sniffed the braided bridle that was in his hands. The horse's ear tips nearly touched, and his eyes were wide as he snorted lightly.

"Well?" Kenneth dropped the braided rope reins and held the bridle out to Bucephalus. The cheek piece joined on one side, where it knotted and hooked together without buckles. He wasn't sure what to do with extra straps and hooks.

In response, Bucephalus nosed the braided bands until Kenneth turned it inside out and what he thought was backward. In response, the horse shoved his head through the strapping. With the bridle pulled out of Kenneth's hands and Bucephalus' lack of hands to put it to rights, the whole thing slung around, forcing Kenneth to dodge again. The stallion gave up after several tosses of his head and gave Kenneth a reproachful look in response to his giggle.

"Here, would you like some help with that?" Kenneth asked him, smiling. "You look rather silly with it hanging half off your face."

"That will do." Skuld nodded as Kenneth fixed the straps on his still fidgeting stallion. "The extra strap goes around his neck and connects to both the bridle and the breast band. It will give you an extra handhold." She told him helpfully. "Yes, just like that. There's no bit. His mouth is left free of hardware so he can bite the enemy."

Kenneth could hear the commotion of dogs outside and Odin bellowing when the high yips turned to a snarl. "Hai, Hai, Hai!" The shouting continued. He sped up the process of his preparations.

He hurriedly picked up the Linothorax armor and wrapped it around himself, tying it along the left side and then tying down the shoulder straps in front with their ties. The leather breeching fit snugly but was loose enough that it would allow him to move freely. He found that the boots also fit. There was a belt, which he donned, and a few odds and ends that he placed in the packs attached to the back and sides of the saddle.

Mounting up, Kenneth followed Icing out of the barn to where Odin waited with the dogs. Upon seeing the big reddish-black stallion, the dogs' pack leader stalked toward Kenneth and Bucephalus stiff-legged. Her head was low, with her hair raised along her spine. Her eyes glowed with an eerie blue-white light in the gathering dusk.

"Lord Odin?" Kenneth questioned. He recognized the dog's aggressive stance.

"You are new to the Hunt," Odin replied to Kenneth's unspoken question. "You must introduce yourselves without fear or prejudice, and she must accept your presence."

"Roxie!" Odin commanded the dog, "packmate, hunting party!"

Bucephalus' ears were back. He blew at the dog and struck out in warning. Upon Roxie's answering growl, the horse bared his teeth, but his ears came up, and he stepped forward.

Kenneth realized the dog wasn't a hound at all. She was black and tan in color, sleek in head and body like a Doberman but with a long tail. She approached his mount with deliberation, and together Roxie and Bucephalus blew in one another's nostrils, sharing breath and sealing friendship. Kenneth reached down, snapping his fingers, and gently laid his hand on her head.

"Good! Now, we hunt!" Odin declared as Roxie's head came up, and her tail wagged happily. The dogs gathered around their

Huntsman as he commanded them. “Tonight, it is not the souls of the damned we hunt! You must find the Spear of Destiny!”

The dogs milled around them. They were black and tan, light golden brown, black, brindle, and of assorted breeds. Kenneth wondered why they were called hounds. They were not what he’d envisioned for hounds of the Wild Hunt. He thought to ask later as the dogs set off at a run with Bucephalus moving in long easy strides underneath him.

13

THE WILD HUNT

The Wild Hunt headed north from Rockwood toward Harriman along the base of the Cumberland Escarpment. The mountain ridge loomed large to their left. The dogs with the horses following close on their heels soon found footing just wide enough single file along the train tracks to hit a rolling canter. A dense fog quickly arose, and the hounds' baying echoed from all directions at once as the sound mingled with the thunder.

Kenneth blinked in the rain and hoped Bucephalus could see better than he could in the rainy darkness. The only lights he could use to discern the path ahead were the sparks struck by Bloodwine's hooves with each step and the occasional flash of lightning.

The streets in Harriman were largely deserted when they got to the city. Odin led them away from the tracks and backtracked up a steep bank before reaching the river. Kenneth recognized the West Hills subdivision entrance as they made the quick turn left onto the paved road and headed up a massive hill.

"We're going up the mountain to Buzzard's Bluff?" Kenneth questioned. The only answer from his mount was an ear flicked back. He could feel Bucephalus' powerful rear end dig in and push on the steep incline. When they got to the base of the final climb, they slowed to a walk to give the horses a breather. Skuld dropped Icewing back beside Kenneth.

"Stay to the right in the tire tracks next to the rock walls and avoid the ruts," Skuld told him. "The footing is treacherous, especially now with rainwater gushing through the washouts. It will be slick with red clay on wet pavement in places and gravel rolling underfoot. We can't let the horses go down. Some of the ruts are belly deep on the steepest portion of our climb. The road is packed

clay at the top, but it's okay. Take your time and help Bucephalus watch his footing."

"Gotcha." Kenneth nodded in agreement. It had been a while since he was here, but he remembered deep potholes and poor road maintenance. "Any more advice?"

Skuld grinned. "Hold on," she answered. "I'll see you at the top!" Skuld forged ahead and led the way again. The dogs dropped back and paced alongside.

Kenneth laid the reins along his horse's neck and helped the stallion steer around the worst holes as they struggled in the rain up the steep hill. Bucephalus was blowing a little by the time the rain let up to a light misting sprinkle. He saw that the worst of it was mostly below them with a strong wind that rose straight up along the whole side of the bluff. His goosebumps told him how chilled he was in his drenched state, but he ignored it, wiped his eyes, and stopped his horse for a brief rest. Though only a half-moon shone above them, their path was brightly lit. It contrasted pleasantly with the darkness they'd traveled through so far.

When Bucephalus' breathing slowed, they continued the climb. The footing here was looser, where water from the rain cascaded off the rocks above them. Mud and stones had washed into the road.

Kenneth let go of the reins with one hand to stroke the horse's neck for encouragement when he was nearly unseated. A grinding crunch sounded underneath them as Bucephalus' left shoulder went out from underneath him in a sliding stumble.

"Skuld, hold! There's a problem back here!" he yelled ahead of them as Bucephalus came up limping. "We're going to have to stop," he muttered to his horse.

Bucephalus snorted and shook his mane, scattering water over his rider. He took two more stumbling steps and nearly went down again but refused to stop. Instead, he set his head, determined to keep going despite the sharp stone that was firmly wedged in the frog of his front left heel.

"I said STOP," Kenneth growled at the horse. "Now isn't the time to be stubborn. You can do that later on your own time."

Kenneth slid down off the saddle and nearly fell himself on the slick footing as muddy gravel rolled underfoot. He realized Bucephalus was holding his left front foot up.

"Let me see," Kenneth coaxed. He ran his hands down the horse's muddy leg and prodded the groove in the sole of his foot until he found the stone.

Bucephalus pulled his foot away and set it down firmly. Kenneth somehow wasn't surprised at the stallion's determined huff.

"No," Kenneth said. "We have to get that out before you go anywhere." Bucephalus' answer was a sassy toss of his heavily maned head. The horse looked up the hill with his ears pricked as a red horse approached out of the darkness.

Odin on Bloodwine loomed over them, but suddenly they were not what the teen saw. Kenneth shook his head as a vision flashed so strongly it nearly set him back on his heels. It came to his mind's eye in full living color.

"Bring me that red mare with the blaze," Alexander ordered, and the relieved groom hurried off.

Alexander rose and caressed Bucephalus' neck, feeling the hardness of the muscles. "You're going to have to sit this one out," Alexander whispered to his horse regretfully. "You need to take it easy on that leg, so you don't end up with a bowed tendon."

The black horse turned his one blue eye on his rider and blew softly with a disapproving look. He stretched out, lowering his back for Alexander to mount.

"Not today." Alexander patted him with finality and turned away. "We will ride together another day," he told Bucephalus. He looked up to see his orders had been carried out. "Ah yes, this will do."

The red mare that he had indicated he would ride was led to him. She was sturdy but sleek, with a fineness about her that spoke of speed and good breeding. He had his back turned to his stallion and did not see what the men standing in front of him saw when Alexander picked up his pad and placed it on the mare's back. They began shouting a warning too late.

Unrestrained, Bucephalus realizing that another horse was to carry his beloved Alexander, spun in place with his ears flattened and teeth bared. He avoided hitting Alexander with his hooves as he reared and grabbed the mare's throat in his teeth and bore her to the ground. Men and horses scattered, trying to put distance between themselves and Alexander's furious warhorse.

Alexander stood still watching thoughtfully. Not wanting to waste a good mare, he stepped forward as Bucephalus held onto the other horse's throat until her eyes started rolling back in her head. The red mare was helpless.

"Bukefal!" Alexander shouted at his horse. "Let go!" He commanded in a tone that made men jump and stand at attention

in fright. Bucephalus merely cocked an ear and grudgingly released the mare who lay panting for several moments. The whites of her eyes still showed as she was slowly encouraged to her feet by Alexander, who didn't stop to contemplate any further. He waved her away, picked up his pad, and placed it on the stallion's back.

"I should kick your ass for that," he muttered to his horse. "You're too damned stubborn for your own good. I'd like to get you home in one piece, not run you into the ground." Alexander grabbed his horse's head and planted a kiss on his nose. "But, if you insist on being an idiot, we got places to go. If your leg is hurt, you are going to just have to suck it up. We can't stop again until we're out of these mountains, and we may have to fight our way clear to Zadracarta."

enneth shook his head to clear it and bring himself back to the present. He set his mouth in a grim line. "Stubborn. Always," he muttered. "Let me see if there's a hoof pick in the pack." A quick search turned up empty.

"Wrong pack," Odin told him. "Check the other side under the flaps."

Kenneth found what he was looking for and took hold of Bucephalus' hoof in a firm grip. A grinding sound came from the horse's foot as the hoof pick pried the sharp stone out. He wiped his hands and the pick before he stuck it in his pocket. Then, rather than have his mount go down again, Kenneth took the horse's head and led him on foot to guide him carefully out of the worst of the debris.

For several more minutes, they followed the road as it wound along the spine of the mountain toward the bluff. It seemed with every step that the moonlight got brighter until they reached the area where the trees opened up at the bluff.

Looking down, they could see lights like hundreds of fireflies in the night sprinkled along the valley's hills over Harriman and Rockwood. A layer of fog softened the angles and curves of the landscape and gave even the interstate traffic an eerie glow. Kenneth might have appreciated the breathtaking view more, except he knew they weren't here just for the scenery. When they reached the top, Kenneth remounted his horse.

"Now what?" he asked Skuld. "We're at the end of the road."

“No. We are at the beginning,” Skuld told him and pointed up.

Ghe moon hung directly over the drop-off. Aurinel’s silvery serpentine shape danced through the churning clouds below the bluff. An impossibly stiff wind was rising harder as it blew straight up. The moonlight filtered through the mist on fluffy white clouds, reflecting it even stronger. As he watched, a ring formed in the air around the moon. Impossibly, he could see brilliant rainbow colors as a rare phenomenon called a moonbow appeared in the air in front of them.

Kenneth drew his breath at the sight, but he eyed the lights of the interstate traffic he could see far below. Roxie turned to look at him, barked once, ran at the edge of the rocks, and jumped. The rest of the pack followed quickly off the edge. Bloodwine reared and made a mighty leap up. For a moment, he hovered, then with his hoofs still striking sparks like lightning in midair, he continued up and disappeared.

Kenneth groaned as Bucephalus gathered himself, seeing where the others were going. “Is it too late to mention, I don’t like heights?” Kenneth sat back and found himself pulling back involuntarily on the reins. In response, Bucephalus backed several quick steps. When Icewing also jumped, and his snow-white wings caught the air currents, Bucephalus dropped his head, dug in, and pulled the reins loose from his rider’s hands.

The big black stallion charged forward and left the bluff’s edge at full gallop, with Kenneth holding onto the neck strap in a vise grip. Knowing it shouldn’t be possible, Kenneth nearly jumped out of his skin when Bucephalus also spread ebony wings with a furious snap and was lifted upward toward the ring of colored light by the rising wind current. Bucephalus glided through the storm-driven atmospheric portal in the astral veil with several strong wing beats. They emerged onto the Rainbow Bridge in the Space Between.

A riot of brilliant color and bright light hit Kenneth’s eyes as soon as he crossed to the other side. “What the?” A wave of dizziness nearly sent him reeling as the act of crossing over also stripped all memory blocks and filters from his mind. Bucephalus simultaneously finally found his brakes and slid to a slightly bouncy stop.

At first, his watering eyes and confusion kept Kenneth from realizing the two tall, dark-colored figures barring further progress

with crossed spear and crook were actually there. Bucephalus, blowing hard from the effort of getting them to that point, also stood shaking his head to clear it. Feeling Kenneth reeling on his back, he kept his wings raised to help prevent his rider from falling.

Memories from many places and times, identities and names, families, struggles and tragedies, and past loves and losses hit them simultaneously. Bucephalus wearing the skin of a horse, once again remembered leading the charge into battle with Alexander urging him to fight. He reared to his full height, bugling an aggressive challenge. The Macedonian language came to Kenneth's lips unbidden, challenging the English, Latin, Scandinavian, German, and Japanese that were all crowding in together.

"Bukefal, prestanat!" he scolded his stallion. "Teishi! Nein! No! Let me get my bearings, would ya? God, I didn't expect that!" He struggled with righting the language he was speaking along with his spinning head. He blinked several times and rubbed his eyes, which began to adjust to the fact that he could see color for the first time in his current incarnation. The figures that blocked their way still stood there, expectantly.

"More gods," Kenneth observed. "Am I supposed to bow or something? 'Cuz ya' know, it's a little hard from the back of a horse."

Bucephalus shook his head, making his thick mane fall to both sides. Bowing his neck, he extended his wings to their full span and then folded them back down into himself. He nickered softly to the figures standing in front of them.

To the right of them, Anubis chuckled and on the left, Set simply grinned, flashing very sharp teeth. They both lowered their weapons. "Once again, at the Turning of the Age, the champions come forth. I hope for all of our sakes that this Turn is not as disastrous as the First," Anubis said.

Bucephalus recognizing him, paced forward and shoved his head into the god. In response, Anubis wrapped his arm around the reddish-black stallion's head affectionately and reached out with his other hand, producing a green apple. "It's good to see you too, mi amere."

Anubis ruffled Bucephalus' forelock as the horse made sloppy drooling work of the apple. "Don't fear," Anubis said to Kenneth. "It is an earthly apple from a wild orchard. It will not force Bukefal to stay. Your arrival was expected."

Set, still grinning toothily, looked Kenneth up and down. "My, my, how far you've come and many miles yet to go. Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Kenneth bared his teeth as well, responding with a slight smile. “Am I ready? Well, let’s see, at this point, I’ve been run over, nearly drowned, blasted by lava, attacked by a demon, AND now I jumped off a cliff. I think I can handle about anything.”

It was Set’s turn to chuckle. “I would expect no less from any of my warrior elite,” he said. “Which is why I felt it appropriate to meet you here myself. I still have and protect what belongs to you. As you are on this perilous quest, you may decide you want them returned to you.”

Kenneth felt a rise of distaste. Deep inside, he felt a coldness in his soul where his loss had been too great to bear. He knew what Set offered as he had at that moment the full memory of how, and more importantly why, Set held them. Still, the teen waited, knowing that this was part of the ceremony and the choice made of his own free will.

Set moved another step forward and came within reach of Kenneth. In one hand, he held a sharpened gold and bronze Khopesh. Within the other hand, Set carefully held a beating heart.

“As you requested many earth years ago in Egypt, I have kept these safe for you. As of this moment, you have a choice. You may take one, or you may take both. However, you will be unable to set them down again until your duty is done,” Set told him.

Kenneth still calmly sat his horse. He reached out and took his sword from the patron of warriors. “You can keep that other thing for now. I don’t need that where I’m going,” he said. “Very soon, I will be joining the American military, and it would again just be in the way of my duty.”

“It is indeed your choice as it always was, but there are times when even warriors find they need their heart. Eventually, you must take it. You can change your mind. Call on it at any time,” Set responded and stepped back. “Go with my blessings and our Heavenly Father’s blessings.”

Kenneth nodded and saluted with the khopesh. They moved forward to rejoin Skuld.

Anubis stood beside his brother and watched them ride away. “He is not whole. Are you certain of this Lord Set?”

Set replied, “He is certain. For this moment, it is all that matters. The wheel turns, the threads of Fate have been laid before them.”

Anubis nodded. “Many possibilities remain, and they must be free to choose.”

“Ha-Set always has chosen,” Set replied. “I would have him no other way.”

Kenneth's head had mostly stopped spinning by the time they caught up with Skuld and Odin. Roxie had dropped back out of the pack to pace them. She raced ahead again, sniffing.

"So now, how do we find what we're looking for?" Kenneth asked. "Are we just following where the dog leads, or are we supposed to do something?"

"Yes, and yes," Odin told him. "Roxie will take the lead. Now that the power of the Wild Hunt has allowed you to cross the Veil without physical death, the whole pack is unnecessary. For the duration, due to the nature of the quest, you will mostly operate on this side of Reality."

"Roxie's guidance will allow you to jump between and across the spaces of existence, but you must also Hunt, use your wits, and make decisions. Skuld will go with you partway. Do not rely on her, or you will not succeed. As you already observed, it is a tool forged for the hand of Man, and the rules of the Prime Creator forbid any of us to interfere with you or touch the Spear of Destiny ourselves."

Skuld nodded in agreement. She continued the conversation where Odin left off. "I am your support, partly for safety. Despite what you may think should be, the lower paths are riddled with mists of confusion, and if you happen upon the Rivers Styx or Lethe, you will be lost to us. To try to cross either without the aid of the Ferryman would mean soul death."

"Additionally, not all daemoni are confined to what you call Hell or wandering the Earth plane. The Multiverse is a vast place," Skuld said. "These creatures are born of not just darkness, but the kind of evil darkness that was never meant to be created. Most fallen ones are scattered, but they are not the only dark spirits corrupted by or born of this devouring evil. Some find their way to the paths and hide between what you understand as 'real' space. They will seek to devour anything they believe is easy prey on the paths including wandering or lost souls or those daemoni who are weaker than they in their quest for power."

Odin chimed back in, "Skuld will see to you." He smiled. "Fate on your side is no small thing." He chuckled.

"Where will you be?" Kenneth asked.

"I have to go." Odin smiled at the teen fondly. "I have some business to dispense."

They watched Odin ride away. Bloodwine's hooves struck sparks on the stones with his passing. He was out of sight when Skuld drew Kenneth's attention to her.

"Now that you understand the risks, I will tell you what you have to do and why," Skuld said. "Several layers of protection guard the spear. Some are physical, and some are arcane. Even though the Spear of Destiny is indeed in the mortal world, it would be impossible to reach it quickly, much less possess it. Even though this is a 'shortcut', so to speak, it will seem longer."

Skuld continued, "Unfortunately, I don't know exactly where the Spear of Destiny is myself, but I can tell you that you have to go through a series of tests. This is not just to see if you're worthy, but in a more practical sense, to trip a certain set of arcane triggers that together will open up the final destination for you. You have to trip seven triggers according to the message brought to us by the archangel. You will follow the dog. She will not be able to sniff out the next step until the present one is reached and done properly."

"Oh! I get it! Like a video game." Kenneth brightened. "This ought to be fun!"

Skuld just stared at him. "In this 'video game,' you don't get a do-over. There are no extra lives, so don't screw it up," She told him sternly. "You only have the life you came with. Although you may have the extra boost from Idun's apple, your beloved horse does not." Her eyebrows raised. "Take care of your mount, and Bucephalus can take care of you. But, also take care not to harm the harmless on the Moonpaths."

"Got it! No pressure," Kenneth nodded, grinning. "Where do we start?"

"The road is ahead of you. It's up to you, your horse, and the dog to work this out," Skuld answered him. "You will have to work as a team. To remind you again, I am only along as an observer and an extra defender if it becomes necessary."

Kenneth thought about what she said. Her clothing changed to a full set of heavy studded white armor as he watched. She practically glowed with light.

The teen remembered the dark poison the demon had left behind at the rest stop and the hotel. Skuld's get-up made him realize how lightly protected he was and how naked his horse was.

He shrugged his shoulders. "All joking aside, I will take it seriously," he told the Power who was choosing to help them. "Thank you for your assistance."

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Skuld nodded her head and said no more. She sat back in her saddle on Icewing's back. She waited with a long silver spear balanced across her lap.

14

THE MOONPATHS

“Okay, Roxie! I guess it’s up to us,” Kenneth addressed the sleek black and tan long-nosed hound which sat in front of them waiting. “Let’s finish this thing. We don’t have all day to wait around.”

Wagging her tail, Roxie huffed at Kenneth. She got to her feet and began sniffing around. She stopped to look at him expectantly.

“Oh, I get it. You need a specific command,” Kenneth said. “Okay, Roxie, please find the Spear of Destiny, and we will follow you to it. There, is that good enough?” he laughed softly.

Roxie barked three times, turned, and began running down the road. Bucephalus set off in a ground covering brisk trot behind the hound of the Hunt. The horse’s ears were pricked nearly to touching, and his head was up so he could see the way ahead of them. Icewing and Skuld followed them.

Kenneth settled in for the ride and relaxed, moving easily with the big horse. The terrain grew hilly and mostly covered with tall grass that looked like young wheat growing. Ahead the landscape rose sharply, reminding him of the Rocky Mountains that they had briefly skirted on their way to Washington State. Roxie sped up, and Bucephalus increased his speed to an easy canter to stay apace with her. They approached the hills, and Kenneth could see that the road led into a series of high ridges, which rose to each side. The gap narrowed and ended in a wall with a steep footpath which snaked up the side of a sheer cliff face and vanished halfway up.

“Hai, Hai, Roxie?” Kenneth called to the hound when she turned up this narrow path. In reply, she barked three times and started climbing. Kenneth shrugged.

"Follow the dog, I guess," he told Bucephalus. "She seems to know where she's going." He eyed the track up the hill. "This might be easier if you were a goat, though. Can you do that? Or maybe we can just fly where we need to go? For that matter, where are we?"

Bucephalus shook his head and snorted. They found barely enough room to walk without Kenneth's leg being dragged against the cliff face as they started up. Bucephalus pulled the reins and put his head down so he could see to pick his way. His rider held the reins loosely. Kenneth gripped the saddle and his horse's mane tightly just in case they slipped. The teen tried not to look down as they went higher, but his mount remained solid under him.

When they were most of the way up the footpath, Kenneth realized that the rocks to the side and in front of them didn't look as solid. A secondary image of a moonlit path seemed imposed onto the rocks akin to a TV screen. The light around them seemed to dim. Ahead of them, Roxie looked back at them, took a step forward, and disappeared.

Kenneth picked up the reins in a tight grip, but this time didn't try to yank back on his horse. Instead, he spoke to him in a firm voice.

"I don't know what this is, so let's assume since the dog just disappeared that we can treat this like a projected image rather than a solid... something. Stay steady and walk forward slowly, one step at a time. We'll figure out what we've got here and how this works," he instructed the pricked ears in front of him. He nudged the dark horse's ribs lightly with his toes. "Go," Kenneth commanded.

The sleek stallion moved forward under Kenneth's direction and approached the solid-looking wall with the picture of a darkened path beyond it. He tentatively struck out with a hoof and didn't meet any resistance. The horse sighed and moved on forward.

Immediately their surroundings went dark, and they had a brief sensation of falling. In response, Bucephalus' wings briefly snapped out and steadied them. He lit on solid ground. As their eyes adjusted, Kenneth gasped in appreciation of the beauty of the glowing path lit by the moon.

The moon itself appeared extraordinarily big and close. Gently moving fog to either side of them seemed to glow with a light of its own. It had the feel of a quiet night on the lake. Normal night sounds of crickets and singing tree frogs resonated nearby. Lapping water licked at some distant shore, and he thought he could also hear faint music. Strong floral scents wafted on the slight breeze.

Roxie waited for them to get their bearings and took off at a flat-out run. Beneath the riders, the horses' hooves struck sparks as they galloped at breakneck speed along the path after the dog. The surreal environment made Kenneth think of an impressionist painting. He imagined the stones being made of the moonlight itself with their spirit selves flying high above the flat fields and mountains of the earth below. He laughed out loud and shook his head at his fanciful imagination.

Roxie finally turned onto a narrower side path of dirt. She slowed slightly at a high stone archway and made a mighty leap through. Again the dog disappeared.

"Keep going!" Kenneth said, urging Bucephalus forward. "Don't stop; just jump where our hound did!" The stallion checked his stride slightly, collected, and did as Kenneth bade him jump over an imaginary hurdle. They came to a sliding stop behind Roxie out in bright sunlight again.

"Ah! Ow! I should have brought sunglasses," Kenneth complained and partly covered his eyes. As he blinked in the bright light, he realized that not all of the heat and sparkle was coming from the sunshine. He looked around, noting the details of their new environment as he allowed his horse to cool and his breathing to relax. Kenneth patted his horse's neck and smoothed his mane. "Good job," he told him.

In contrast with the footing they had just left, they found themselves on flat land in a carpet of white star-shaped flowers. Beyond their position was open air, where the land dropped off abruptly. A huge white bird lazily circled on the currents high above them. Acres of solid forest filled their vision to the horizon. Curiously, there was a split in color as the trees to their left were a verdant green with white fluffy clouds sailing overhead that made shadows skirt along the landscape.

By contrast, the terrain was reminiscent of a winter wonderland to their right. The trees flashed silver and sparkled like sunlight on choppy waves, yet they didn't look white. Between the two forests was a solid line of separation. They all stared at the astounding sight.

"Oh, wow! That's gorgeous!" Kenneth breathed. "But, what's causing that? I can't tell from up here," he addressed the hound. "Where do we go next, girl?"

Whuffing at them, the dog turned to look out over the valley. She walked to the edge and stood sniffing the air.

"That way. M'kay, so how are we supposed to get down? Do we jump? Is there another trail or some other way?" Kenneth responded.

Roxie barked and pointed her nose at the bird, jumping up and down. She followed it with her eyes as it soared through the air.

Kenneth quickly worked out what the black and tan hound was telling him. "Okay, I get 'jump' and 'bird' out of that." He smiled at the dog. "So, we fly this time?"

In response, Roxie wagged her tail and barked three times. She looked over the edge of the bluff to the green forest and back to the bird. She sat down, panting.

"So that's not all... What else?" He thought hard. "Roxie, do the laws of physics apply here in this place?" He nodded his head when the dog barked her assent. He spoke out loud conversationally for his horse's benefit. "Alright, Bukefal, we need to watch the bird, see what the air currents are doing. Where are the drafts going? Maybe we can glide across that expanse," he said hopefully.

Quietly, they watched the bird as it flew across the valley. Kenneth noticed that it tended to stay over the green forest and avoid the sparkly foliage next to it. He watched it glide smoothly and slowly circle upward like a hunting bird of prey. It folded its wings and dove down, only to snap them open a second later and catch another updraft.

Kenneth smiled slightly as he analyzed the bird's flight path. "We should be fine. Oh, wait. Uh, oh!"

He watched the bird edge over the line that demarcated the two sections of forest. It suddenly wavered in the air and dropped like a stone. It struggled, flapping its wings in a desperate attempt not to crash. It barely managed to get to a point where it rose again on another thermal after it crossed back over the line.

"That's not good." Kenneth bit his lip and watched for a while longer. He also noted that none of the floating clouds seemed to cross the line either. "We can't fly over the sparkly part. If we try, we'll crash badly," he said with a slight shudder. "I hate heights. Okay, Roxie, so we're flying next. What direction do we need to go?"

Roxie tucked her head and looked up at Kenneth with soulful eyes. She turned and pointed with her nose. The dog wagged her tail while she looked off to the right at the horizon.

"I see. Well, there better be a way around. I guess we'll skirt around it unless we can fly down and walk through. Is there a path, I wonder?"

For the first time, Roxie growled at them. Kenneth was taken aback when the dog snapped at the air and fell over on her back with her eyes closed. “Playing dead. Dead. Die. What the heck is that place?” Kenneth wrinkled his brow. “So evidently, we don’t want to find out. This place is full of surprises and misdirection. From our position, we have to go left to go right, and if we try to go over or through the sparkles, we’ll die. Did that cover it, Rox?”

The hound jumped to her feet and barked happily. Her blue eyes glowed, and with her tail wagging again, she approached her companions. “Come on aboard, Roxie. Bukefal is strong enough to carry two.” Kenneth patted his leg. “My lap is the best place.”

Bucephalus stretched to lower himself for the dog. She leaped into Kenneth’s lap, and he grabbed onto her to steady her in position.

“This will work, I think, although maybe slightly awkward. Okay. So if we need to stop somewhere or change direction, bark, and point with your nose. One bark go left, two barks go right, and three barks to stop,” he told the dog.

Kenneth patted his horse’s neck. “Okay, hon, if you get tired and have to stop, you set us down away from the sparkles, whatever they are.”

Bucephalus nickered softly. He backed up several steps, feeling the difference in weight and balance on his back. He hunched and dropped one shoulder, and in response, Roxie moved slightly and resettled with a good grip on Kenneth’s lap. The big horse extended his raven-colored wings. The two riders felt Bucephalus coil down into his powerful haunches and take off like a bullet straight off the plateau. At first, they dropped but then caught an updraft, carefully circling like a hang glider.

Kenneth held onto the extra neck strap and jammed his feet deep in the stirrups. He gritted his teeth and concentrated on keeping the dog steadied rather than allowing himself to look directly down.

Toward the apex of the updraft, with his legs tightly tucked, Bucephalus tilted slightly over to the left to stay clear of the shiny place. Picking up momentum, he went into a long swift glide. To maintain altitude, the horse flapped his wings between wind currents. Below them, the woodland sped by for miles. They stayed within sight of the line where the green forest ended but didn’t venture over.

Eventually, the green forest narrowed, and Kenneth realized that Bucephalus’ wing beats seemed to be slowing. He looked for a

possible landing site, paying attention to the land features below. Soon a small lake caught his eye. It appeared to have a clearing in the narrow strip with enough room to land. A waterfall with a sunlit rainbow fed the lake. He couldn't see an outlet. Roxie noticed too and barked three times.

"Is this a safe stop for a rest?" the teen asked the dog as Roxie worked her nose and wagged her tail. "Good." He tapped Bucephalus, and when the horse flicked an ear back, he pointed to the clearing. "Down!" he shouted above the wind whistling by.

Bucephalus slowly circled down, and back winged to stop their momentum just above the ground next to the water's edge. Roxie jumped off while Bucephalus was landing. She noisily lapped the clear water. Kenneth slid off his horse and plopped down.

The horse daintily sniffed the water hesitantly. Kenneth realized what Bucephalus was about to do. He jumped up and grabbed his horse's head.

"No!" he said firmly. "Roxie is from this side of the separation between here and home. She can drink and eat from sources here. If you drink the water or even eat one blade of grass, you're stuck," he told him. "I think though, that you can probably cool off with no ill effects as long as you don't swallow any. Let me get our gear off of you. I have an energy bar in the pack and a flask of water; both are from home. Skuld insisted I pack a little extra for you."

Kenneth offered his horse some clean water and an energy bar. He then unbuckled the girth and unhooked the straps to remove the saddle and bridle. He dropped their gear on dry land and watched his companion enjoy the water.

Bucephalus waded into the lake. He folded his wings and rolled in the water, carefully not submerging his head. He came up snorting and shaking the wet from his glossy hide. Kenneth marveled at how easily those enormous wings could just be made to disappear like they weren't there, yet impossibly, they were.

A prickle up Kenneth's spine was the first indication the three of them were no longer alone. He felt someone watching them. Bucephalus' head came up with his ears pricked to alertness. The horse reared and, in three splashing leaps, stood dripping by Kenneth's side. Bucephalus nudged his rider when the boy stood up and tried to see what his mount could hear and smell.

Roxie sat beside them, looking in the same direction as the horse. Her blue eyes glowed, and her tail wagged so hard her rear end shook.

An armed trio stepped out of the shadows wearing light armor suitable for fighting and quick movement. The warriors blended well with their surroundings in their dark green, brown, and gray attire. It almost appeared as if a part of the forest separated from the tree line and walked toward them. They carried bows and long, slender swords.

“You are here without invitation,” the leader addressed the human. He was tall and slender with blonde hair and an exotic tilt to his smooth features. His elven pointed ears showed through his long hair when he turned to speak to one of his companions. “They have a hound of the Hunt with them.” He frowned and turned his face back to look at Kenneth. “State your allegiance,” the elf challenged.



“**K**illing keeps them quiet for a little while, but they always come back.” Vincent Kovitch lay back on another motel room bed, watching a cockroach crawl across the ceiling. A half-empty bottle of Vodka and a pile of white powder cluttered the nightstand beside him.

His last kill had been just hours ago, but there was already a rising murmur in the back of his head. A throbbing migraine made colorful spots dance in front of his eyes. Whispers in his head grew stronger, and he raised his hand to wipe his face, trying to push away the voices. It didn’t work. It never worked.

“Shut up. Shut up!” Vincent snarled. He stood up and punched the wall behind the bed. The peeling plaster looked like a face laughing at him. He punched the image again in the nose and felt something in his hand snap. The disheveled man grabbed his hand and howled in pain.

Sinking to his knees beside the bed, he sobbed as someone on the other side of the wall pounded back. Faintly Vincent heard someone shouting over his crying. “You shut up!”

Laughing, like a hyena’s bark, sounded in his head. All he could smell was rot and blood. Although he had showered hours ago, when he sniffed himself, he could still smell it, almost like the scent itself had crawled up his nose unbidden. He rose and washed his hands. Steam rose from the sink as he turned the water on as hot as it would go. It didn’t help. His hands shook as he clawed at the skin of his fingers until the water took on a pink tinge.

"It's not funny!" he screamed at the voice. It kept laughing.

"You know..." a different silky smooth voice told him, "you can make him shut up. All it would take is a little more blood."

"I bet that guy in the next room has money. You could get more drugs," a rough-hewn female voice suggested.

"Eh, just have another stiff drink mate! Ye'll be dandy!" This one had a pronounced English accent.

"Start a fire and burn it down. You have a lighter. Make it buuurrnn," another one said.

"The guy next door has a pretty daughter. You could get another girlfriend," a deep voice wheedled.

The last one whispered an unending litany of names and places. As it spoke, images flashed through his head. Each one was more horrible than the last. Scenes of wanton horror and torture sent him to his knees again, gripping his thinning hair and pulling it. If clawing his own eyes out would help, he would have done it.

Vincent looked up and blinked several times through his blurry vision. True blackness stirred above him in the mirror. He imagined a giant panther stalking him and two flame gold eyes peered through the glass into his soul. The hyena that had been laughing nonstop for hours abruptly shut up, and he reeled as the empty spot in his head made him dizzy.

He rose to his feet as the blackness oozed through the mirror onto the sink, leaving the glass intact. Two paws with razor-sharp talons gripped the sides of the sink and pulled the rest of the darkness through the mirror.

"W-What?" Vincent stuttered through his alcohol and drug-induced haze. This was far from the first hallucination, but it was most definitely the clearest.

"Mine," the giant panther said simply. "I am here."



Tiamor're watched the other daemoni scatter in panic. One of them stopped and hissed at him. This one, the cat pounced and swatted. Taking the hint, the other daemoni left Tiamor're alone with Vincent. The voices mercifully stopped.

"Shadow!" Vincent exclaimed. "My kitty! You're okay!"

Tiamor're turned and considered the man. His tail flipped for a moment, and Vincent watched him jump up on the bed. Tiamor're sniffed Vincent's scent and wrinkled his nose.

Regret, thick and cloying permeated the man's psychic scent, but so did denial and refusal of responsibility. Vincent still believed that he hadn't done anything wrong, and he was the victim.

Vincent continued, "My Shadow. I thought you were dead. I thought Kyle drowned you in the pond behind the house. I was twelve, remember? I can't believe that you found me again. You always did chase the nightmares away."

The man sat down on the bed beside the cat and reached out to pet him. Tiamor're didn't move except for his tail tip flipping slightly. He began to purr audibly and subtly manipulated the man's energy to dull the effect of the drugs.

As Vincent ran his hand down the mussed spiky fur of the black cat beside him, he dropped his shoulders, worked his neck a bit, and sighed. The lingering migraine he'd had for months was easing.

He spoke conversationally to his cat, "I've been lonely since you've been gone, Shadow. That bastard Kyle tormented me for years after you left." He continued to pet his furry companion. "It'll be better now. He can't hurt us anymore. He drowned in the pond." Vincent smiled, remembering the day they'd dragged the pond for the bully's body. "We are safe now, just the two of us."

Vincent leaned over and slid his arms around Tiamor're's shoulders. He began to cry inconsolably as he held the black cat close. The cat, in turn, gently put his chin on Vincent's shoulder, nuzzling his cold nose up to the man's neck. They stayed like that until Vincent cried himself to sleep.

Tiamor're didn't move. While the man touched him, the spirit pulled apart his memories and sifted them. He ate the dark energy of his rage, selfishness, and hate until clarity beckoned in Vincent's mind. *Give it all to me.* 'Shadow' whispered to him gently. *You can tell me everything. I am here.* Tiamor're purred until he judged Vincent was ready to awaken with a clear mind, and the spirit was full of dark sustenance. The purring stopped.

When Vincent awoke, the only emotion he had left was deep, profound sorrow. He sat up and felt the most alive that he had in years. He looked at the cat still sitting on his bed. "You aren't Shadow, are you?"

"No," Tiamor're replied simply. His deep calm voice resonated smoothly in Vincent's head as well as his ears. It contained no feeling of threat.

"Why didn't you kill me?" Vincent wanted to know. "I have done horrible things."

"Yes," Tiamor're agreed. "You killed and lied and stole. You want to be safe, but no one is safe with you," he said gently.

Vincent cringed despite the lack of judgment in the cat's eyes. He heard scratching at the door. A sound like ice creaking heralded cracks that spread across the face of the mirror.

"I cannot keep your daemons at bay forever. Even now, they howl at your door," Tiamor're told the man calmly. "You have a choice to make. When you cast one daemon out, seven return. You will shortly have the legions of Hell on your tail."

"Because I am a killer," Vincent responded.

"No," Tiamor're told him. "Because you let them in." He turned to look at the drugs, and Vincent's gaze followed the direction of the cat's view. "And because you failed to take responsibility for your choices. One single daemon 'rode' you for the first murder. The rest were of your own free will."

Tiamor're let his bright gold eyes draw Vincent's full attention. He projected horror. He showed him the fear, the pain, and the desperation of his victims as each one died by Vincent's hand. "Nowhere is safe," Tiamor're whispered. "What will you do?" He crept closer until he was but inches from the man's face, and the cat could smell the stale alcohol still on the man's breath. "Choose!"

Mirrored in the spirit's eyes, Vincent saw clearly the monster he had become. He then understood that he could go on as before, he could seek redemption from a priest and turn himself in, or he could end it all in this lousy motel room. He considered his options. "It's too late. They're on me. I won't be able to leave," he told his companion. "God will never forgive me for what I've done."

"They are coming." Tiamor're's gaze seemed to bore into Vincent's cold heart. Cracks spider webbed up the walls under the pressure of the daemoni trying to enter. In response, Vincent looked around for a weapon. The only thing he could see was the partly empty glass bottle.

Taking the Vodka by the neck, Vincent smashed it against the face on the wall. With precision born of practice, he turned to face the mirror and dispassionately watched himself slice his own throat open. His body went down, and in just a few minutes, he stopped twitching.

Tiamor're was still standing over the man's cooling, blood-spattered body when the horde of daemoni broke in from multiple directions. They snarled and spat when they saw the death sprawled on the floor. There were mere scraps of emotional energy still floating in the air.

Furious that their meal had been stolen, the daemoni launched themselves on Tiamor're. He disappeared beneath the seething mass of teeth and claws. He fought back furiously, and as their bodies began to pile up, some of their fellows broke off to feed on the fallen. More arrived, and Tiamor're realized he was too overwhelmed to escape. Something large grabbed him from behind and yanked his head back. He saw a Hellhound coming at his throat. He'd seen a hell-hound rip a much larger daemon practically in half to yank out their core and devour them.

Tiamor're tore the back of his neck out of the other daemon's grip and twisted so that the Hellhound's pounce took the other daemon off of his back. With no time to waste and no retreat, Tiamor're did what he had sworn to himself he would never do. He jumped free just long enough to call his only ally.

"Khebechet!" Tiamor're backed up against a corner to make it easier to defend himself. He raised his spiked fur like a porcupine's quills to make himself look larger and more ferocious.

In response to the call sent out on the threads of connection that Khebechet had placed on the panther-like spirit, she touched Tiamor're's mind. She 'read' him and saw his desperate predicament. She growled in fury. "His life is mine, not yours daemoni."

A bright tear formed in the middle of the darkened hotel room. Khebechet came out of the rift in full armor. She grabbed Tiamor're by the neck, and he yowled in pain as her fingers slid into the grooves left by the daemon's teeth. He found himself hurled bodily through the rift to plop awkwardly in the garden of Anubis' temple. His nose landed on a gold-clad foot. Tiamor're winced and looked upward.

"Well then," Anubis sounded amused. "I see you got yourself into a larger brawl than you could handle. Stay there until Khebechet can deal with you herself." Anubis turned back to the garden scrying pool and watched his daughter.

Khebechet snapped her fingers, and the rift closed. She planted her spear quickly on the floor and threw up a dome shield around the room. The daemoni stopped fighting among themselves and jumped around like a pack of trapped rats looking for a path to escape. Central to the moving mass Khebechet called upon her ability to wield flame and set herself, the daemoni, and the room blazing with blue fire. The evil creatures trapped in the inferno crisped and died.

Later, investigators would blame an electrical fire for the damage done to the hotel. When his dental records identified Vincent's burned body, young girls all over the northwest breathed a sigh of relief.

"Nicely done." Anubis nodded. He turned and spoke to the panting cat. "All are dead. You won't have any foes on your back trail."

"There should not have been so many," Tiamor're replied. "I cast out seven, and I expected them to return with reinforcements and promises of feeding, but I have never seen so many gather in one place that quickly in the mortal realm."

Khebechet, who returned while the spirit was speaking, overheard. "I agree. We have a problem," she addressed Anubis and the cat. "There are far more than the usual weak spots and tears in the veil. I believe when the Spear of Chaos was brought to this side, it weakened the barriers between worlds."

Anubis' normally scary-looking face looked even grimmer. "We will see many more incursions if this is the case. We will need to call on my sister and brother to help close the holes. I will go talk to Bast and Set. I will also send a message to the High Court through Archangel Gabriel. This may get bad enough that we have to involve the Angels."

"Father, I will take the 'Spirit of Sorrow' and go Hunting. His tracking skills may help us find the source of the weakness. If it is the spear in truth, we will endeavor to find it." Khebechet looked at Tiamor're, who lay on his side resting.

The Lady of Cooling Water walked over to Tiamor're. "I can't heal you. It's unfortunate, but I would do more damage to you if I dared to attempt it. How seriously are you hurt?"

Tiamor're rose to his feet and turned so Khebechet could examine the wounds on his neck. "That is pretty deep. Did you feed?" she asked him.

The cat dropped his head and refused to look at her. He knew it would do no good to lie to a Power, so he answered her truthfully. "Yes. I caused the death of a human."

"Did you offer him a choice?" She raised an eyebrow.

"I did offer him a choice. He chose death," Tiamor're answered.

"The terms of our agreement, cat, is that you would not take the life of an innocent. The man you speak of was not innocent, and you did not kill him directly. You did, however, push the rules. We both know that since Sorrow is your method of attack to feed and Sorrow is what you are called, you can still be held to account for suicide,"

she told him firmly. “Your redemption is on the line. See to it that you do not carelessly repeat the action, Tears of Sorrow. For now, you balanced the scales by preventing more deaths.”

Tiamor’re sat up straighter. “Redemption? Surely this is not possible for one like me?” He looked at Khebechet’s back as she walked away. She didn’t stop to explain. Tiamor’re silently thought on her words as he trailed her out to the Moonpaths to Track and Hunt.

Once they reached the Moonpaths Tiamor’re quickly took the lead. Khebechet shapeshifted into her large cat form, where she was able to stay apace with her companion. Together they quested for the tears and weakness that would indicate the passage of darkness.



Kenneth carefully regarded what appeared to be three elves facing his own small team at the side of the lake. Several possible answers came to mind as the newcomers faced him. So far, they had been polite and unthreatening he reasoned, and they thought of this place as theirs. He settled for telling the truth.

“My allegiance, as always, is to the Most High God. We have a mission to find and claim the artifact called the ‘Spear of Destiny’ so we can use it to destroy Loki’s weapon, which is said to be able to destroy everything on earth and in heaven.”

“It is not here,” the lead elf stated.

Kenneth nodded. “Please pardon us. We are passing through from where we were to where we are going. I wasn’t aware of this territory being yours,” Kenneth replied. He thought back to the ‘rules’ of conduct he’d read that applied to encounters with the High Fae. It wouldn’t do to be careless. “We could not pass over the silver forest, so this was the only possible route.”

“You were seen flying over our realm. At least that part of your story is true. I was sent to investigate. What is your name?” the elf asked.

Kenneth smiled as he was aware of the trap set. “My friends call me Ken. Well met, elf.” He bowed slightly, staying polite.

The elf also smiled, noting the neat dodge of his question. He considered the boy, the horse, and the dog. “Well met in return.” He inclined his head. “I see no threat here. As you are accompanied by Odin’s hound, I believe you. Therefore, I shall allow you passage. You may drink the water here. It is pure and will not cause you

undue delay. However, I don't suggest eating anything. Your horse may find the grass... not to her liking."

"Her liking," Kenneth grinned. "Nice catch."

"Our kind have True-seeing. We know what is underneath the illusions presented to us. She is very beautiful," the elf said. "You also are very bright to my senses."

Not sure how to respond to that, Kenneth settled for more pleasantries and simple communication. "I appreciate your candor. We will take only what we need and no more. We will be on our way quickly."

"Make it so," The elf responded with a slightly deeper bow and moved away from them. Soon the warriors faded back into the forest.

Kenneth knew that the elves still watched. He would do the same under the circumstances if the situation were reversed. "Okay girl, get your stallion ass over there and get a good drink. I know you're still thirsty," he told his horse in an amused tone. "I believe the elf told us the truth. Just don't try the grass, okay?"

While Bucephalus waded back in and took deep swallows of water, Kenneth drank some of the cool water himself. He waited a few minutes, and feeling no ill effects; he refilled their flasks. "Alright, an unexpected boost and a blessing. I'll take it," Kenneth remarked.

He glanced around at the beauty of the peaceful setting and noticed its cleanliness. "The elves know how to take care of their lands. There's no litter or anything to mar the looks of the place or poison their water supply." Kenneth shook his head. "Too bad humans don't do as well. They worry about climate change and ignore the elephant in the room."

Roxie whuffed at Kenneth as he scraped the water off the horse's hide with his hands. "There's no scraper, so this will have to make do," the teen said gently to Bucephalus. "We don't have time to dry you properly. Roxie's getting impatient to go."

Soon Kenneth mounted, and with the hound not asking to come back aboard, they followed her on foot. After leaving the clearing, they found a forest road that took them in the direction they were going. Roxie sniffed the air as she trotted along but stayed on the road. Bucephalus was comfortable with the brisk pace and the surface. He moved quickly, settling into a ground covering gait.

Eventually, the green forest ended in a grassy plain, and the road continued at the edge of the silver forest. When the road

curved toward the silver trees, Kenneth finally got a good look at the barrier they had been avoiding.

"Wow!" he exclaimed to Bucephalus. "The trees look like metal growing out of the ground. Those leaves look razor-sharp too." Eyeing the forest floor, he saw why the forest sparkled so much from above. Each leaf edge appeared as if it had been carefully forged and sharpened on a lathe to a razor-thin cutting blade. The edges caught the light, and when the wind blew, it knocked the leaves together. It sounded like the tinkling of many bells.

Kenneth was astounded. "Do those actually grow that way?" It was impossible, yet there it was. Looking down on the path near one of Bucephalus' hooves, he saw one of the bladelike leaves. "Hold there Bukefal. I want to examine a leaf." Bucephalus stopped and stood steady for his rider to dismount.

Carefully picking it up, he realized it was stiff and felt cold like metal. Drawing it flat and lengthwise down his forearm, he also realized it cut his arm hair with precision. "Ha. I bet I could shave with this," Kenneth said. "I think I'll keep it for now."

He wrapped the sharp leaf in a spare cloth from the saddle pack and placed it carefully where nothing would rub against it or cut anything. He took a last look around, and they moved on while watching carefully for fallen leaves that might cut their feet. He noticed further details as they went.

Kenneth eventually realized that the forest of razors, as he'd begun to think of it, was home to small creatures that seemed unbothered by the blade-like leaves. Further into the woods, a large predator roared. He was relieved when the road curved away from the dangerous forest, and Roxie sped up the pace.

When a meandering river blocked their way, Roxie stopped. Kenneth drew up beside the hound and halted. The road abruptly ended at the river's edge. It was too wide to jump.

Tall grasses topped with heads heavy with seed waved to either side under a bright blue sky. Extending quite a distance, the grass was home to what looked like grazing horses and buffalo. Snowcapped rocky peaks rose beyond the plain. A light breeze brushed his face and played with his hair as he talked to his canine guide.

"Are we supposed to swim across?" The hound growled and tucked her head. "No? Another danger I don't perceive?" Kenneth asked. Roxie barked and wagged her tail, tucking her head again. The otherworldly blue light in her eyes faded to plain brown, and

she sat down in the road. "No again." The teen considered. "I missed something." Another affirmative bark.

He suddenly realized the landscape appeared to him in tones of gray. Gone were the holographic colors and halos.

"Wait. This all looks very normal. Did you lose the trail and bring us out on the earth? Ah, crap." Kenneth responded to her tail thumping the road. "Well, if you lost the trail, we are not close to our destination. We need to get you back to where you can pick up the trail again. So it's up to me. Hold on and let me think."

15

SPACES BETWEEN

Kenneth analyzed their surroundings versus all the places they had been and how they got from place to place. Each time, he thought, they had jumped a barrier or gone through something that looked like a hologram or mirage. He realized Roxie needed another directive command.

“So...rainbow bridge, archway, stone screen or whatever that was, a high launch point. This looks like the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, so what are we most likely to find here?” Sparkles on the water drew Kenneth’s eyes. Again, water seemed to want to guide their direction.

He stood in the stirrups looking in all directions at the lay of the land. To the right was the way they had come. He discarded that route out of hand. They couldn’t cross, and the only direction was left along the river bank. The sound of the water lapping the banks against the rocks gave him an idea. The flow was coming from their left and passing in front of them. He made a decision.

“Roxie, go left along the bank against the flow of the water. Seek a rainbow or another jump point. I’m pretty sure if we came out with you, we should be able to go the other direction too. This water has to come from somewhere, and logic dictates probably the mountains, which means waterfalls. As bright as it is out here, we should be able to find a rainbow, yes?”

The hound woofed at him and took off running. By late afternoon judging from the sun’s angle, Kenneth decided to rest his horse and let him and Roxie drink from the river. The current’s strength was greater here in response to the land rising toward the mountains. The water’s white-capped waves washed over the stones of the creek. Wildlife was plentiful. The air was full of bird

songs and the smell of pine needles. Fish jumped in the river, and squirrels busily looked for nuts.

Kenneth caught his breath when a huge solid white stag separated itself from the trees. As it approached the whitewater river on the opposite bank, it stared at them. It bugled, and Kenneth almost got the feeling that it greeted him. The deer dipped his head and bowed at his wave.

A prickle of recognition caused goosebumps. "Wait, didn't the legends say Skuld sometimes rides a white stag?" Kenneth said softly out loud. He laughed suddenly, startling some noisy crows out of the trees. "Icewing, I thought you guys were gone and left us all alone out here!" Kenneth yelled across the water.

Long and shrill, a whistle sounded from behind them. The stag gathered itself, reared, and leaped upward. Snowy wings snapped out, and Icewing landed beside them moments later. Skuld laughed and vaulted up on her horse. "You figured it out! We have been with you the whole time. You simply didn't recognize us. Remember the bird flying over the green forest? We showed you how to work out the flying route, but you had to figure it out for yourself," Skuld told him.

"I get it." Kenneth nodded. "You said you'd watch, but not help. What about now? We took a wrong turn somewhere."

"No. You're doing fine. You needed a stop for water in a safe location, so you were allowed to emerge on the earth. This will be the last exit. You are pushed now for time."

"We are seeing an unusual number of daemoni on the move. You will have to move fast to stay out of trouble. I will have to leave you soon. I must help stem the tide of taint. Your quest is more urgent now than ever. The fingerprint of the Spear of Chaos is all over this, but you must not turn aside. Find the Spear of Destiny and bring it back safely."

"You're talking different than you were before about this," Kenneth observed.

"Something's changed," Skuld replied cryptically. "I'll stay with you a little further, as long as I can, but then I will send you on."

"Alright then. Let's go. Roxie, seek!" Kenneth ordered.

They continued at speed along the river as it rose among the rocks. Kenneth could hear the roar of a waterfall close by when they stopped again for water and a little grazing for the horses. The sun shone with a golden cast in the evening light. If they were going to use a rainbow as a jump point, Kenneth knew they would have to hurry.

Thalling into a sparkling pool, the waterfall wasn't quite deafening but was still very loud. The light was angled just enough to form a bright rainbow in the mist. To reach it, they would need to jump from the riverbank. Skuld went first. Icewing leaped again, aided by his powerful wings.

Roxie and Bucephalus were close on their heels. This time it seemed like they fell through the shimmering light, but instead of landing in the water, their surroundings instantly changed again. Bucephalus' hooves hit solid stone, and they came up short with a large, heavily-armored, and stern-looking Viking blocking their progress.

Skuld saluted and rode up to him without fear. "Greetings, Heimdall."

"Hai. Sister. Again, there is a mortal on the Rainbow Bridge. The last time, this did not end well," he said and looked piercingly at Kenneth, who sighed. "But you accompany him."

"Heimdall?" Kenneth said. He was getting tired of being questioned at every turn. "Skuld doesn't need to speak for me. We are here by our free will but not of our choosing. We have just been informed that we need to pass through quickly and be about our business to foil Loki's plans. I take it there is a reason you are standing in our way. Do you have news or assistance for us?"

Heimdall looked surprised at the boy's directness and lack of fear. He looked closer. Amber heat flared in his brown eyes. No, not a boy and not mortal either, though he wore mortal skin. "My apologies, Warrior." He saluted and stood aside.

Bucephalus reared to full height with his raven-black wings open and bellowing. His front feet touched the ground, and the dark-colored horse folded his wings in with an impish snort. Together they made an impressive pair. Heimdall watched them take the lead following the hound, with the Valkyrie on her snowy steed running close behind. The rainbow quivered from their passing and faded away as the sun moved in the sky, closing the portal where they passed.

They found themselves on the Moonpath again speeding through the dimly lit corridors. A couple of shadows launched themselves at the horses and quickly went down under them only to be trampled. The riders didn't stop, but Skuld made sure they would no longer move as she passed with her spear. When the path ahead lightened to take on the cast of sunset, Bucephalus came to a

sudden sliding halt. Kenneth was glad of the saddle that kept him in his seat rather than on his horse's neck. "What is it?" Kenneth asked. Bucephalus nickered and stood steady.

Behind them, Skuld, who had managed to stop without knocking over the black horse, solved the puzzle. "Dreamer, or it appears to be. This is where discernment matters," she reminded him. "Things are not always what they seem, remember."

Kenneth judged the child was maybe five or six. She wandered down the road toward them in a pink nightdress. Her stuffed bunny was cuddled in her arms, nearly hidden by the girl's long light brown hair. Brightly smiling, she came close to the horses who towered over her head.

"Horsie!" She giggled. Bucephalus gently sniffed her and blew in her hair. She wrapped her arms around his face. "Nice horsie!" She giggled again. "Would you like some tea, nice horsie? You can come to my tea party."

Kenneth gently addressed the little girl, "You have tea? My horse loves tea, but we have important matters to take care of."

"Are you a knight on a noble quest like the bedtime story my daddy reads to me?" She beamed up at him without fear.

"Why yes," Kenneth humored the child. "I left my kingdom to go find something very special to protect it."

"My BunBun is special too," the little girl said. "My mommy gave it to me b'fore she died of cancer. She said it would be my friend and protect me from the boogeyman in my closet." She held up the stuffed rabbit in both hands even though there were tears in her eyes. She smiled again as she had an idea. "Would you like to hold BunBun for good luck, noble knight?"

Kenneth looked around at Skuld for help. She was smiling but remained silent. He shrugged. Leaning down, he reached out a hand and took the offered rabbit from the child. Surprised, he could feel the love that the child had imbued in the toy.

"You have to cuddle her like this." She crossed her arms to her chest and hugged herself. Bucephalus nosed her head, making the child giggle again. "Your hair is in your eyes pretty horsie... Here, this always helps me." The little girl reached up and removed a light blue barrette from her hair. Taking a firm hold, she grabbed Bucephalus' forelock and pulled his head down. He was unresisting when the child placed it in his hair. She clapped her hands and squealed in delight. "You have a blue eye the same color," the child said. "You can keep it so you can see." Bucephalus nickered softly when the cute little girl planted a kiss on his nose.

Kenneth offered the well-loved toy back to the child. She snatched it with both hands and hugged it fiercely. "My BunBun," she said and walked off. "Bye-bye, pretty horsies and noble knights!" She waved one last time and then ignored them.

Kenneth watched her go for a moment and saw her sit down on a blanket with a tea set quietly humming to herself and holding her rabbit. The whole scene abruptly disappeared. "What the?" He then turned to Skuld in surprise.

"A dreamer, as I said," Skuld said. "They manifest their own personal reality and can bring items with them from earth-side when they spirit-walk. The hair clip she just gave your horse is one such item. Because it is such, and a gift, you two may keep it. It won't disappear or transform into something else. She disappeared because she 'went' back home in either a dreamless sleep or she woke up."

"M'kay." Kenneth squinted and rubbed his face, brushing his hair back. "I'll figure that one out later. Let's proceed, shall we?"

They continued from there with riders and horses, both staying alert for more attacks or more innocents wandering about. Bucephalus held his head a little higher and strutted as he trotted. Kenneth didn't complain about his ride being slightly bouncier. "Proud of your new jewelry, are you?" Kenneth laughed a little. Bucephalus flicked an ear back at him but only snorted in reply.

The next time the sky lightened, Roxie stopped at a crossroads and sniffed around. She sped up again, this time on the leftward bearing road. Here, the road quickly became gravel, and the riders moved the horses to the shoulder so they could travel on the grass instead of sharp stones. Roxie barked several times and sped up to a run, baying as she went. They sped past succulent appearing fruit trees and flowering gardens. The further they went, the brighter it got, and the scents were almost cloying; they were so strong.

Bucephalus scented something new besides flowers, and he slowed to a walk before he finally stopped. When Kenneth nudged him, he shook his head and switched to the other side of the road snorting a loud alarm. He sidestepped facing an object in a heap at the side of the road where he'd just avoided walking. Icewing also kept his distance, eyeing it carefully. Both horses blew and breathed deeply. Bucephalus stuck his nose in the air, sampling the scent. He bellowed and struck out furiously with one foreleg. His ears were flat against his skull. Kenneth saw that Icewing also had his ears flattened and was glaring.

It looked vaguely human, but was covered in something white, whatever the object was. It twitched, and something rolled behind it. Kenneth heard Skuld suck in her breath, but she didn't say anything.

The teen realized she didn't have anything to add. Either it wasn't dangerous, or it was, and it was deceptive. Bucephalus didn't trust it, and he was inclined to listen to his horse's opinion. If it was dangerous, it might not be a good idea to leave it behind him to come up on their tail.

"So, what are you?" Kenneth asked.

"Ugh! Help me!" the object moaned. It twitched again and lifted itself off the ground. It was a woman. She was lovely, and her top half that they could see was scantily clad. She dripped with jewelry, and her face had an exotic tilt. The woman's hands were obviously stuck and covered with white sticky thread like her bottom half. She could not move except to push up with her hands and arch her back. Her large, well-shaped breasts jiggled as she moved. Kenneth was skeptical. "Are you trying to get free or display yourself?" he asked her.

"I'm trapped. Can you get me loose before the spider comes back?" She batted her eyes at him and flung her long red curly hair over her shoulders. She pouted. "If you help me, I'll be forever grateful. If you could at least cut my hands free?"

Kenneth dismounted to take a closer look. Bucephalus, still with his ears back and muscles tensed, stayed with him. Kenneth examined the woman's predicament. She was webbed in so thoroughly that she had no way to free herself. If there was anyone else behind her also stuck, he couldn't tell. The extra lumps made it look possible. He looked around at his horse, who still looked dangerously angry.

He removed the bladed leaf from the pack and carefully unwrapped it. When the woman saw the glint of what looked like a knife in his hand, she looked hopeful. "Oh, thank you, kind sir!"

Kenneth realized that the cocoon was relatively dry and cut fairly easily using the metal leaf. When he nearly had her one hand freed, he heard another female voice above them speaking.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." He looked up and realized a giant spider was approaching on a thick strand of web that spun out from its body while it crept toward them. The woman on the ground started screaming with genuine fear and struggling when she heard the spider approach. "Unless, of course, you want to be eaten today."

Stepping back, he watched the spider warily. “I’m tough and stringy and don’t taste good,” he responded to the implied threat.

“I don’t think she much cares. Lamia will eat anything,” the spider told him. “By all means, continue if it makes you happy. I won’t stop you.”

The spider’s surprising words made him pause. Kenneth looked at the two females and pulled his sword free of his belt.

He chopped free the remaining spider web that pinned the webbed hand in one smooth motion. The lamia then used her free hand to pry at the webbing entrapping the other. Her hands were nearly free when the spider threw a strand of silk to the back of the woman’s head and yanked her head back.

Furious that they might thwart her escape, she hissed, reared back, and swiped at Kenneth with long talons. Her snake-like fangs caught the light, and she snicked out a forked tongue. The snake-woman reached out forward again in entreaty. “Help me?”

Bucephalus stomped on the lamia’s hand for its trouble. It hissed again in pain when it found itself pinned back down where it couldn’t reach Kenneth. Bucephalus bellowed and struck out with his other hoof, breaking the creature’s nose. His rider didn’t try to stop him. He winced.

“Oooh! That’s gotta hurt,” Kenneth said.

The spider addressed Kenneth again, “Do you still want your prize?” She crept closer. “I can cut the silk for you,” she offered helpfully.

“Uh, no thanks,” he said. “You can have it, whatever ‘it’ is.”

“Good choice,” the spider said. “I will take care of this personally. She has been eating my prey and killing my daughters. It would have been such a bother to catch her again when she was done with you.”

Without another word, the spider jumped forward onto the lamia’s back and bit its head off. The head rolled into the ditch while several feet of webbing undulated and thrashed behind the headless body.

“Well then,” Kenneth said. “It looks like we’re done here.” He watched the giant spider quickly web the remaining body of the snake and turned away.

Remounting Bucephalus, he found Skuld was no longer behind him. He turned Bucephalus in a circle to find the Valkyrie standing calmly beside the giant spider in deep conversation. Since they didn’t appear in distress, Kenneth shook his light golden-brown hair out of his face and settled deeper in the saddle. “They’ll catch

up, Hon. Let's go." He patted his horse on the neck. "Good job, by the way."

A few minutes later, Skuld came trotting up behind them. Icewing came alongside, bringing his rider close enough to talk and keep moving. "Arachnia says that she is seeing an unusual number of fell creatures creeping through her domain. This last one has been the most problematic."

"Arachnia. So that's who that was? Interesting," Kenneth said.

"What is interesting?" Skuld asked.

"That she didn't attack us. But I guess she didn't feel the need with so much food already right there," he said.

"She wouldn't have whether the food was there or not. She's smart enough to know the difference in whether a snack will be, shall we say, approved," Skuld said.

"So the legend is probably true. She's not truly a spider, she was just made to be one," Kenneth observed. Another thought hit him, and he continued. "You are both weavers. So you know each other, or at least share something in common."

"Arachnia and I, we do not share ill-will for one another." Skuld smiled. "She is a neutral personality. Neither does she venture out much to come for a friendly chat."

"That makes sense. A spider doesn't go around on a flying horse like the Valkyries. She's kinda' tied in one place." Kenneth laughed. He allowed Bucephalus to walk to the next crossroad.

Skuld sighed when they stopped. "This is as far as I will go with you," she said. "You are doing fine on your own, and you're making good decisions. I need to go. Too many signs are pointing to something going wrong with the fabric of the veil itself. Stay with Roxie. Stay safe and protect each other. I will see you soon." She saluted and left them.

Roxie started trotting again, and rather than stay on the road; she sniffed around a steep rise with a jumble of boulders.

"Let me guess, another jump," he said to Bucephalus' pricked ears. "We got to go, Rox! Make it a shortcut!" Kenneth shouted to the hound.

Roxie stopped and looked at her companions. She tilted her head and looked behind her, wagging her tail and whuffing. Her blue eyes looked like stars as the light darkened again. She circled once and raised her nose to the wind.

Watching them, the hound jumped down from where she had intended they go. She barked excitedly and took off at another run along the road where it was easier for man and horse to follow.

Roxie led them to and through a stone archway a few sharp turns later.

The trail led downward and kept going. The Moonpaths grew steeper and winding. In places, there were stone stairs that the horse navigated carefully. Roxie continued with her nose to the ground and quested after the faint prickle of power dimmed by distance.

Phosphorescent light glowed to the sides of what appeared to be a colossal underground cavern. It highlighted a large river that they skirted on a wooden walkway. Somewhere in the distance, they could hear the faint splash of an oar.

A chill went up Kenneth's spine, and he shivered. "Creepy," he whispered. "Why do I feel like I'm about to meet Death around the corner at any moment?" The sound of his quiet voice echoed loudly in the chamber.

Instead of crossing the river, they turned aside and went through another archway continuing down. The heat hit their faces like an oven. Kenneth noticed lava slowly oozing in a deep chasm capped by black stone where it was partially cooling. They soon passed by, and it grew cooler again to the relief of horse and rider.

Yet another large cavern loomed ahead of them. It was black as pitch with no light at all. Roxie woofed and whined as she led them through the darkness. Once his eyes adjusted, Kenneth realized that he could still see, although there was no light source.

A blue glow lit their way, and Roxie showed up in the dimness. He smiled. "That gives new meaning to the term headlight."

The little girl's gift, imbued with her innocence and love so that Bucephalus could see, glowed brightly. "Okay horsie, watch your footing since you have the light," Kenneth told him in an amused tone. He smoothed Bucephalus's heavy mane. "Some shortcut, huh? I wonder what the long-cut would have looked like. Ya' think?" He cleared his throat, trying to peer through the dimness. "There's nothing here, just a long blackness. Why are we down here, Roxie?" She barked once and stood on her hind legs, pointing at the featureless ceiling with her nose. It had lowered enough to perceive shapes and shadows in the light they carried.

"What is it? Oh!" A colossal sinuous shape moved by overhead as if swimming in the ooze of the primordial deep. Kenneth cringed and counted. Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty... one thousand one

hundred and twenty feet long. "Dear God," he breathed. "There's not supposed to be anything that big out there, according to science!"

He felt the drip of something wet land on his forehead. He reached up and wiped it. It was slightly gritty. gingerly he smelled it. "Saltwater, fish, it smells like the ocean." Then it dawned on him. "We are under the ocean. We are going somewhere that you have to cross the sea?" Roxie barked assent and took off running again. It was a flat, slightly sandy surface and the space narrowed to a tunnel. By the time it widened out again, they had slowed to a fast trotting pace.

They were still going strong when they reached what seemed like an open doorway. "It looks like we're finally getting somewhere. Another jump point, maybe?" Except they found their way suddenly blocked.

"Oh, crap!" Kenneth exclaimed, pulled his sword, and yanked Bucephalus into a quick stop and rear. The animal in front of them barked and jumped up and down. "Why wouldn't I think that thing is real given everything else we've come across? We let our guard down! Dammit, Roxie!" he swore.

The three-headed dog towered over the trio. Its shoulders were nearly as broad as the tunnel. The spotted hound held Roxie dangling from the mouth of the center head. The other two heads barked deafeningly. It halfheartedly pounced at Kenneth and crouched with its tongues lolling. It wagged its massive tail. "Oh, my gosh! It's just a big puppy dog! He wants to play!" Kenneth told Bucephalus. He decided to try the direct approach.

"Cerberus put Roxie down! Bad dog!" Kenneth yelled firmly.

However, at the sound of his name, the three-headed dog just got more excited. Barking enthusiastically, Cerberus turned tail and ran, carrying Roxie like a puppy. Bucephalus didn't need urging and immediately pursued the three-headed dog.

Warmth and light intensified as they turned into a narrow hallway. Here there were neatly formed bricks and wall sconces. At the end of the hall, Cerberus stopped before a tall and stern-looking man in a black toga. A simple gold brooch held the garment at the shoulder.

Bucephalus careened to a stop just behind the dog. He was blowing hard, and his ears lay flat in anger. Kenneth wasn't in much better humor.

"Spot, what did you bring home this time? Another trophy? Ah, a puppy?"

"If you please, we need our dog back," Kenneth told the man. "I assume you are Hades since our hound got snatched by a three-headed dog?"

"Cerberus doesn't have much company down here, so he gets a bit lonely," the tall figure in the toga replied. "And yes, you have correctly identified me as the terrible, frightening Lord of the Underworld and my loyal doggie Spot."

"Um, yeah, okay. About our dog." Kenneth pointed at Roxie, in the hold of the giant dog who towered over him even mounted. "We can't find our way out without her. We are here only to,"

Hades interrupted. "Yes, yes, yes... every couple of millennia, some 'Hero' with delusions of grandeur comes down here to free a loved one from my 'Vile Clutches'. Who is it this time? I see you already have your soulmate with you, so it can't be her."

Kenneth glared at Hades and finished his sentence. "Pass through," he growled through gritted teeth. "We are only passing through to somewhere else. We had no intention of coming to your house except your big puppy there kidnapped our guide and ran off with her."

Cerberus barked again and lay down with the hapless Roxie between his paws. He licked her vigorously. Cerberus' three heads all panted happily as he whooed at his master.

"I see," said Hades. "Well, if you aren't here to liberate someone or make a deal, then I suppose whatever you are up to is not my problem."

"I'll have Spot take you to the border and release you. I can't have you wandering about loose here. I'm charged with taking care of souls who are in between, neither bad nor good, until such time as our Father calls them to judgment or reincarnation. Having the living mix with the dead is not good for discipline. It's messy. Just not good practice, you understand."

"Understandable." Kenneth nodded. "I am not particularly interested in the dead anyway. I am trying to rescue the living and prevent a war," he told the disinterested Power.

"Sure, sure!" Hades said. "So let's get you out of here and gone. Besides, I don't want to deal with Odin if he comes looking for his hound... Cerberus, you can't keep the puppy, okay? Put her down and take these people to the border in the direction they were going." Hades instructed his dog and patted all three heads. Dismissed, they found themselves escorted out.

Cerberus herded them along until they emerged from Tartarus on a simple dirt footpath leading upward. The three-headed dog left

them there with a regretful whine and bounded off into the darkness.

Kenneth was relieved to be on the move again with Roxie in the lead. Compared with the maze they had just left, the new path turned out to be a direct route with the shortcut he'd hoped for.

Silently waiting like a sentinel in the moonlight, another stone archway marked the end of the trail. This one was white marble and gently glowed in the light Bucephalus carried on his forelock. Roxie trotted pertly up the stairs and stopped in the center, where a blue mosaic sun decorated the floor. Bucephalus carefully picked his way upward and followed Roxie through the jump point.

Once the team went through, Kenneth realized they had reached their destination. Roxie led them a short distance to a gate attached to a huge wall with guard posts everywhere. The dog stopped and sat down, looking at it.

16

BREAKING AND ENTERING

SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE, OCTOBER 18TH, 1986 FULL MOON

“Good dog, Roxie!” Kenneth told the hound. “Now, how do we get in? One more jump?”

Roxie stood up and pointed toward the fortified compound with her nose, wagging her tail. Kenneth observed the ostentatious show of force before him.

Pairs of armed guards patrolled the grounds in regular intervals. On the roof, anti-aircraft artillery scanned the skies. From their side of the veil, Kenneth could see lines of electric blue energy in angular geometric patterns. Powerful wards meant to prevent spiritual intrusion glimmered and flickered across the building’s ornate façade. Thin filaments of energy stretched out to guard the wall and gate. This was a fact that the red cat sitting on top of the gate post ignored entirely.

“Ok, now how the hell did you get here before us?” Kenneth asked the feline with a puzzled stare.

The cat just yawned at him and flicked his ears in amusement. He settled down comfortably to watch the goings-on. Unlike everything else visible in the mortal realm, the cat was in full color and sharp focus to Kenneth’s vision. He shook his head in wonderment and turned his attention back to the problem of getting in.

Kenneth knew that the guards could not see him, even sitting astride a huge black horse at their gates because of the separation created by approaching from the other side of the Astral Veil. But that did not get them through those iron gates. “Can we make the jump straight to it?” Kenneth asked the dog.

Roxie dropped her head and tucked her tail in response, half closing her bright eyes. When she wagged her tail and whuffed,

Kenneth knew he had his answer. “Guess, not huh? Ok, so now what? Maybe we can break in.”

“The polite thing to do would be to knock,” a matter-of-fact voice said from behind them. All three of them were startled.

“Who the hell?” Kenneth said as he turned around. Since they were supposed to be concealed from mortal sight as part of the ‘rules’ of the Wild Hunt, he knew it would have to be someone also on their side of the Veil.

The light brightened to a brilliant white, and a winged figure stepped through the light into their presence. The one who stood before them bore only a faint resemblance to the romanticized depictions of Angels. Stocky and clad in full armor, he bore a large sword and a slight frown. Three sets of enormous gracefully arced white wings framed him, declaring his identity. He exuded an air of power and authority.

He glared at Kenneth sternly. “Not remotely.”

“Oh, yeah... sorry,” Kenneth said.

The Archangel Michael nodded.

“Considering that we are kind of technically breaking and entering, knocking on the door may not be in our best interest,” Kenneth responded.

“The Spear of Destiny is a prize that men have sought after for two millennia now. What makes you any more worthy of holding it than they?” the archangel challenged.

“That’s a loaded question,” Kenneth answered. “But, there’s that whole saving the world thing. We need it to stop Loki from getting his hands on the Spear of Chaos.” Kenneth blinked in the brilliant light surrounding the archangel. “Besides, I’ll give it back. Ruling the world would be way too much paperwork, and I hate paperwork.”

“You will put it back where you find it?” the archangel inquired leadingly.

“Yeah, well, maybe. No. Not exactly,” Kenneth stumbled over his answer. One thing he was good at was quick thinking on his feet. “I have a better idea. It doesn’t belong in the hands of men.”

“Go on,” the archangel encouraged.

“So, my thinking is we just make it disappear,” Kenneth responded.

“And how do you plan on doing that?” the archangel asked.

“Why are you asking me questions you already know the answers to?” Kenneth asked in return.

“You may not ignore the dangers for all involved in that action,” the archangel declared. “The consequences would be an unbalancing of power the world over, and as you are currently in flesh earthside, neither you nor your friends have the foresight required to understand all repercussions, good or bad, from taking it from one seat of world power. That is for our Heavenly Father to decide,” he declared with finality.

“Let God give it to whoever He wants to. But considering the state the world is already in, it don’t need to stay here. I’m betting you happen to agree, or you wouldn’t be here, and we wouldn’t have gotten this far already,” the teen pointed out.

“Perhaps, but you still have not answered my question,” the archangel pointed out.

“By making everybody think they already have it when they don’t,” Kenneth stated.

“To hold the Spear of Destiny is a heavy responsibility, and you can find yourself driven to extremes by light, as well as darkness. Either way leads to madness,” Michael told him.

“Not to point out the painfully obvious or anything, but I’m standing here arguing with an archangel, trying to get my hands on the Spear of Destiny so that I can destroy the Spear of Chaos and prevent the end of the world. I’d say I’ve already crossed the madness and extremes category. Besides, you already know everything that can be known about me in the first place. I think we can both agree that I am not the poster child for mental stability,” Kenneth pointed out.

The archangel’s lip twitched in amusement. “Agreed.”

Kenneth dismounted from Bucephalus and went to one knee. “With God as my witness, when this is done, I promise to place the Spear of Destiny where no one will ever find it, even if they are looking right at it.”

“You’re going to find yourself with an overwhelming number of enemies,” the archangel said.

“Yeah, I know, but other than being the poster child for the mentally unstable, the other thing I seem to be really good at is pissing people off,” Kenneth grinned unrepentantly.

“Just as long as it’s not the wrong people,” the archangel said pointedly.

“Yeah, well, there is that,” Kenneth pushed his hair back from his face and nodded agreement.

The Archangel Michael laid his hand on top of Kenneth’s head. “Warrior to warrior,” Michael said, “I will hold you to your vow. I

will also want this back.” He took off his sword and placed it in Kenneth’s hand when he stood. Eldritch fire burned along the blade in bright shifting colors.

“You would give me your sword?” Kenneth was shocked into stillness. He thought after all he’d already been through, nothing could surprise him.

“You will need it where you’re going,” the archangel said firmly and also handed him the baldric.

Kenneth caught his breath and felt his muscles tighten with the threat that implied. “Yep, now I’m *really* screwed,” he said.

“You can always change your mind or turn back,” the archangel reminded him.

“Yeah, that whole free will thing is a bitch, but I’m already here, so let’s do it,” Kenneth replied.

“The Spear of Chaos is already in the hands of the enemy,” the archangel warned him. “It has been taken since you left the earthly realm. You must recover it before it reaches the depths of Loki’s domain.”

The Archangel Michael turned to the wrought iron gates and touched them. A pulse of light flashed, and the runes rearranged themselves throughout the property. “You may enter, General Ha-Set,” he told Kenneth formally and stepped back through the bright light. “Go with the blessing of our Father.”

“See you, brother!” Kenneth answered and then waved, but Michael was already gone.

With the protections triggered, the barriers no longer held them back. The three of them easily and silently slipped inside, with Roxie leading the way as she followed her nose to their goal. Ahead of them was a large empty grassy area which would have provided no cover to anyone just walking in. However, since Kenneth, Bucephalus, and Roxie were incorporeally operating on the other side of the veil, Kenneth believed no one would see them. However, halfway across the yard, he discovered that the usual rules were only partially suspended in their case.



A heavily armed guard was blissfully unaware of their passage and could not see the dog. He tripped over Roxie and fell flat on his face. In the compound guardroom, unusual movement on the security cameras caught the attention of the Officer on Duty.

The captain punched the radio. “What the hell is going on out there?” he demanded.

“Sorry sir, I tripped over something!” crackled the answer.

“That was some trip, Parks!” the captain replied. “There’s nothing there but flat ground. While our distinguished guests are here is no time to be playing around. If it happens again, there’ll be hell to pay, got it?”

“Yes, Sir!” the hapless guard answered. He gazed intently at the ground around him, puzzled. He barely caught the edge of the officer’s next exclamation. “Sir?”

“Sonofabitch!” Zooming and backing off the camera didn’t bring the fuzzy spots of moving light into better focus. There were three of them, one large and two smaller ones coasting unhindered toward the building. One was the general shape and size of a man. “Ghosts? In broad daylight?” He switched to infrared, blinked, and shook his head to try to clear his eyes. He had heard of cameras being able to pick up spirits in certain lighting conditions, but he’d never seen it himself. In his position, he could afford no mistakes.

“PARKS! Turn around and tell me what you see!” the captain barked the order into his radio.

“Nothing Sir, but the empty yard,” the guard the officer addressed answered. “Although what I tripped over felt big and solid, there’s nothing.”

The captain considered for a moment. He refused to call an alarm for ghosts. A decorated military veteran didn’t believe in such things. He dismissed it as a trick of the light. Nevertheless, he switched one of the cameras to infrared and made sure the rest were recording as he sat back and watched the invisible man, horse, and dog walk right up to the building. When the spots on the camera reached the door, he suddenly got an uncomfortable feeling in his gut. A buzzer sounded on his desk.

“Shit!” The captain jumped up. “That’s not ghosts! Somebody’s got some kind of personal cloaking device!” Seconds later, he hit the radio alert. “A-wing, we got possible intruders. Mason, I need you and Lankford to check out the alert on door A7. Handle it quietly but see it’s handled.” He glared at the camera, unable to leave his post to see for himself.

“Sir, we’ve done a thorough search and turned up nothing,” Mason radioed back to the guard room several minutes later. “It’s most likely a malfunction.”

“Fine, I’ll call maintenance,” the captain stated. Puzzled, he still hovered over the cameras. He could no longer see any anomaly

present. “A trick of the light,” he shrugged and shook himself as a chill made his hair rise on end. He was halfway to reaching for the phone when he witnessed his man suddenly go flying off his feet and slam hard into a wall as he was walking past a set of guarded double doors. Lankford had been following closely behind him. While he wasn’t hit by his partner, he also fell over something invisible in the hallway, much like the unlucky guard earlier.

In a state of grim dread, the officer smacked the emergency button. “What the hell!” he started yelling. “Someone or something has made it into the building. I want every security officer in ‘A’ to get your asses to the round room, now!”

The captain cursed as he saw the two guards posted outside the doors to the round room also go down as if something had hold of them. How were they supposed to fight an invisible enemy? Given what he knew was inside that room, he struggled not to hyperventilate. He and his team would be lucky not to leave in body bags tonight.



Bucephalus didn’t quite look contrite after double-barrel kicking the guard who had run into his hindquarters. Kenneth wiped his hands after disabling the second guard.

“I can’t let you have all the fun,” Kenneth whispered to his horse. “They can’t see us, but at least we can still affect our environment. This is a good thing, methinks. It reminds me of when we took down Ulfr and brought the Astral and Earth planes together to take out his body and soul at the same time. The rules here seem to be similar.”

Roxie jumped up on the door and scratched it, then turned to look at Kenneth expectantly. “Is this it?” he asked her. The dog gave a sharp bark of acknowledgment.

“All-righty then. Let’s get what we came for,” Kenneth said. He opened the double doors just as another group of guards rounded the corner with their guns drawn. They pulled up short when they didn’t see anything but their comrades on the floor unconscious but breathing, and the doors opening on their own. In the confusion, Kenneth simply strolled into the room.

The round room was aptly named. It was deeply carpeted in plush burgundy red with gold accents on the chairs and mahogany-paneled walls. A skull and crossbones flag hung on one wall with flags of nations, photographs of world leaders, and CEOs past and present. The central feature of the room, however is what drew the eye. A glass case containing a single item was sitting in the middle of a round stone table that almost filled the room.

Around the table filling plush chairs were the presidents and dignitaries who provided the power behind the thrones and elected governments the world over. A former President of the United States stood leaning over the table with his finger pointed at a red-faced man wearing white robes and a headscarf.

“We agreed to your request Mr. President,” the man replied to the American. “It is not our fault your free press is making news of our arms for hostages deal! Perhaps if you put those dogs on a leash and execute your American personnel with loose lips, you can put a stop to the nonsense.”

“We don’t do that in America,” the President declared. “We have Constitutional protection of our Press!”

“You mean you don’t let anyone know you do it. At least in Iran, we don’t hide behind party politics and lie about it.” The man stopped and considered his next words. “Then I would suggest that to save face prosecute your military commander. Put the blame there and take the attention away from anyone in this group or President Reagan.”

Leaning over the table about to reply, the American was the first to notice something amiss when the clasp fell open on the glass case in front of him. Long the assurance of the group’s world domination, the Spear of Destiny was their prized possession. Confiscated at the end of World War II from the Nazis after Hitler’s fight with his Rothschild kin, it had been brought here and placed under lock and key for many years.

“Sorry, gentlemen, to steal your prize,” Kenneth said, “but you *clearly*, do not have the wisdom to carry this.” Kenneth didn’t feel sorry at all, but hey, it sounded good, he laughed to himself.

He opened the case carefully in front of all the shocked faces in the room. Of all the things that could bring them each to their feet, the Spear of Destiny vanishing into thin air from its resting place was one of them. The expected shouting started, and Kenneth grinned.

"Which of you is responsible for this?" the American demanded.

"You thief!" the Iranian accused him. The mood in the room went downhill from there, with everyone shouting.

Kenneth jumped off the table, quickly mounted Bucephalus, and with Roxie following, they ran out into the dusk. The security officers and the meeting room were left in disarray behind them.

The lone watcher of the cameras watched them go until they disappeared through the compound's iron gates. A bright light flashed briefly and was gone along with the Spear of Destiny.

 F warm wind blew over the fields of Summer, ruffling the high grass. Barely perceptible, the fabric of the world rippled.

For the first time in a millennium, mortals had crossed the veil. Khebechet caught her breath. The amount of power required to bring such a thing into being was absurd. Foreboding spread like frost over her heart. Over the ages, she had learned to trust these feelings. Something was going to go badly wrong, though she did not yet know what.

The light of two moons shone down from above. Beautiful blue trumpet-shaped flowers hung from vines draped over silver birch trees, nourishing rather than strangling them. This was Khebechet's place, the garden that she and her father had coaxed to life from nothing.

Tiamor're's large golden eyes watched her anxiously as he waited for some sort of result from her use of farsight. The panther-like spirit shifted uncomfortably, trying to remove pressure from the stump of his missing paw, which was slowly regenerating. An ambush had ended their joint hunt for the Spear of Chaos. Only Tiamor're's quick thinking and reflexes had kept a hydra from taking Khebechet's head off, though not without cost to himself.

Khebechet's feline ears twitched as the excited baying of hunting hounds echoed across her mindscape. She had been sitting here for what seemed like hours but may have been days watching all the trouble her chosen soul-sib could get herself into. There were so many twists and turns of possibility. The truth of destiny and free will being what it was, neither held full dominion. She frowned as she rose from her meditative stance. Visions and farsight would not suffice for this.

“Lost in thought, my daughter?” Anubis inquired as he entered Khebechet’s favorite meditation garden beside the temple, barely sparing a glance for the dark spirit which lay beside her.

“Ahyi, my father.” Khebechet nodded, turning to face him.

“You’ve been worrying,” Anubis observed.

“So have you,” she told him.

Anubis’s rich chuckle filled the air. “Perhaps, but idle worrying will not do anyone any good.”

A faint smile curled the edge of Khebechet’s mouth. “That never seems to stop either of us.” Her expression turned serious again. “I do not want this to end with sacrifice. Far too much has already been lost to the daemoni and the dread lords’ mad ambitions.”

Anubis sighed out in a long exhale, centering himself before responding. “Your chosen sister and her bonded will do as they must, as they always have. Nothing is yet certain, my daughter.”

“They are strong, and Fate favors them, but there is darkness tugging at the edges of my vision, something hidden from my Sight.”

“You fear the outcome.” It was not a question.

She turned, looking into the twilit forest that she had shaped to remind her of her devastated homeland. “Yes.”

Khebechet sighed deeply and turned to the Spirit of Sorrow, who had been listening. “I thank you for your aid Tiamor’re,” she said. She returned to the spirit’s side under Anubis’s watchful gaze. “Quite honestly, the situation is looking bleak. I cannot in good conscience ask more of you than you have given already.”

“Lady,” Tiamor’re began formally, “you have given far more than a thing like me would have ever thought to ask for. You could ask a great deal more of me, and still, it would not be enough.”

Khebechet’s brows furrowed as she tried to puzzle out what the spirit meant by his words. She almost felt like crying when she realized that she was probably the closest thing to a friend that Tiamor’re had ever encountered, even though their acquaintance began with her trying to kill him.

Anubis bent down on one knee and looked into Tiamor’re’s eyes. “You are far more than you believe yourself to be, dear child. We do not reckon debt amongst friends and make no mistake,” he paused, “a friend is what my daughter considers you to be.”

Tiamor’re caught the psychic scent of tears unshed as Khebechet tried to hide the sorrow that her startled realization had caused. Dumbfounded, Tiamor’re struggled for the words to respond to Anubis.

"To be a daemon is to fight for food and power, to kill anything that gets in the way. There is nothing else. I don't know... I haven't..." Tiamor're's throat closed so that he couldn't speak.

"I understand, but it doesn't have to be that way," Anubis told him gently.

Tiamor're sat up straighter. "What do you mean?" His golden eyes reflected the glow of Anubis' fiery intensity. He could feel the energy crackle around him as he was being Read.

"While your exterior is dark, you are not completely so. Even if you were, Redemption and Grace are universally available to even the daemonic. The difference between receiving it or not is choice. It is a gift, not an affliction and must be accepted, or it shall not be received."

Khebechet spoke up, "You don't realize it, but you made your choice long before you met me. You chose how to sustain yourself, and instead of leaving a trail of death behind, you aided those you could."

"I didn't need to kill them, but I did take from them, and isn't stealing things supposed to be wrong?" Tiamor're asked plaintively.

Khebechet laughed brightly. "Oh darling, that's exactly my point. A daemon wouldn't care."

"So then, what am I?" Tiamor're asked with a puzzled frown.

Khebechet answered with a mischievous grin. "You are my friend. We can figure the rest of it out later." She grew more serious. "But time is short, I'm afraid. We must prepare for war. We failed to find the Spear of Chaos, so war is inevitable with that loose in the worlds. But you, my friend? It will be some time before you are again ready for battle."

She stopped while he thought through what she said. When he nodded agreement, she continued, "Because of this, I don't think it will remain safe for you here. Too many Powers will see the color of your coat and not your core. You may rest here for a time, though, and I will leave it to you to decide when you are ready to go. I'm not going to throw you out as if I don't have any more use for you. You deserve better than that."

Tiamor're inclined his head in assent. "I understand."

Anubis and Khebechet returned to the Temple. Tiamor're calmly watched them as they left him alone in the garden.

17

THE ABYSS CHASE

Gwisted and bent, the wraith was an ugly little thing. He grunted and moaned. He found that licking his intense sunburn didn't ease the pain of his smoking hide. Finally, he had settled into an awkward scamper as he used his fourth limb to keep a tight grip on the stolen Spear of Chaos.

The spear pulsed with bloodlust and desire, lending the daemon a glut of power. It reminded him of the magnificent creature he had once been until he was thrown down upon Earth, drowned in the Great Flood, and cursed to a half-life with the other Nephelim; considered an abomination. Like most of his brethren, he was brought low by his base desires. Even with a new name, he was denied all but bare sustenance to exist until he withered away to this, THING he could not recognize. He growled at the unfairness of it all.

"No more!" he whimpered. "I am doing things MY way, and no one will be able to stop me now! I will feast, and I will drink rivers of blood and death, and I will rule them all! They will pay dearly for what they have done to me."

He snarled and jumped to the space between the worlds. He could easily escape any pursuit that would surely follow on his way to rule the Realm of Darkness. "And then? I will make the very gods pay and they will watch their precious Earth ruined so that all the Abyss can feast on its rotting bones! I will begin with the traitors who went crawling to the all-Father, begging forgiveness and offering their pitiful allegiance!"



Roxie made two more jumps into different levels of the multiverse. Kenneth and Bucephalus were hot on her heels. She ran along a star stream with her nose in the air as she quested for the second artifact. The dog's hair rose along her spine as she slowed and showed her gleaming white teeth. Her low growl turned to a snarl.

"That doesn't sound good," Kenneth said. "What is it, Roxie?"

The hound's eyes shone like blue stars. It was almost blinding in the low light. She barked once sharply and slung her head for them to follow her. She gathered herself in a mighty leap. A step behind her, Kenneth had the odd sensation of endlessly falling through all the other levels. Though there was no air to catch them, Bucephalus involuntarily spread his wings and flattened his ears with displeasure.

Momentarily Bucephalus' hooves touched solid rock. His horse moved so quickly that Kenneth's attempt to take stock of their surroundings was foiled by having to grab the saddle to keep his seat. Roxie already had hold of a nasty-looking little creature and was making an admirable attempt to tear its leg off when Bucephalus dove in for its throat.

"Bad, horrid, filthy dog!" it shouted with a low-pitched guttural scream. It swung the Spear of Chaos wildly at Roxie's head but missed.

Kenneth's grab for the spear also missed. He shifted his grip on the Spear of Destiny and swung it, but the daemon was out of reach. The dark spirit had managed to drag himself and the hound of the Wild Hunt to the very edge of a black broken crevasse. Roxie however, refused to let go, and a chunk of putrid-looking flesh came off. The piece evaporated in noxious black smoke. The spirit screamed as it jumped into the blackness below, and Roxie's snarls turned to a whine. She backed away from the edge of the drop-off and tucked her tail. The dog threw herself down, panting.

"You didn't follow, so I guess there's some reason you can't?" Kenneth asked the hound.

Her sad look and the diminished glow of her eyes said volumes.

"We have to get to that spear!" Kenneth declared and shoved his heels into Bucephalus urgently. "Oh well, here goes nothing!"

Bucephalus hesitated despite his rider's urging. He stared at the barren and broken landscape. Darkness pushed and tore at his core as it tried to pull him in. Energy blacker than his hide oozed and

dripped like oil. Even the very stone he stood upon seemed warped and stretched somehow. He shook his head, throwing his mane in Kenneth's face. Even gravity seemed to want to pull him into the dark maw.

The stallion spread his wings wide and reared to full height, bellowing challenge. There was no answer as he came back to all fours and sidestepped. The horse sensed that ambush and danger awaited if he jumped. The old-soul part of his Self recognized this place. It told him they would never see the light of day again if they entered.

Kenneth was having the same feeling as he noticed every detail. Where they stood was only the beginning of the broken landscape. This appeared to be the entrance. Beyond the rift created by the death of a star were broken floating landmasses. It was as if some planet had exploded and its twisted remnants suspended in midair. Everything as far as the eye could see warped and spiraled slowly as the trap became visible.

Unlike the Summerland, there was no cohesion. He could see just emptiness and desolation. The teen could only imagine what they'd find inside that rift.

Kenneth knew there was only one reason Roxie would stop here. The Abyss. Home of the daemoni, the Outer Darkness. It had many names, he mused, but all of them were bound into one inescapable problem. They were out here, and their goal had been dragged into the depths of Hell by a demon.

"Okay, so that's what Hell looks like," Kenneth muttered to himself. "And... I suppose that's what everything else will look like if we don't do this. Fun, fun," he said sarcastically.

Kenneth urged Bucephalus forward again. The horse obediently gathered himself for one more leap. This time as they fell, their descent was slower. Initially, it was like sinking through a thick black fluid.

Below, a vast landmass caught them before they could descend to another level underneath. They were practically right on top of what appeared to be one of the numerous teeming cities that were concentrated around the points of entry of the tainted energy that oozed into the Abyss from multiple sources. In some places, as they searched for where the daemon might have taken the spear, it

appeared to rain blood. In others, the rocks hissed as acid ran in rivulets and tar bubbled in pools.

There appeared to be no living thing except for misshapen beings that fed upon taint or abided in the filth. Most of these residents shrank away in fear as they passed, too minor in strength to take on the intruders, too self-absorbed or too busy fighting over the scraps of death that were left by stronger daemons. Some of them simply preyed upon others for food. There were no plants for Bucephalus to nibble and no clear water for either of them to drink. Everywhere they looked, they saw only ruin.

“Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven? Yeah, that guy was a fucking idiot.” Kenneth looked to one side and then the other. “What a shithole!”

“Hey, don’t step in that!” Kenneth wrinkled his nose as his horse avoided another pit only to find something foul-smelling and sticky dripping on them from somewhere above. The only light other than Bucephalus’ blue hair clip was a sickly greenish-purple glow, and Kenneth could see no signs of fire anywhere. “Well, so much for hellfire and brimstone,” he observed wryly. “Anybody stuck here if they don’t get eaten first would simply die of boredom. Ewww, this is gross!” He attempted to wipe himself off and only managed to smear the filth further across his face.

Their progress was slow, but they continued until they started hearing screams ahead. The terrain flattened out onto a smooth desert plain of bare stone and sand, with the central daemonic city of the first level of the Abyss to their left.

All Kenneth and Bucephalus could see was a writhing mass of creatures biting and clawing one another in a huge pile. More daemoni ran toward the fracas while others, the smarter or stronger ones, hung back. These waited, watched for their chance, but were unwilling to risk their own hide.

“I think we found it,” Kenneth said to Bucephalus quietly. “I’d almost be willing to bet that’s what’s got all their tails in the air.”

When they got a little closer, several blood-thirsty daemoni noticed them at the same time and broke off for what they thought was easier prey. Kenneth’s brown eyes narrowed as he growled through a feral grin, “Come on, you bastards! We ain’t here for the view!”

Suddenly they were swarmed. Bucephalus took the straightforward approach and charged into the mass of them, stomping viciously. He grabbed something with wings as it tried to

launch itself into the air and ripped its arm off by the simple expedient of not letting go with his teeth and standing on it.

The next one was on them in a flash. When it latched on with its claws and went for the horse's jugular, Kenneth stopped swinging the Spear of Destiny. He drew his Khopesh and ripped the daemon off by its throat with the hook of the Egyptian sword. As it fell, one of its fellows grabbed it. This one tried to drag it away to eat, and another mass of fighting broke out as others attempted to steal the prize.

They took advantage of the distraction to drive further forward into the fighting. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the carnage as the daemoni were just as willing to attack and kill each other as they were the man and horse.

Bucephalus repeatedly reared and plunged, kicking out behind him to clear space and keep the scrabbling horde off his hamstrings. Kenneth wielded the spear and the Egyptian sword on his back, which worked well in close and for swinging. He speared two at once as his horse achieved a little space to push forward. He found the daemoni backing off, squealing at something else that had joined the battle. He pulled the Spear of Destiny free, shoved the Khopesh home in its sheath, and drew the archangel's sword.

The light it gave off was terrible to the daemoni, accustomed as they were to the darkness. Many scattered back in terror or burst into flames, immolated instantly. In front of them, one daemon, stronger and more vicious than the rest, had come up from the bottom of the pile holding the Spear of Chaos. It bellowed triumphantly and faced them without fear. This spirit refused to shrink back from the light of the holy weapons Kenneth still held.



 Elsewhere in the multiverse, slit-pupiled green eyes watched events unfold through a silver scrying pool. Void black walls reflected light from luminescent white crystals set into sconces where gracefully curved arches supported a domed ceiling.

“Damnit, Isa my sister! What were you thinking?” A taloned hand viciously carved a path through the air in frustration. Tension rippled through Khebechet’s body as she began to pace, not taking her eyes off of the scene below her. “She is lost to us, my father,” Khebechet nearly keened with grief. “Isa has gone where we cannot follow.”

Anubis's eyes narrowed, tracing the path of the warding runes at the pool's edge. They flared with golden fire, the only thing preventing the Abyss from leaking through the tenuous connection that scrying created.

"It is not that one could not follow her, my daughter. The difficulty lies in getting back out again. The rifts into the Abyss are quite eager to swallow everything they can and are loathe to give anything back," Anubis responded.

A snarl ripped through Khebechet's throat as she continued to pace, still glaring into the pool. "Of course they are. Such is the nature of anything created by that fell realm. It isn't as if they are true Gates."

Feeling her father's eyes on her from across the pool, she stilled and looked at him. He met her gaze with calm patience, the edges of a grin curling around his muzzle.

"A Gate," she thought aloud. "A single point in space and time, existing in two places simultaneously. Perhaps..."

"What if I said that it was impossible?" Anubis echoed her words from millennia before.

Khebechet recalled the answer he had given her clearly, even to that moment. "Then I would say that something being impossible is an oxymoron, a paradox, a contradiction in terms."

Considering her options, she closed her eyes and reached for her gift of foresight. She hissed when the images refused to settle into a definite path. The chaotic nature of the Abyss itself and the volatile situation prevented cohesion. "Of course, it wouldn't be that easy," she grumbled, opening her eyes. "I won't leave her down there, my father. I can't."

"No good can come of them or the artifacts lingering there," Anubis nodded.

She let out a cry of pain as her mind, already treading along the paths of possibility, tapped into the next logical connection. The vision's foresight was so intense that it *burned* as it drew her under.

Kenneth groaned and attempted to clear his head. The Spear of Destiny and the archangel's sword were still firmly in his grip. He'd been determined not to let go when the spears crossed. His flesh smelled burnt. While his face and chest were certainly in enough pain, his neck was the worst. The skin of his neck cracked and bled sluggishly as he attempted to move. He managed to roll over stiffly from where the blast had thrown him and took stock of the situation.

Enemies surrounded him. They were thrown and scattered from the force of the blast. Some appeared to be dead, while others moved and twitched weakly. He could not see Bucephalus, but there was a white bundle of something several feet away. He pulled himself by his elbows and knees toward the pale figure. His head was still spinning too much to try to get to his feet. Venom dripped from several bite wounds, but he ignored those when he realized who it likely was that lay so deathly still.

White feathers with a golden sheen half-covered her face. Reaching out, Kenneth gently brushed the edge of her wing aside.

“Isa?” he breathed in shock. “How?” He realized she was still unconscious from the blast. Placing a hand on the skin of her arm, he felt the livewire tingle of her energy. He sighed in relief. Flopping loosely, the wing that had curled over her was unharmed, but the other one that was crumpled beneath her appeared broken. “God, no!” he exclaimed. “Why did it have to be you? Why didn’t I see it?” She began to stir, and after forcing himself not to hyperventilate, he got hold of himself.

“Mary Lou, get up,” Kenneth demanded. “This is no time to lie about.” He reached out to shake her gently awake. She moved slightly and opened her eyes. He was nearly undone at her first confused words.

“Ha-Set?” She attempted to sit up and squealed in pain as the bones in her broken wing ground together.

“It’s Kenneth,” he replied. “You’re hurt.”

Mary Lou favored him with a sour look. “Obviously.”

“Are you up to using a sword?” he asked her.

“I can do anything I have to,” she insisted. “This isn’t the first time I’ve lost the use of this wing in battle.” She looked over her shoulder above the current break at a large scar from an old daemon bite. “One of the dark ones caught me unawares from above and brought me down. Khebechet healed it well enough for flight.”

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“Ka’Ali, of course. You remember her?”

“Oh, that stuck-up Priestess of Bastet you liked?” Kenneth grimaced. “I try not to.”

Mary Lou glared at him. “She’s my best friend, Ken.”

Kenneth decided to settle for something less confrontational. He knew she would argue with him regardless. “Here, let me help you up.” She squealed again when he put his arms around her to

gently lift her to her feet. The pain seemed to radiate through her whole back.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” he asked her. “We need to get moving.” Some of the daemoni around them were starting to groan and move in more than twitches.

He hissed as she leaned on his shoulder for support, putting pressure on one of his wounds that wept black ichor. Mary Lou almost recoiled in concern. “You’re hurt too!” she said.

“It’s fine,” he responded with a groan. “We don’t have time to worry about that right now.” Kenneth’s eyes narrowed as he saw the marks under her jaw from where he hadn’t been quick enough with the Khopesh to keep the daemon off of her neck. Black, tainted blood dripped down her collarbone.

They looked at each other as a low throaty growl sounded just behind them. Mary Lou nearly fell but caught herself. She could feel the familiar sensation of the taint seeping in. She concentrated what energy she could spare around the bite but didn’t have the strength left to take care of it properly. This time there was no one to burn out the poison.

Kenneth considered his options briefly and handed her the Khopesh sword. “Here, make good use of this.”

“Anything else?” she asked him.

“Yeah,” he said firmly. “Don’t get dead.”

“Michael? Mike?” Kenneth peered intently up at the rift they’d entered. “A little help here? We could use an Angel about now!” He waited several seconds for a response then turned his attention to the matter at hand.

The urgermach was still somewhat disoriented, but it recovered quickly from a stumble as it crept upon them. Its vaguely canine head dripped acid over its scaled hide from serrated teeth, and it lashed its serpent tail wildly, seeking prey to bite. At Michael’s name, it cowered back and also looked up. It growled just before it sprang on them.

The rest of the daemoni who weren’t killed in the initial blast circled in agitation. They sought the dark power source that was gone, but they were not brave enough as of yet to enter the radius of the blast zone.

Scenting weakness, the daemon jumped at the angel’s broken wing. He knocked her down, but not before she split his skull with the sword she held. Determined not to go down without a fight, she climbed painfully to her feet again without Kenneth’s help. She stood back to back with him, attempting to ignore her pain so she

could concentrate on the battle at hand. She glared intently at the circle of massed opponents and dared them to come.

Kenneth was angry, no, more than that. He was enraged. "A little help would be nice!" he complained.

"We were on our own as soon as we came here," Mary Lou whispered in a low tone. "Nobody's coming," she said. "They can't."

She looked in dismay at her wings as her feathers turned from their natural shimmery white to a dull gray. Her light dimmed with the taint in her energy body. She was now in her true soul form, forced out of any shapeshifting to protect herself from the explosion. There was no more hiding any part of her nature. Isa could not deny her impending end. She could feel the darkness beginning to seep through her. It was only a matter of time before she would either Turn and become a true creature of Evil or simply fade. Her heart fell. She knew what she had to do.

"Fine, then," Kenneth said. He ground his teeth. "We don't need them anyway." The sting of his bite marks just seemed to give his anger strength. This was at least a familiar feeling. The Spear of Chaos had often whispered to him in his sleep to let his anger free. He unleashed it with a bellow. "We will take as many of them down with us as we can!"

More of the daemoni overcame their hesitation. Two urgermach, larger, stronger, and smarter than the rest by virtue of their pureblood demon status jumped out of the pack. A tall dark-cloaked shadow behind them bolstered them. The smaller of the two displayed quickness and grace in its feints and false attacks. They toyed with their prey, trying to draw them away from each other for easier pickings. The larger tired of the game and attacked Kenneth directly.

Kenneth met the daemon's fangs with the Spear of Destiny, knocking it rolling as it sizzled and howled. "Yeah! Who's next!" Kenneth swung at the next one with the sword and speared another.

Behind him, Mary Lou had her hands full. She fought the agile urgermach, barely missing time and again. The world blurred as the taint slowed her reflexes and stiffened her muscles. The daemon was swift, and her responses weren't quick enough. It finally got inside her guard.

She screamed as it held her down while the fanged tail struck again and again. It finally let go and fell still as its jaws and throat burned away from the inside, the poison of her light tearing

through its darkness. Kenneth speared it to be sure it was dead, but it had accomplished its purpose.

The angel lay gasping. The very air of this place was tainted. Her feathers turned a darker gray, with the tips going black. She found herself without the strength to lift the sword. "You've got to end this," she looked up at Kenneth. "I'm Turning."

"Mary Lou, Isa... No. Get up. We can still fight."

"Kill me, now, before I Turn completely," she said. "I can feel the hate and rage taking over. I don't want to live like that for eternity."

"No, you can fight it! It's not who you are. Please!" Kenneth reached down, intending to pull her to her feet, and nearly recoiled. Her gold-flecked eyes were turning black, and she opened her mouth to show dagger-like fangs. She hissed at him. "You must!"

Kenneth pulled her close instead. "No! Isa, stay with me. Don't you dare die on me again!" He closed his eyes and kissed her forehead. Her light brightened, and her eyes cleared.

"Ha-Set, I am sorry." She tenderly brushed a stray sprig of sticky hair back from his face. "Perhaps, you can get out of this place somehow. If I don't make it, remember me, ok? Go give 'em Hell!"

She closed her eyes. With supreme effort, Isa gathered the last of her light and attempted to burn the poison out. Her hair and her wings turned white. She glowed with the fire of a star. For a moment, it seemed as if she would succeed. Then as she pulled the core of her being in tight, she burned out in the attempt and lost any pretense of cohesion. She simply burst apart like fireworks in Kenneth's arms.

Beautiful specks of glittery light rained down on the whole area. Wherever a spark of light touched a daemon, it burned mercilessly. Howling, writhing daemons added to the chaos. Their fellows tried to avoid being hit even as they spread the bright sparks everywhere in their panic. Where sparks touched sand, a white crystal grew. Even a pit of tar turned to clear, pure water when several sparks landed in it. The small light banished its darkness.

The loss was nearly too much for Kenneth to bear when he felt the soul-link vanish. Remember her? God, how could he not! In some lives, deadly enemies, in some lovers, in some simply friends or family, but always dancing together through time, meeting their destinies, learning, and growing and struggling. He had

pushed her away because this was a loss he had never wanted to face. “I will never have the chance to tell her,” he said with a growl. “They are going pay for that.”

When he looked up, his eyes were completely black as he finally unleashed his full rage. He picked up the Spear of Destiny and walked determinedly forward. He decided that the tall figure who seemed to be directing the chaos would be a good place to start.

Kenneth waded into battle, with vengeance being the only thing that mattered. He wielded the Spear of Destiny wildly, killing anything that got close enough. If it wasn’t close, he chased it down. He fought for a long time. He wasn’t sure if it was hours, days, or months, but he simply kept killing until the horde scattered.

Finally, covered in demon filth and with his many wounds throbbing, Kenneth stopped before the dread lord. The archon simply watched and waited as he had when the Spear of Chaos entered the Realm. He could afford to be patient after all. He knew his enemy had nowhere to run, and his rage suited his purposes admirably. The dread lord might let the thing live, he could be an interesting tool. He considered the one who stood before him.

Kenneth pointed the Spear of Destiny at the dread lord. “You’re next!” he growled.

“Well, General,” the dread lord addressed him calmly. “Just how do you think you are going to do that without a holy weapon to aid you? And this time, you have not the army of Egypt, Rome, Macedonia, or Japan at your back. There are no other angels here to help you either. That would be an interesting trick, don’t you think?”

“What are you talking about?” Kenneth sneered.

“Oh, come now,” the dread lord answered. “You have performed admirably. Your soulmate would be proud, would she not? How many of my simple daemoni did you kill? Hundreds? How perfect.”

“You don’t care? How could you be so cold-hearted? Those were your soldiers,” Kenneth was puzzled. Weren’t they at least of a kind?

“Oh, I don’t care about them,” the dread lord purred throatily. “They are bait. The question is, how can YOU be so cruel, yes? They are living creatures like yourself, who deserve a chance.”

“Don’t twist my words!” Kenneth spat.

The dread lord laughed as if at an inside joke. “General, for all your expertise, you still don’t understand, do you? They may have

been daemoni, but you gave your soul to us just the same when you became like them, and it so happens, the sword of my nemesis and the spear you carry.”

“I’m not giving you shit!” Kenneth declared.

“Oh, but you already have, and I tire of this.” The dread lord removed his cloak to reveal his radiant countenance. “Bow before me. Kneel.”

Instead of light, the dread lord was surrounded by a dark corona. His huge black wings were fuller than Isa’s wings, which had been designed for speed in flight as all her kind were. These wings were built for gliding. He was beautifully handsome.

“I only kneel before God,” Kenneth said in disgust.

“That pretender,” the dread lord said. “I wield the true power here and on Earth. So many bow to the Dark Web in servitude, even as they claim they serve the Light,” he said. “It is beautiful is it not? There are the things that men do to feed my realm and my children which remove them from Grace; the murder of the innocent, rape of women and children, bloodletting in their not-so-holy wars, the delicious pollution that makes feeding oh so easy, and the self-righteous who spread hate and eat the heart from God’s churches in all of the earth’s religions.

“Man against woman, sister against brother, they do my work for me. Sometimes it’s rather boring, as I have little to do but rake in the spoils as they point to each other and refuse responsibility for bringing my realm to theirs,” the rebel angel monologued.

“Poor thing! Get to the point.” Kenneth wasn’t impressed.

“The point General, is that you have done so much for me already that I should reward you with a place at my side. You aren’t going anywhere, and I would have someone interesting to talk to. All you have to do is pledge your heart and soul to serve me as my warlord. We will take over the rest of the Abyss and break open the pathways to your world.” He stepped towards Kenneth, seeing the desire in the teen’s eyes to run him through with the spear. Still, he came closer.

“Nice try, Sherlock. I can’t pledge my heart. I don’t have it with me to give.” Kenneth took that moment to lunge forward, burying the tip of the spear in the dark angel’s belly. “You’ll have to ask Set for that, and he’s not sharing.”

The dread lord grabbed the spear impaling him. “You gave your Self to the Warrior aspect, did you? Then you are of no further use to me. There is no need for honor or rules here.” He

used the spear as a conduit to begin pulling the dark energy from Kenneth's rage and hate into himself.

The dread lord bent down and looked into his eyes just before Kenneth was drained of tainted life energy completely. "I'm sure Loki will be very angry at the loss of his Spear, but you have given me two greater prizes with which I shall take over the Multiverse.

"I now have the archangel's sword, and by your wielding its power with hate, you have given me the Spear of Dark Destiny. It shall not ensure mankind's dominion, but daemonkind's dominion. Whosoever carries it is guaranteed the final Victory, and the burning Light will be extinguished forever!"

Kenneth's senses dulled as his life force was drained to nothing. His empty husk fell over and shattered into millions of tiny pieces. The dread lord calmly pulled the spear out of himself and picked up the sword. The balance of power would be forever changed, and the Great War would resume, destroying Realms and Worlds as the Elder Race of Dark Angels returned for vengeance.

hebechet clung to her father's warmth and solidity as she sobbed. "No, no, no, no!" He caught her as she fell to the ground. The vision had pulled her under completely, leaving no focus left for balance. Tears coursed their way down her face.

Long fingered hands gently pulled silky strands of black hair away from a face grown pale with shock. "Calm... Focus... What did you SEE?" Anubis instructed gently.

She let out a shuddering breath as she anchored herself once more in the present. Her father's smooth voice centered her. "My vision showed the beginning of the end. I SAW the final death take her my father, the artifacts twisted to dark purpose and the daemonic of the bottomless pit breaking free." Her voice gained strength as she gathered herself, her lips twisting into a snarl. "This, I shall not allow!"

Khebechet accepted Anubis's aid in getting to her feet. Light flared around her as she summoned her armor and her weapon, preparing for the battle ahead.

"The Council of the Powers would never approve of such an action. Neither will the High Court of Heaven. The Abyss is to remain closed until the appointed time," Anubis reminded his daughter solemnly.

"It is their realms and temples at risk as well, and even Heaven's Gates may fall if no action is taken." Khebechet turned and ran. She

could not do what was needed here. Even in desperation, she would never open a Gate to the Abyss here in the Summerlands.

"My daughter!" Anubis called.

Khebechet turned for a moment in response, catching a small pouch that Anubis threw. "You may find these useful," he told her.

Small stones clinked and rattled in the pouch. Tucking the cord around her neck, she jumped elsewhere as soon as she exited the temple.

Hist curled and flowed around her. Years ago, Khebechet had carved out a small ritual space along the shadowed edge of the Moonpaths. It would not prevent daemoni from escaping their imprisonment, but it would prevent taint from spreading rampant while she dealt with the task at hand.

Vague impressions of trees loomed through the pervasive mist just past the circle of stones. Hardly ideal, but it would do. Taking a deep breath, she tapped the depths of rage she felt at the thought of her friend's demise, the hate at the injustices done to her herself through the millennia. It was the only way she would be able to open a Gate to the needed location. Any energies used to create such a construct had to match that of the destination.

Fighting abhorrence and nausea, the black energy flowed over her talons as Khebechet drug them through the Astral Veil. Gritting her teeth, she continued even as the fabric of the realm screamed with the intrusion. As the Gate yawned wider, it tried to suck her in. She fought the pull of the Gate even as she expanded it. If she let go, it would start to close as there was no natural taint in this area to sustain it. She had to have enough time to get to them and get back out again.

Finally, the hole extended until it matched the circle's diameter, almost twelve feet across. Shifting into her silver dragon form, she dove through.



Ghat's MY stick," Kenneth told the daemon mildly. He pointed to the Spear of Chaos, "I will have it back."

"You can have it through your belly," the daemon snarled. "All the rest of what you carry will be mine. Your horse's entrails will

decorate my door, and I will feed his blood to my nestlings. You, I will simply throw to the Hell Hounds."

"Nice try, genius," Kenneth smiled threateningly. "One mouthful of Bucephalus' blood would kill your whole nest. I've seen the filth you eat. My horse is too pure for your kind."

"Night Death," the daemon answered. Its dark face was twisted into a snarl. It still faced them, unafraid. "I know who he is. I feasted at the table of his kills unseen, in Alexander's day. Blind men plowed their fields under with the blood of their wars while they comforted themselves that it was God's commandment." It licked its lips. "Your horse is not as pure as all that. If he were, he would not have been sent back to that pitiful excuse for a mortal realm for redemption. Any spirit can become warped, tainted, or broken given enough pain, even an angel. Whispers imply that this one has already fallen."

It was the daemon's turn to expose his teeth in a threatening smile. Bucephalus flattened his ears in response. "Besides, where are you going to go? You are as trapped here now as I am. When we jumped here, it was a one-way trip to Hell. So what's your plan, mortal?" The daemon taunted them laughing uproariously as if at an inside joke.

"First," Kenneth replied calmly. "I am going to kill you. Then, I will kill all of your so-called nestlings. As for my horse, he is going to live up to his name and be the Death of Night."

"You have only to examine my words to see I speak the truth," the daemon attempted to assure him.

"Barely a partial truth. But here's some real truth for your dumb ass. This is the Spear of Destiny, dick-face! You are a dead motherfucker!" Kenneth planted his toes hard in Bucephalus' sides to tell him it was time to end the conversation and get the Spear of Chaos.

In agreement, the big black horse reared to full height. He bellowed, snapping his wings out as he struck forward hard with one forefoot in warning.

The daemon hissed in defiance and grabbed a nearby four-legged monstrosity. It mounted and faced them. Hunched and slender, the four-legged daemon proved to be quick. With purpose, the two charged low, snapping rapidly. Bucephalus danced back out of reach and gave it a sharp blow with a hoof. Spinning around cat-like in retaliation, it came in from the side, and the daemon-rider swung the Spear of Chaos. Almost, Kenneth grabbed it, but

Bucephalus had to scramble away at the last moment to avoid the claws of the daemon's mount.

Another daemon sprang at them. It went down quickly to the Spear of Destiny. With his other hand, Kenneth swung the archangel's sword. Their opponent's mount squalled in pain when the sword tip grazed him. Enraged, it came after them with its rider grinning maniacally. He saw what he thought was an opening, and he directed his mount to come at them again from the side.

As Kenneth smoothly spun the Spear of Destiny, Bucephalus saw their opponent's defenses weaken. The beast was favoring its left front shoulder. It pulled up just enough to allow Bucephalus to make a time-honored war-horse move.

The stallion neatly pivoted on his haunches and sidestepped. He planted his hooves firmly then held rock still. The maneuver positioned Kenneth to come sideways up and under the wraith's swing at the perfect angle. He blocked the Spear of Chaos in a thunderous clack with a solid blow by the Spear of Destiny.

The resulting explosion was blinding and deafening. Kenneth's ears rang as he was thrown from his horse by the force of the blast in his face. He felt a searing pain on his face, neck, and arms from the heat generated by two artifacts of such tremendous power clashing. He found himself rolling end over end across the hard rocks.



Kenneth groaned. His head throbbed, so he lay motionless where he'd landed. The Spear of Destiny and the archangel's sword were both firmly in his grip, determined as he was not to let go when the spears crossed. Relief that those were intact made him relax slightly.

The scent of burnt flesh met his nostrils. Although his face and chest were certainly in enough pain, his neck felt the worst. Upon his first attempt to move, the skin of his neck cracked and bled sluggishly. He managed to roll over stiffly from where the blast had thrown him, then, looking around, Kenneth took stock of the situation.

Enemies surrounded him. They were scattered from the force of the blast. Some appeared to be dead. Others moved and twitched weakly. Bucephalus was nowhere to be seen, which caused a creeping fear to rise in his gut. Looking further, Kenneth saw that there was a white bundle crumpled several feet away. It didn't look

as if it belonged in the filth and squalor of this realm. Led by his instincts, he moved to investigate.

Kenneth pulled himself by his elbows and knees toward the pale naked figure. His head was still spinning too much to try to get to his feet. Venom dripped from several bites on his armor and from where it was smeared on his skin. Kenneth ignored it when he realized who it likely was that lay so deathly still.

White feathers with a golden sheen half-covered her face. Reaching out, Kenneth gently brushed the edge of her wing aside. “Isa?” he breathed softly in shock as he looked upon her beautiful face. “How?”

He realized she was still unconscious from the blast. He sighed in relief at finding her alive. Flopping loosely, the wing that had curled over her was fine, but the other one folded beneath her appeared broken.

“God, no!” Unbidden emotion rose in him. Kenneth exclaimed and covered his face with his hands, “Why did it have to be you? Why didn’t I see it?”

Slowly, the crumpled, dirty angel in front of him stirred awake. He forced himself not to hyperventilate then resolutely took hold of himself.

“Mary Lou, get up!” Kenneth urged her. “This is no time to lie about. The battle isn’t over!” Carefully he reached out to shake her gently further awake. She moved slightly. With a groan, she opened her striking brown, gold-flecked eyes.

Kenneth gasped. He stared at her and felt like he could almost fall into those eyes. Hints of cool blue in her irises reminded him of the Nile River in the desert. It also reminded him of the Lapis Lazuli that came from the mines he’d guarded for the Pharaoh. Those memories came with a yearning for a past he’d tried to leave behind. Kenneth’s self-control was nearly undone with her first confused words.

“Ha-Set?” She attempted to sit up. Grinding sounds came from her broken wing. Waves of pain where the ends of her bones crunched together made her squeal and tense her muscles.

“It’s Kenneth,” he replied. “You’re hurt.”

Mary Lou favored him with a sour look. “Obviously.”

“Are you up to using a sword?” he asked her.

“I can do anything I have to,” she insisted. “This isn’t the first time I’ve lost the use of this wing in battle.” She looked over her shoulder above the current break at a large scar from an old daemon bite. “Khebechet healed it well enough for flight.”

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Ka'Ali of course. You remember her?"

"Oh, that stuck-up Priestess of Bastet you liked?" Kenneth grimaced. "I try not to think about the mess in Egypt."

Mary Lou glared at him. "She's my best friend, Ken," she sounded sad.

Kenneth decided to settle for something less confrontational. He knew she would argue with him regardless. "Here, let's get you up." She squealed again when he put his arms around her to gently lift her to her feet. Sharp pain seemed to radiate through her whole back.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" he asked her. "We need to get moving." Some of the daemoni around them were starting to groan and move in more than twitches.

He hissed as she leaned on his shoulder for support, concerned about her injuries. Mary Lou almost recoiled in concern. "You're hurt!" she exclaimed.

"I'm fine," he responded. "We have other things to worry about now." Kenneth's eyes narrowed as he saw the black marks under her jaw from where he hadn't been quick enough to keep the demon off of her. Black, tainted blood dripped down her collarbone.

They looked at each other as a low throaty growl sounded just behind them. Mary Lou nearly fell but caught herself. With dismay, she could feel the familiar sensation of the taint seeping in. She concentrated what energy she could spare around the bite, but didn't have the strength left to take care of it properly. This time there was no one to burn it out.

Kenneth considered his options briefly and handed her the Egyptian khopesh sword. "Here, use this."

"Anything else?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he said firmly. "Don't die."

"Michael? Mike?" Kenneth peered intently up at the rift they'd entered. "A little help here? Where is an archangel when you need one?" He waited several seconds for a response then turned his attention to the matter at hand.

The urgermach was still somewhat disoriented, but it recovered quickly from a stumble as it crept upon them. Its vaguely canine head dripped acid over its scaled hide from serrated teeth and it lashed its serpent tail wildly, seeking prey to bite. At Michael's name, it snarled and sprang at them.

The rest of the daemoni who weren't killed in the initial blast were circling in agitation. Most of them sought the dark power

source that was gone. However, none but the strongest were brave enough to enter the radius of the blast zone.

Scenting weakness, the daemon shot forward low to the ground in an attempt to hamstring the angel. It knocked her down, but not before she split its skull with the sword she held. Determined not to go down without a fight, she climbed painfully to her feet again without Kenneth's help.

Resolutely, she stood back to back with him, trying to ignore her pain so she could concentrate on the battle at hand. She glared intently at the circle of massed opponents and dared them to come.

Kenneth was angry, no, more than that. He was enraged. "A little help would be nice!" he complained.

"We were on our own as soon as we came here," Mary Lou whispered so that only he could hear her. "Nobody's coming," she said. "They can't."

Frowning, she looked dismayed at her wings, but not because of her injury. Her feathers were turning from their natural shimmery white to a dull gray as her light dimmed with the taint in her energy body. She was now in her true soul form, forced out of any shapeshifting to protect herself from the explosion. There was no more hiding any part of her nature. Mary Lou-that-was-Isa could not deny her impending end. With darkness beginning to seep through her, she knew it was only a matter of time before she would either Turn and become a true creature of Evil or simply fade. Her heart fell. She knew what she had to do.

"Fine, then," Kenneth said. He ground his teeth. The filth of his bite marks just seemed to give his anger strength. This was at least a familiar feeling. The Spear of Chaos had often whispered to him in his sleep to let his anger free. He unleashed it with a bellow. "We will take as many of them down with us as we can!"

More of the daemonic overcame their hesitation. Two urgermach, larger, stronger, and smarter than the rest by virtue of their pureblood daemon status jumped out of the pack, bolstered by a tall dark-cloaked shadow behind them. The smaller of the two displayed quickness and grace in its feints and false attacks. They toyed with their prey, trying to draw them away from each other for easier pickings. The larger of the two tired of the game and attacked Kenneth directly.

A faint whistling sound reminiscent of a firework slowly rose over the din of battle, growing louder and louder. In confusion, several of the daemonic looked up. A bright light came from above.

Silver fire formed a corona that edged to green as the tainted atmosphere burned.

Cries of ‘Archangel!’ and ‘Run!’ rang out as some of the daemonic who had heard Kenneth calling to Michael earlier assumed he had been answered. Some of the remaining horde scattered. “HOLD YOUR GROUND!” a deep voice roared over the confusion. Those who had not already escaped froze in indecision at the dread lord’s orders.

Silvered draconic wings snapped out just before Khebechet hit the ground, halting her fall. Strong jaws took hold of the small urgermach that had been targeting Isa. With a single flick of her head, she snapped its neck. Standing beside Ha-Set and Isa with her tail curled protectively around them, she tossed the body of the urgermach contemptuously at the dread lord’s feet. She let her fire spill out over her fangs to set the body alight. Continuing the motion, she spun in place, forcing the horde to fall back or be incinerated.

She shifted back down to a more humanlike form. Shrugging a coil of rope off of her shoulder, she threw it at Kenneth. “Ha-Set, bind her wings!”

“It’s Kenneth,” he replied, snatching the rope out of the air.

“Khebechet!” Isa cried.

The ring of silver fire began to flicker and die. Shadows flitted around behind it. Low notes from a hunting horn rang out. Deep roars began sounding further out in the abyss, responding to the dread lord’s call.

“Kill the interloper!” the dread lord’s voice commanded over the screeches of his burning minions.

Anubis’ daughter eyed him and turned her attention back to those she intended to rescue. “We haven’t time to argue! Shadow drakes will be here soon. Bind her wings!” Khebechet told Kenneth urgently.

Driven by the threat of the dread lord’s wrath, a chimaera braved the flames. It leaped forward, enraged by the pain of its burning coat. Khebechet swayed to the side and drove one end of her dual-headed spear through its chest. She spun with the momentum and threw the corpse back through the fire. Panicked screeches ensued as the melting daemon impacted its fellows, catching more alight.

“Rude,” Khebechet muttered. She felt faintly annoyed. She turned her attention to the wall of flames, tinted green now as it burned away the corruption. Anubis’s daughter raised her hand.

She poured more power into the fire, which caused it to rise far over their heads.

“A broken wing is not conducive to flight. If we do not leave right now, we will all be spending the rest of our short Eternity here,” Khebechet told Kenneth urgently.

He took the sword of the archangel and plunged it into the dull stone at his feet. Angel fire spread out from the sword's blade in all directions, bolstering the protective circle. “If you can carry her out of here, I'll tie her up. You two can leave,” Kenneth responded. “I have some demons to kill.”

“No!” Isa looked fearfully at him. “I'm not going without you! No way I'm leaving you here to die by yourself!”

“This argument is irrelevant,” Khebechet interrupted. “If we fall here, the Multiverse goes with us.”

Kenneth rolled his eyes at her melodrama. “I will be fine,” he declared stubbornly. “I have the two most holy items known to mankind. I cannot be defeated. It is not possible. If you can get out, I'm sure I can find a way after I've cleaned this place up. Here, raise your arms. This is going to hurt,” he told Isa grimly.

“The only way out is closing rapidly; another will not be made. Decide because it's now or never,” Khebechet snarled impatiently. She resisted the urge to pace in agitation and looked up at the portal above them in concern. By her estimation, they had another couple of minutes before it closed, and she could see flyers approaching. “Not only that, I won't be able to get any of us out without someone able to fight off what's going to come at us as soon as we're off the ground. I'll have to focus on flight and evasion.” She eyed their escape route further. “Unless, of course, you want to fly her out by yourself, General?”

Kenneth pretended to ignore Khebechet as he focused on Isa. She gasped in pain, nearly falling to her knees as Kenneth drew her broken wing to her body and wrapped the rope around her. He crisscrossed it tightly over her shoulders, leaving her hands free, but keeping her wings stable. Tears were falling down her face by the time he was finished, and she gritted her teeth to keep from crying out again.

“Are you okay?” Kenneth asked her gently.

“Just, let's get out of here,” Isa told him, gasping. “Khebechet can carry both of us. We accomplished what we came for already.”

Khebechet twisted back into her dragon form then lay down on her belly to allow them to climb on. She grimaced at the sticky, tarry

feel of the ground against her scales. The ring of fire still burned beyond them, keeping the evil horde at bay for the moment.

Kenneth turned to help Isa onto Khebechet's back then retrieved the archangel's sword. He saw that the crystalline dragon armor she wore came with a dual saddle. Handholds set just above the front of the wings paired with the seats placed for maximum balance just behind her shoulder joints. Footholds were recessed in the side of the plating. Taking his weapons firmly in hand, Kenneth climbed on behind Isa.

"Hold on!" Khebechet's deepened voice rumbled beneath them as she rose. Tensing all four legs, she pushed off with all of her might, throwing them into the air.

The silver dragon swerved wildly to avoid being rammed by a shadow drake as soon as they took off. Kenneth stabbed upwards with the Spear of Destiny as it passed above them.

"Keep them off my wings!" Khebechet told them. With several powerful wingbeats, she headed for the portal above them.

Kenneth realized the advantage their height and slow climb gave him as he looked down. Milling daemoni jumped and snapped, trying to reach them to pull them out of the air. "Oh, you want a piece of us?" Kenneth asked the massed evil below. "Okay, if you're hungry, eat this!" He pointed the archangel's sword below them, and answering angel fire poured out. It spread wildly as much of the remaining horde of daemoni died where they stood.



Dot all of the horrors of the Abyss were intent on attacking them. Many still slunk in the dark shadows, intent as they were on their own concerns.

A mid-level daemon with a dual nature observed everything on an outcropping of stone high above the conflict. Though he was powerful and vicious enough to command others weaker than itself, Adamacht was not strong enough to challenge the dread lords and their Generals.

Adamacht watched with amused contempt. Unconcerned about discovery, it hissed at the silver dragon from safety. He remembered these three. He licked his lips at the delicious memory of their mortal deaths of the flesh. Each of them was betrayed, hated even, by those they trusted. Afterward, Khebechet had angrily flung

him, barely coherent, into the Abyss. Yet, here they were in his domain.

He watched the dread lord's pitiful attempts to gain control of the situation and nearly laughed. Khebechet especially had a talent for disordering carefully laid plans, but HE knew how to bring them down. This particular plan was going excellently. After all, he was the expert because he knew how to manipulate their reactions. He stopped to consider his next action as he looked with satisfaction at the opening above.

"Yessss! It worked perfectly," Adamacht hissed.

Rather than go down to the dread lord's call, the spirit of Treachery and Betrayal began to climb. If Adamacht was quick enough, he could get out of this place. He missed the carnage he could cause in the world above as loved ones turned against each other. It had been long and long since he had been able to satisfy his thirst for blood.

The portal was slowly closing, but the daemon slipped through the hole in his shadow form, moving slowly to avoid drawing the attention of anything waiting outside. Direct confrontation was not his way unless victory was certain. For now, he needed to get clear and plan.

The spirit of Treachery and Betrayal was not the only daemon to notice the limited window of escape. The moving shadows that came through the hole slowly, one at a time, slunk away in all directions. Some hid, and others jumped clear as soon as they reached the edge, heading for the 'space between' where they could go anywhere in the Multiverse to look for easier pickings than what any of the dread lords allowed them.

In seconds, the slow trickle through the hole became a flood that created a whirling vortex around the circle that held it open so more could come through. The portal widened instead of closing as daemons dragged the taint from the Abyss through with them. Not even a brilliant light appearing right over the portal stemmed the tide of daemons.



Flortally wounded, the shadow drake that Kenneth had stabbed with the Spear of Destiny shrieked as it fell. The air of the Abyss was thick and soupy. It resisted Khebechet's climb upwards.

Dragon fire burned deep in her throat, cleansing the air as she breathed it.

The shadow drakes had no such trouble. They were perfectly at home in their environment. Four more of them darted and spiraled just out of their reach. Three came in above them, and one dove down straight for Khebechet's right side wing.

Isa watched it come with narrowed eyes. "Anchor me!" she told Kenneth over her shoulder. Not enough reach was possible with the Khopesh, and this attack required refined targeting to avoid hitting Khebechet. Isa quickly transferred the sword to her left hand and let go of the saddle. Kenneth steadied her.

With the portal open now above her, Isa had access to the powers of Light that she couldn't use while she was a horse or closed up in the Abyss. While she couldn't heal herself in her weakened state, she did have her natural weapon available to her in her True form.

Isa raised her hand and drew power from outside the portal. She hit the shadow drake with a lightning bolt as it came close. Sweeping her hand quickly across her body, she drew the bolt of light to strike the other two drakes out of the air. They crисped as they dropped.

Isa sagged in the saddle, her energy spent. The outside edges of her wings began turning charcoal grey as the taint started going systemic. Sensing Isa weakening, Khebechet growled. "Conserve your Light, my Sister. We will get out of this yet."

The fifth shadow drake drove forward from behind as it sensed an opportunity. Feeling the disturbance in the air behind her, Khebechet lashed her armored tail. Razor-sharp, the bladed tip opened her opponent's long throat from chest to jaw.

The last of their pursuit fell away. However, just when it looked as if they were going to make it out with no more attacks, Khebechet was forced to back wing to avoid flying straight into the dread lord. The black-winged archon grinned as he let go of the orb of virulent purple energy he held in his hands.

Khebechet shrieked when it impacted her chest. The crystalline plating there cracked as it absorbed most of the damage, and her muscles seized as dark lightning sizzled over her scales. Khebechet snarled and twisted away from another shot, pumping her wings to regain lost height.

She gathered her fire, compressing it between her jaws. As the dread lord readied his energy for another volley, she released it in a bright sphere. Although her opponent dodged, she detonated her

attack, engulfing his entire right side in flame. Reeling from the impact of the dragon fire, the dread lord flew straight into the beam of angel fire Kenneth aimed upward at him with the archangel's sword. The wall of darkness their opponent threw up to block the dual attack quickly burned away with the onslaught of light. Screaming as the feathers of his black wings burned, he was forced back.

Taking the opportunity, the dragon gathered herself. With a final burst of speed, Khebechet shot through the portal with her companions still on her back amid a crowd of exiting daemoni.

A brilliant blue light on the top side of the portal was the first indication they were not without aid. The archangel Michael received his sword from Kenneth, who gladly gave it to its rightful owner. As more daemoni poured through the opening, Michael violently sliced and swung, killing them as they exited in a confused swarm. Blinded by the light after the darkness they escaped they slammed into one another and screamed in pain as they died or were forced to retreat.

Khebechet turned quickly and breathed searing flame into the portal. She crisped anything close to the opening before any other daemoni could follow them out. The Archangel Michael dragged his sword around the edges of the portal and began to burn it closed.

Just on the other side, the dread lord screamed in hatred as he too attempted to follow them out. He used all the dark power at his command to force the portal open as the Archangel Michael and Khebechet tried to push it closed.

In the last moment, before it was too late, the dread lord squeezed his black wings through the portal. He aimed with a power blast at Michael.

However, before the dark angel's attack struck, another angel interposed himself between them. The energy dissipated harmlessly against a curved sword, blacker than the darkest night. The razor-thin blade held an aura of void and annihilation made manifest.

Everyone froze in place as the new presence commanded all attention. Kenneth noticed the smug smile on Michael's face.

"Hello, brother," the new arrival said silkily in a pleasant, even tenor. He wore a dove gray tabard over white battle robes. Three sets of snow-white wings showed his rank as an archangel. He set his boot on the edge of the portal. It stopped moving.

"Azrael!" the dread lord nearly screamed in terror. He quickly folded and clamped his black wings down to his back with the

presence of the Angel of Death. He bowed his head in submission.
“Are you here to kill me before the appointed time?”

“Only if you persist in this ill-advised course. You shall have your freedom, but not now,” Archangel Azrael told the fallen archon.

The dread lord nodded his head in defeat and dropped away into the miasma of the abyss. Once he was gone, Azrael moved his silver boot and allowed the portal to begin closing again.

Before it closed completely, the Archangel Azrael waved his hand across the portal. Several small orbs of light flew out and gathered around the archangel. They listened as he whispered gently to them. Their lights brightened before the sparks of innocent souls sped off and disappeared, freed at last from their prison in the Spear of Chaos.

Finally, all was quiet, and the mist gathered around them while the remaining dark shadows slunk away unremarked. Khebechet sank to her belly and laid her head on her paws, exhausted. “Alright, you two, off,” she rumbled.

Isa slid weakly down to the ground with Kenneth close behind her. Isa squealed as the movement jostled her broken wing. She sat huddled as Kenneth unwound the coils of rope.

The Archangel Azrael paused a moment, watching. The Archangel Michael approached with a smile. “Thank you, my brother,” Michael said formally.

“This was one duty I was glad to perform,” Azrael replied. “Long in coming, these souls should be free to determine their own path.” He saluted, and with a burst of light, Azrael was gone.

Khebechet groaned as she let go of her draconic form. She hissed lowly as she peeled off her cracked breastplate and poked at the spreading purple bruises beneath it. She grumbled, “Four thousand years since I forged this set of armor and nearly as many battles. ONE trip into the Abyss, and it’s fried.” Somewhat louder, she addressed her companions, “I should be fine. You two, however...”

She opened the leather pouch hanging at her neck and spilled the contents into her left hand. An assortment of stones glittered in the low light. Several stones glowed brightly. Picking out a bloodstone and a piece of charged quartz, she approached Isa.

“Here, hold on to these while I treat General Ha-Set.” Isa took the bloodstone in her left hand to help draw out the poison and the quartz in her right to bolster her fading Light. Khebechet poured the rest of the handful of stones back into the pouch.

Extending her talons to full length and coating her hands in silver fire, she turned to Kenneth. “Alright Ha-Set, come here.”

“I don’t swing that way,” Kenneth stated. “You’re not my type. I prefer my girls, you know, human?”

Khebechet stared at him flatly. “Human? You can get yourself in trouble that way, and you’re still as tactless as ever I see. Before we go ANYWHERE else, the taint has to be burned out of the both of you.”

“What do you mean?” he asked her, puzzled. “I’m fine,” he said. “I’m already burned on my neck, face, and arms from the blast, but no big deal.”

“I can throw you right back down there into the Abyss,” Khebechet threatened. She knew he’d missed the point and decided not to waste time arguing. Far more urgent was Isa’s light slowly dwindling. “You’re not stepping foot in the Summerlands with one bit of daemon taint in you or on you, and you’re dripping with it!”

“This is rather gross,” Kenneth admitted. “I could use a good shower. And God, I stink!”

“Ken, please...” Isa said shakily. “Can we just get on with this?”

Looking at Isa with concern, Khebechet strode forward. Rather than burning inwards as it would if Kenneth were truly tainted, the silver fire skated over his clothes and armor, burning off the filth that coated him.

Khebechet snorted. “Well, that was anticlimactic! I can probably speed your healing, but I can’t outright heal the burns myself. The explosion caused this. Its chaos magic, even worse, the clash between chaos and order. You will likely have scars on your neck.”

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “I told you I don’t swing that way, but at least I’m clean.” He looked down at himself and adjusted his clothing. His armor was white again.

Rather than dignify that comment with a response, Khebechet turned to Isa. “Alright love, you know how this goes.”

Isa looked at Khebechet sourly. “Just get it over with. This part is always worse than getting bitten in the first place.”

Isa gathered her legs under herself and gingerly sat back. Stalking forward on padded feet, Khebechet knelt before her. “Take a deep breath,” she requested.

Isa gasped in and held it, squinching her eyes closed. Khebechet gently poked her in the stomach. “Not what I meant, and you know it. Again, slower this time.”

“Okay.” Isa complied, still not relaxed.

Khebechet spread her taloned fingers across Isa's collarbones then centered her thumbs over her friend's heart. She began purring deep in her throat, hoping that the familiar sound would relax Isa enough to allow what needed to be done. "Relax, my sister, I do not wish to hurt you unduly."

Kenneth watched alertly in the background, seeing the familiar byplay between the two. It had the feel of a ritual performed many times.

Isa slowly released her breath. Beneath her fingers, Khebechet could feel Isa's heart rate slow.

Now. Breath and Focus. Khebechet directed her fire into Isa's heart. Allowing her consciousness to follow, she hunted the darkness through Isa's veins. Throwing her head back, Isa cried out as her soul sister's talons partially phased through her chest. Khebechet's gentle purring still rumbled through her, mitigating the worst of the pain. "Shhhh..." Khebechet encouraged gently. "Almost done."

The Archangel Michael put a restraining hand on Kenneth's shoulder as his grip tightened on the Spear of Destiny. "Easy boy. It looks gruesome, but let the healer work."

The taint gathered itself for one last offensive, almost but not quite sentient, and struck back at the intruder with psychic fangs. Khebechet bared her own fangs with a hiss as she tore her talons from Isa's chest, the darkness caged in her claws. Steadying Isa with her other hand, she incinerated the last remnants.

"Well..." Khebechet commented. "That was the worst of it, but we're still not done. Lie down please."

Isa was somewhat more pleased about the opportunity to get rid of the searing pain shooting through her left wing. Groaning, Isa shifted her weight forward. She caught her breath again as she lowered herself to the ground on shaky arms, and the broken bones ground together with a crunch.

Khebechet gently took hold of both wings and fully extended them on the ground to either side so that she could assess the damage. Conjuring a white cloth, she laid it over Isa's legs and lower back. To get better access to the bones and muscles of the base of the wings and shoulders, Khebechet sat on Isa's lower back, carefully balancing her weight on her knees.

Isa tensed when Khebechet put the initial pressure on the torn muscles of her left shoulder but relaxed as the healing warmth soothed and knitted the fibers together. "Better," Isa said. "It doesn't hurt as much if I don't move. It just throbs a lot."

“Where are the points of pain?” Khebechet inquired.

“That was the worst in my back,” Isa replied. “Something feels torn on the right side wing, or maybe like I have splinters; the break on the left.”

Khebechet gently prodded the skin of Isa’s back. The pads of her fingers found shallow wounds. “If you have shards of the Spear of Chaos in you, then that would explain why the taint set in so fast,” Khebechet observed. “That would have made you a very powerful daemon if it didn’t just outright destroy you.”

“Halfway below the fold by the primaries,” Isa told Khebechet and lifted her graceful wing for the healer to sink her fingers deep under the feathers. Khebechet went by feel to search for debris. “Yes, you have one embedded here. I may have to remove the primary to get it out.”

“You just want another one of my feathers,” Isa joked. “Perhaps I should throw you in the lake of purple again.”

“It was PUCE, and you know it!” Khebechet replied indignantly, disagreeing on principle. She looked to where Kenneth stood watching. “Here, Ha-Set, hold this. I need you to steady her wingtip so I can dig this out before something else goes wrong.”

Kenneth took hold of Isa’s wing. He felt around for himself and also found the splinter embedded there. “Are you going to be able to get this out with those claws of yours?” he asked.

Khebechet smirked at him. “I wouldn’t be much of a Healer if I let the shape of my hands get in the way.”

“Regardless of that... I got this. You go on and do the other side.” He waved her off. Kenneth gently pulled the smaller iridescent white-gold feathers back from the wound and delicately picked at the piece of bone-like wood that just barely rose above the skin close to the base of the third primary. “You don’t need any more injuries. I’ll get this out without you losing anything, but what doesn’t belong here,” he told Isa.

Mildly offended but not in the mood to argue since what Kenneth was doing required steady hands and not energy work, Khebechet moved to the other side. At least he was trying to help despite opposing her at every turn.

Khebechet split the surface skin over a couple of splinters in Isa’s back and removed them. Next, she moved to repair the broken wing.

Laid out at full length, each wing was 10 feet across, and the general shape was reminiscent of a gyrfalcon. Khebechet knew that in flight Isa was one of the fastest and most agile of creatures. Not

even in Khebechet's draconic form could she keep up with her sister at full speed. The one time she'd seen her brought down in the air by an opponent in battle it had been by sneak attack. Khebechet had never known an enemy to outmaneuver Isa or run her down. The healing had to be exact to restore full use of this wing.

Khebechet sucked in her breath in dismay at the damage. There were several breaks as well as crumpled, broken, or missing feathers. The feathers would have to grow back in their own time as she didn't have the energy left to restore those. Carefully stretching her shoulders to relieve the tension that had settled there, she set to work as Isa lay still.

First, she had to place each hollow bone end to end and carefully knit them back together. Some of the supporting tendons were strained but intact. A bright glow ran along her hands and down the wing, enforcing the healing and straightening bones.

Isa sighed in relief as the pain subsided. "Am I going to be able to fly again after this?"

Khebechet didn't answer immediately. Instead, she ran her fingertips over the length of Isa's wings with her eyes closed. "I got to it quickly enough this time to prevent any additional scar tissue. As long as you don't cause any more trauma to them, you will be able to use them in due time," she said.

"It itches," Isa complained, shifting her shoulders uncomfortably. "And I can't scratch."

"Yes, well... the last time it scarred because you wouldn't leave it alone," Khebechet admonished. "The sensation will fade once your body realizes the problem is taken care of."

"I know, but that doesn't help right now," Isa replied.

Kenneth rolled the Spear of Chaos splinter that he had extracted around in his palms, drawing Khebechet's attention. "These remnants need to be dealt with," she stated.

"Well, the only thing that works is the Spear of Destiny and the blood of Jesus," Kenneth told her.

"Feel free," Khebechet replied, setting the shards that she had gathered on a flat rock.

In response, Kenneth added the splinter he held and placed the spear's tip on the shards. They immediately flared brightly and disintegrated with a loud pop.

"Okay, so now what?" Isa said as she slowly and carefully got to her feet, gathering the white cloth around herself so she would be covered. She tied it like a sarong so it would look like a dress. She

held her wings half folded. Both sides gracefully curved in an even arc. “How do I look?” She held her hands out to her sides.

Khebechet grinned at her. “Like yourself again.”

“Gorgeous,” Kenneth answered her question as he admired the subtle play of rainbow-colored light along the length of her healed wings. However, despite Isa’s light, he did not share in their uplifted mood.

“You know, something bothers me about what you said. If splinters from the Spear of Chaos would have made her a very powerful demon... How many of them running around in the Abyss escaped with shards?” he asked.

Khebechet looked at Kenneth, unsettled at the implication. She felt her stomach drop as she thought about it. “Do you have any shards in you?” she inquired.

Kenneth grinned down at her. “What? You can’t tell?”

She just barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “The Spear of Destiny makes reading you almost impossible. It masks your signature to aura and soul sight.”

Khebechet began the tedious process of getting to her feet, only to be forced to sit back down as her legs failed her. “Khaas!” she cursed. Stretching out her fingers, she examined her hand. She could not prevent faint tremors. “I don’t think I’m going to be going much of anywhere for a while after all that.” She looked up as the Archangel Michael approached.

“You miscalculated,” the archangel stated, staring at Khebechet steadily. “There is a reason that one should not stare into the Abyss.”

Khebechet’s shoulders hunched beneath the angel’s gaze. “For the Abyss stares back.”

“Just so,” the archangel replied.

“What is he talking about?” Kenneth asked.

“I had a vision... it was why I decided to jump into the Abyss to save you. The SEEING was wrong, or someone managed to twist it,” Khebechet explained, unable to meet Kenneth’s or the archangel’s gaze. She sighed deeply and straightened her shoulders with an effort of will. “I would do the same again,” she stated with conviction.

“Even knowing?” Archangel Michael inquired.

She stood her ground and raised her gaze to meet his. She stared into his eyes with absolute certainty. “Yes.”

He continued to examine her for a moment more before nodding slowly. “It is well,” he said with the barest curve of a

genuine smile. “Our Father wouldn’t see any not guilty of crimes against Creation condemned to the Pit. Your actions released innocents as well as the Watchers’ spawn. Furthermore, ‘The Wolf’ is now where he belongs. Ulfr shouldn’t trouble you further because he is now imprisoned below.”



Gate opened in the air a few feet away, and Anubis stepped through. He nodded respectfully to the archangel. “The Lower Court is demanding your presence,” Anubis told Khebechet. He gently picked his daughter up.

Khebechet groaned. “Right now?”

“Yes,” Anubis told her, “but I told them they can wait until you’ve recovered enough to see them at your trial.”

“Oh, good,” Khebechet said. “So they will at least let me have a last meal.”

“Food?” Kenneth perked up.

“You still can’t eat anything on this side of the Astral Veil if you intend to return to your mortal skin, except for what you brought with you,” Anubis told him firmly. “The only thing you can accept is the Lethe for memory loss as that is its intended purpose, but anything else will keep you from going back to Earth.”

“Yeah, I know,” he sounded resigned. “That whole Persephone and the Pomegranate seeds thing applies.”

“What do you mean?” Khebechet said with a puzzled frown.

“Never mind. Not your pantheon,” Kenneth dismissed her question with a wave of his hand.

Isa added. “It’s an old Greek story about how Persephone got stuck in the Underworld because she ate three pomegranate seeds after Hades kidnapped her.”

Khebechet lost the last half of her friend’s words as she drowsed against her father’s shoulder.

“Come,” Anubis told Isa and Kenneth as he stepped through the Gate into his Temple.

18

THE TRIAL

The surface of the water was dark and smooth like black glass. Lanterns on the edges of the barge cast reflected light off the river's surface and glinted along the damp cavern walls, but the meager light could not reach the craggy ceiling far above them.

Charon, the ferryman of the dead, dipped his oars in the River Styx. They heard the faint splash of the boat's movement as if the sound was a quiet plea for mercy when Khebechet approached her trial. Slowly he conveyed the group toward the opposite shore.

"Where are we going?" Isa asked. Her voice echoed into the quiet.

"We were called by Ma'at and Ra for Khebechet to be judged by the Council of the Powers," Anubis told Isa. "This means that we will not go to the Weighing of the Heart, nor go to the High Court of Heaven to speak with our Father. Instead, we will go to a public arena above in the open-air coliseum overseen by the lesser Powers, our peers. The Ladies of Justice will oversee the trial, and there will be guests and witnesses. Our Heavenly Father will have a representative there as He cannot show up in person. That would be problematic for all involved because His power is so great, it would overwhelm and incinerate the Lower Court to ashes," Anubis explained.

"Isa, you and Ha-Set have also been called rather than simply sent back as of yet because you are involved," Anubis added. "This is why you were asked to dress for the occasion, and the rules regarding weapons are suspended. Because General Ha-Set cannot surrender the Spear of Destiny at the door, fairness dictates that everyone will be armed."

Isa glanced over at Ha-Set. He'd finally given up on objecting to being called by one of his former living use-names and simply rolled his eyes and sighed. Isa smiled at him. He looked resplendent in his combination of formal dress and armor with golden bracers. His bronze and gold khopesh, a gift from her own hand 4,500 years of Earth time in the past, was firmly belted to his side. He carried the Spear of Destiny with an air of authority. He noticed her looking and returned her stare with an impish grin.

She looked pretty good too. Her slender frame was accentuated by white leather breeches and a white draped top held together with golden clasps in the front so that it did not interfere with her wings. One beaded braid of her natural black hair hung to one side as the rest of it fell full and straight. Gold shimmers on her white wings gave off rainbow-colored lights that made her look larger and gave her an imposing presence. She had them tightly folded to stay out of the way of the other occupants of the boat.

Khebechet's white loose-fitting dress was clasped at the shoulders and flowed around her in the slight breeze created by the boat's passage. Silver bracers protected her wrists. Isa stood beside Khebechet, who knelt in a relaxed pose, waiting for what would come. Her silvery double-sided spear balanced across her knees, and her eyes were closed.

The boat grounded at a dock made of dark stone. Slippery stone steps shone faintly with dampness as they rose upward. Anubis disembarked first and handed the ferryman something the others couldn't see. "Charon must be paid his dues," Anubis told them solemnly.

Ha-Set was next, and reaching into his belt sash, he pulled out a coin. He got out and held his hand out for Isa to help her out of the rocking boat. She spread her wings for balance on the slight waves. Isa pulled a bead from her hair. The illusion vanished when she rolled the bead around in her fingers. It changed, and Isa also handed the ferryman a gold coin. She took the offered hand to allow Ha-Set to help her from the boat then guide her onto a solid surface with a firm grip.

Khebechet took a silver ring from her finger and placed it in the ferryman's hand. "Thank you," she said to him as she had the many times she had passed this way. She received only a silent nod in return, as always from the old man.

She paused and looked upward when she stepped from the boat to the stone dock. The fitted stone path ahead of her led onwards until it split off to the right leading to another cavern where the

hearts of the dead are weighed. However, the path they were to take led uphill. Further ahead, the cavern fell away, allowing sunlight to illuminate their destination. Khebechet brought up the rear. She walked slowly but with determination.

Jhuge bas relief bronze doors stood open at the top of a massive set of stone steps. White marble columns surrounded the building in front of them. No roof covered the entrance hall. A large flat area served as a landing pad for flyers to arrive at the other end from where they came in. It was considered rude to land inside when someone had the floor to speak. There were seats of various sizes and large booths in some sections to either side of the amphitheater.

When they entered Isa and Ha-Set were directed to seats from which they could be easily called to speak. Anubis accompanied Khebechet to Thoth's side, where his magic white feather quill was auto-writing as it recorded events and commentary. Isa's eyebrows rose, and she looked at Khebechet in silent question when the glint of gold on the quill caught her eye. "So that's what she did with it," Isa muttered to herself.

Khebechet didn't notice Isa looking at her because she focused on the formal instructions Thoth was giving her. Anubis walked to the middle of the floor and took his place at Ma'at's side, where a large set of scales took pride-of-place in the center of the room.

They waited while several more arrivals entered. The prime deities preceded them. However, representatives of the elder races and elementals from various planes or regions of the multiverse trickled in. Many of these would be concerned with the proceeding's outcome. Khebechet saw several friends and allies, but she noticed some stern or outright angry faces in the seats about her.

The seats were nearly full when the Archangel Michael walked in alongside Archangel Azrael and an elder dragon whose box nameplate proclaimed him to be Zah'Kri Inariel. Michael nodded in respect to Khebechet. Instead of walking to their intended seats, both archangels took their place on either side of Ha-Set who already shook his head in disapproval at what he witnessed.

Whispers of consternation followed when those attending noted the archangels' presence and seating arrangement. It showed clear support for the accused and her companions, a declaration from the Highest Court. None missed the presence of the Spear of Destiny

held firmly in Ha-Set's right hand. Therefore, he would stand as representative of mankind in this event.

When it was time to begin, Ma'at picked up a bell to call the proceedings to order. The crowd fell silent, waiting for her to speak.

"I call the Ladies of Justice forward. They are, to with me witness, judge, and execute the orders of this court," Ma'at announced slowly and clearly. "Themis, Dike, Lustitia, join me, please," Ma'at requested formally.

When the judges had settled in their place, Ma'at turned to the crowded room to speak the formalities. "As you have all heard, we are here to settle the very serious matter of the opening of the Abyss by Khebechet, daughter of Anubis, and the resulting escape of many formerly entrapped dark entities." Ma'at's hair shone like a raven's feathers contrasting with her blood-red sheath dress. All eyes in the room focused on her colorful presence.



Ma'at paused to let her words fall upon the ears in the crowd. She continued, "You all also know, after the Great War that destroyed much of the Multiverse, the Abyss was formed as a place to home the enemies of the divine order, truth, law, and justice. It was never to be opened until the appointed time," she said.

"Those who occupied that darkness were never to be prematurely released because the elder race of dark angels swore when defeated in the last battle that they would return to bestow death and vengeance on all other life. As such, any individual or group who is responsible for opening the Abyss, even in this case as with a gate from one place to another is considered a traitor to all. This is punishable by execution and final death," Ma'at concluded.

"However, there are mitigating circumstances." To Khebechet's surprise, another strode forward to speak. Ma'at gave the floor to the Divine Principle of Fate.

Skuld turned a circle, scanning the crowd. "Though any opening of the Abyss is a dire affront to cosmic harmony, in this case, it was not done maliciously," she said and paused.

"For the benefit of those of you who may not know the details, this was done for love and not chaos or violence. The one who opened this portal fought alongside the rest of us in the first Great War and saw her homeland utterly destroyed. She has not since fallen to darkness."

“She knows the consequences of her actions, does she not?” Amaterasu, Principle of Divine Light from Earth’s Japan, spoke from the crowd. She stood up so that she could be recognized.

Khebechet strode forward to answer for herself. “I knew when I went down there; that I could very well be giving up my existence for Isa Imdur Re’Indalen’s life.”

“You went IN there?” Amaterasu’s eyes widened. “I was not told this detail!” Her metallic gold and white silk kimono folded gently around her as she again took her seat.

Khebechet shrugged. She didn’t have a reply.

“Yes, and she is not the only one who traveled there and returned,” Skuld added. She had to wait for the noise to die down at that revelation before she could continue.

A male voice rumbled forth from the crowd. “Who is this Re’Indalen you speak of?”

Khebechet pivoted and responded to the new speaker, “The Jyrr’Khun’Ari angel present with us today. She is my sister.”

Zeus laughed as if through a far-off thunderstorm. “You bear no resemblance.”

Khebechet resisted the urge to bare her fangs. “By oaths sworn long ago, by blood spilled together in battle, and by the long dance of eternity, we have become such. I speak no lies.”

“I see. In this, at least, you are being honest.” Zeus nodded. Her aura showed no deceit to the Powers present.

Another challenge came from a beautiful platinum blonde woman who stepped forward. The tilt of her features marked her as a non-human. The silver crown that sat on her brow sparkled with midnight-blue star sapphires.

She spoke with a musical tone of voice. “I saw dark creatures mass at the borders of the realm of the Fae and flood into the Earth realm,” she said.

“Long ago, we separated ourselves to keep the taint from spilling over into our lands from man’s activities. However, our borders do not hold as they once did. The new onslaught seems to coincide with current events, beginning with when Ha-Set crossed the Veil and traveled through our borders,” the lady stated, glaring at Ha-Set. “We hold strong, for now, but the Fae people also have an interest in the outcome of this court’s decision.” She looked at Khebechet and continued, “Our traditions have protected us for thousands of turnings. We do not forget with the passage of time the cost of failure to be ever vigilant.”

“Are you going somewhere with this?” Skuld asked the speaker.

The queen of the Fae looked at Skuld directly. “We care little about how Lady of Cooling Water, the Oracle of Bast, will be punished even though all of us know she made a grievous error in opening the land of chaos. Our concern is that these incursions will stop and that such events do not get repeated.”

“Anything else?” Skuld asked.

“No, Lady Fate,” the fae said. “Our position stands as stated.” She returned to her seat.

Another rumbling voice spoke up. “With your permission, Ladies of the Court,” the dragon interjected.

“The floor goes to the Representative for the Guardians of Storms,” Ma’at said.

Zah’Kri Inariel stepped out into the sunlight beating down from above and eyed the sky. Briefly, his scales reflected the light in shades from dark grey to light cream and burgundy.

“I, too, have been seeing these incursions in the Earth realm,” the dragon stated. “There are always dark ones hanging about who attempt to subvert the balance held by the elementals, but I am concerned by the numbers I have seen lately. If the realm of man falls, many will follow. We guard and guide where we can in the realms of the younger races.”

A massive white wolf rose from her bench and approached the floor. “Long have I hunted these shadows. They breed prolifically even as they snarl and snap at each other. Their numbers have been rising steadily these past few turnings. These incursions began long before now.”

The dragon’s head rose proudly above the wolf’s as his voice cut across hers. “The dread lords are never idle, and their plans have stretched across the ages.”

“This is irrelevant!” an angry voice spoke from the crowd. “The law is the law! It cannot be broken, and it cannot be disregarded!”

The dragon’s head turned towards the speaker as his neck arched and wings mantled. “Why then, do you speak over us when we have the floor?” the dragon asked calmly.

Kinich Ahau, the Mayan Solar Deity stood from his seat and pointed at Khebechet. “We know what the dread lords are planning as they constantly plot against us. The point is that we are here to judge that one for her actions. I want to know why and how this was done so that it may be prevented in the future,” he echoed the concerns of the Fae.

Zah’Kri lowered his voice to a growling rumble that nevertheless carried across the audience. “Judgement cannot be passed without

more complete knowledge of the situation. Ha-Set would not be the holder of the Spear of Destiny without the consent of the Greater Divine. All of us here hold some knowledge of these events, but only those who were there know the full truth of the matter. Perhaps we should let them speak.”

Ma’at stepped forward and picked up the Scales of Justice. Silence spread throughout the amphitheater without the need for any further action. “Thank you, Zah’Kri Inariel, for your words.”

The storm dragon tipped his head forward respectfully to the Lady of Justice and returned to his seat among the elemental delegation. The spirit wolf did likewise and returned to her seat next to CO-YO-TE.

Ma’at continued, “We must not only confirm guilt but decide Khebechet’s fate. To do this, the accused and witnesses must recount the events for those of us here.”

Ma’at sat back down, and Dike, Lady of Justice, stepped forward. “In the spirit of moral order and fair judgment, let Khebechet speak for herself. Come Lady.”

Khebechet joined Dike in the center, who spoke to her directly. “You will speak of these events as you saw and experienced them,” she instructed. “Behind you on the wall where you entered are the viewing panels. Use these to show us anything which may aid in explaining your actions or help us to understand what happened.”

Khebechet nodded and looked over at her companions. Isa looked nervous. Ha-Set was visibly swelling with anger but managed to stay his tongue, for now. Michael’s calm presence beside him quietly communicated that his chance to be heard would come. Azrael betrayed nothing in his serenely thoughtful countenance. Khebechet smiled at Ha-Set, but all he managed was a slightly feral grimace.

“A thousand years ago, Earth time...” Khebechet began.

“Can we get on with it?” Hades demanded. “I have a demanding schedule.”

“My apologies,” Khebechet told him. “This is necessary to present a clear narrative.”

She paused and looked out over the audience. There were quite a few whose faces were closed and auras radiated hostility. However, many were simply intent on her and her words, not yet having passed judgment. Khebechet began again.

“A thousand years ago, there arose a psychotic priest of Loki, who stole from Fate his life thread from the weave and claimed for himself immortality. With a branch from the World Tree and the

murder of several of his kinsmen, he forged for Loki a great weapon. It was designed to break his chains so that Loki could unleash the second Great War upon the realms.”

Khebechet faced Hades and continued, “Ha-Set and Isa, along with several others, sent the priest Ulfr to his death. The Spear of Chaos did not die with its maker. It increased in power as it devoured each unwary soul. Daemoni stole the Spear of Chaos before my sister and her companions could find a way to destroy it. The artifact was then dragged into the Abyss on the way to its master.”

“Isa and Ha-Set were guided to the location of the Spear of Destiny as only a greater and opposite power could destroy the Spear of Chaos. They pursued the thief through a rift into the Abyss. They accomplished their task, though they were grievously wounded in the process. All of this, I watched from afar. I received a vision that revealed if they, the Spear of Destiny, and the archangel’s sword were to stay in the Abyss that my sister and Ha-Set would meet their final deaths and the artifacts become tools of the daemoni, the keys to their freedom and eventual domination.” Khebechet told the spectators firmly.

“Yes... It was love for my sister that drove me to action, but more than that, it was in defense of all of your realms, your temples, and the multiverse itself. I made my choice, knowing all of the possible consequences, and believed it to be the best course of action that could be taken. I did not have time to stop and analyze my decision. Isa was about to end, and everything would have compounded from there.” Khebechet looked up at the amphitheater with her hands extended in supplication. Tears shone at the corners of her eyes and threatened to spill over on her cheeks.

Khebechet stepped forward and continued. “I ran to the shadowed edges of the Moonpaths to a ritual space that would help to prevent the spread of taint. From there, I opened the gate to the Abyss. I retrieved my sister, her soul-bonded, and the artifacts, without the Spear of Chaos. That, Isa and Ha-Set did destroy. After a short but intense battle, we emerged. With the help of the Archangels Michael and Azrael, we closed the gate.”

“The archangels involved themselves *directly* in these events?” Gaia inquired incredulously. “The archangels act only upon the will of the Greater Divine.”

Khebechet responded to Gaia’s statement, “The Archangel Michael took his sword back from Ha-Set as soon as we exited the

Abyss. The Archangel Azrael was able to rescue the lost innocents so they could at last go to their proper place.”

“How did Ha-Set acquire the archangel’s sword in the first place? Such is not for mortal hands!” the irate goddess demanded as she glanced at Michael, yet shrank slightly under his answering stare. She deliberately ignored the presence of Azrael, who remained quietly observing.

Khebechet responded candidly, “I know not the details of that happening as it was blocked from my vision. Perhaps the archangel himself felt that his sword would find the best use in Ha-Set’s hands for his endeavor. I rather doubt he managed to steal it.”

One of Ha-Set’s hands was over his face as he struggled not to laugh. He shared a glance with Michael, who shook his head and put his finger to his lips.

Khebechet continued, “Your objection invalidates itself as Ha-Set is not mortal.”

Themis interjected loudly over the growing discontent of the crowd, “General Ha-Set is not the one on trial. Khebechet’s actions and the consequences thereof are the matter at hand. This matter is closed until it is his turn to speak.” Gaia subsided back into her seat, looking thoughtful.

“Well, this all very fascinating,” Hades again interrupted, “but we have yet to get to the point. She opened the Abyss. What are we going to do about it, and how many daemoni escaped?”

Khebechet acknowledged Hades with a nod. “Very businesslike as always, Hades. I know this court will do as it sees fit with me. To answer your second question, probably about five dozen dark born. Most that escaped were natives of that fell realm. Ha-Set and Isa killed many more in direct battle for the Spear of Chaos, the explosion between the spears and fight afterward. We killed hundreds more and grievously wounded a dread lord on our way out.”

“I wish to see how this was done. Dread lords do not go down easily,” Hades told her. “I am at the moment undecided.”

“Where would you like to begin the viewing of events, as seen through my memories?” Khebechet asked him.

“Begin with how you carved your way into the Abyss,” he demanded as he leaned back in his seat, somewhat intrigued now.

“It will be as you wish,” Khebechet answered. She turned and placed her hand upon the first of six viewing panels. The scene unfolded in brilliant color across the massive stone surface between two columns positioned so that all present could see.

The audience winced as the fabric of the world was rent apart before their eyes. They watched as the gate yawned wide and swallowed Khebechet whole, the desperate free-fall downwards through the darkness and the hopeless position in which she found Isa. Wing broken and throat torn and bloodied, still Isa battled the urgermach back to back with Ha-Set even as she weakened.

Some viewers jumped, and some who had more recently fought growled as another attacking daemon sprung through the flames. They watched Khebechet spear it then fling it back into the milling horde.

Many cheered as Ha-Set wielded angel fire to kill everything within reach of the archangel's sword; held their breath at the treacherous climb upwards, attempting to beat the closure of the portal while being set upon from all sides by shadow drakes.

When the memory reached the dread lord's attack, it played in slow motion as Khebechet had perceived it. Most of the audience came to their feet when the dread lord's attack hit Khebechet in the center of her chest. Rather than go down, she quickly pulled herself together and returned the attack, catching the dread lord in dragon fire. By the time Ha-Set also hit the winged black lord with angel fire, all were on their feet cheering.

Hades stood with the rest and watched with intent fascination through the final battle. The trio fought alongside the archangel, who neatly claimed his sword from Ha-Set as they emerged. Hades saw them kill many of the escaping dark born and watched their struggle to seal the gate. In the cold silence of the aftermath, the life spark of a tiny child cradled lovingly in Archangel Azrael's gentle hand was the last thing they saw before the panel went blank.

"I stand with Khebechet," Hades said into the quiet and then sat down.

Anubis smiled as he mentally began tallying the support versus those who still appeared unmoved by the emotional content of what they'd just witnessed. By his reckoning, his daughter had won over two-thirds of the Council. *There is one who is absent*, Anubis thought to himself as he observed the empty seat beside Sekhmet, and his grin widened. He shook his head knowingly. His sister would make her appearance at the moment of maximum drama. *Just like a cat to pounce when it's least expected!*

“I do not!” another female voice chimed in the quiet. “I believe the only just punishment for opening the Abyss is the final death. That is our law. She knew before she did this action that the consequences would be dire.” Everyone looked around to see that Athena was speaking.

“I also knew the consequences for doing nothing would be extreme for everyone, not just myself,” Khebechet reiterated. She faced Athena squarely. “What would you have me do, just leave them down there and allow the archangel’s sword and the Spear of Destiny to fall into the hands of evil?”

“Yes.” Athena glared at her. “And because you released the dark born from the eternal trap, you must die. Your power should never be abused in such a manner, Khebechet! You are one of the Powers that keep the balance, and you know better.”

“Now, now, Athena. Let’s not be hasty,” a giant spider purred in a gravelly voice as she slipped onto the floor to stand with Khebechet.

“Arachnia!” Athena said with disgust. “You would disagree with me just on principle.”

“Of course,” Arachnia answered. “But that does not invalidate my opinion, and my, shall we say... situation, is proof that your views can sometimes be extreme.”

Through the trial, Ha-Set sat quietly listening, watching, and analyzing. When he saw the discussion devolve into petty politics, he could stand it no longer. Beside him, the archangels felt the force of Ha-Set’s anger, so both expected it when he finally exploded out of his chair. Kenneth stood and slammed the butt end of the Spear of Destiny on the floor, sending a shockwave throughout the whole amphitheater.

“Y’all are a bunch of pussies, blaming her!” Kenneth pointed the Spear of Destiny at Khebechet as he shouted while the reverberations from the impact died down.

Khebechet groaned and draped her wrist over her eyes. *Now this is where it gets ugly.* Khebechet remembered well Ha-Set’s temper and dislike for politics from her time with him in Egypt.

Isa gasped from her seat in consternation. She glanced around at the shocked faces in the audience and waited for the sky to drop on him.

“At least she had the balls to do something while the rest of you just sat there!” Ha-Set continued, glaring accusingly at the massed Powers before him. “You judge her for making a mistake. Well,

what about all those other mistakes and failures that led all of us to have to be here?”

Ma’at gave Ha-Set a stern look. Skuld remained expressionless as she also knew Ha-Set’s tendencies. Ma’at was the one who spoke. “The floor goes to General Ha-Set,” she declared. “We will hear from a witness.”

Kenneth strode forward as Arachnia returned to her seat, holding the Spear of Destiny high to make a point. “This, if you had been doing your jobs, would not be in my hand. Immortality of the flesh? How did I get that? It wasn’t by choice. That was an accident that could have been prevented, as normally fruit from the World Tree isn’t left lying about.

“Neither was Isa given a choice when she carried me into the Abyss. I agreed to sign on to this mission, but she could not give consent for facing the death that nearly took her. So what choice did Khebechet have but go down the Abyss to get her?

“The mistake was made hundreds of years ago, and since YOU the Powers are all about balance, why only now are you choosing to act to balance what you allowed to be out of balance in the first place?” he demanded. “Are you righting a wrong, or are you just looking for a scapegoat!”

“Are you claiming to be blameless?” a stocky god wearing a cloak of azure blue demanded. His red beard bristled.

“No. I am not.” Ha-Set turned to face him. “Who are you?”

“I am Aegir,” the god replied.

“Okay, let’s examine this.” Ha-Set was not in the mood to back down. “Norse God of the Sea. You had the opportunity to stop this nonsense by dragging the ships under as soon as Ulfr set sail from Norway,” he pointed out. “For myself, mistake? Well... in hindsight, throwing the Spear of Chaos into a volcano wasn’t the brightest idea. On the other hand, it could have been a much bigger boom if Mount St. Helens had waited to blow.” He grinned slightly.

In the crowd, only a few noticed Pele’ the Hawaiian volcano guardian nodding and grinning in agreement. It had given her a moment of surprise, but she always appreciated a good explosion. She hadn’t even been in a bad mood that day.

Ha-Set continued, “By the time Khebechet acted, the balance and laws you all hold so dear had already been broken. It should not have fallen to her. It’s not her pantheon. She wasn’t even involved in the whole Ulfr mess! The only reason she got involved was because of Isa, who was not in the Abyss of her own free will.

Who, then, if not Khebechet, was going to go down to get her? Or were you going to let an innocent rot down there?"

Aegir turned to Isa. "Did you give formal informed consent to enter the halls of the bottomless Pit?"

Isa answered so that all could hear. "I did not. I could not speak, nor write, or sign. I had agreed to shift my form to that of Bucephalus and pursue the Spear of Destiny. Thereafter, even when we acquired the Spear of Destiny, I went where Ha-Set bade me out of trust."

Aegir sat back, thoughtful. "By our laws, that does not equate to consent."

Ha-Set turned and remarked to Khebechet "You see! They don't even have all of the facts! How could they presume to try you?"

"You insolent mortal!" A lightning bolt whizzed from the area where Zeus sat. "How dare you question the council in this manner?"

Ha-Set didn't move to avoid the attack, but Isa jumped quicker than the lightning bolt and caught it sizzling across her mantled wings as she shielded him and grounded the lightning. Thunder shook the amphitheater with a deafening crack.

"You WILL NOT USE YOUR WEAPONS!" the Ladies of Justice shouted in unison. The rest of what they had to say was lost in the roar of white water as Aegir tossed a wave of seawater at Zeus.

"I was TALKING!" Aegir shouted at Zeus. Only, he got everyone else on that side of the amphitheater wet also. The only one who looked happy about it was Zah'Kri Inariel. The storm dragon spread his wings, enjoying the water cascading down his sides.

Pele', who was sitting just behind the dragon and was thoroughly soaked, angrily threw magma at the God of the North Sea. Hearing the sizzle behind him as water evaporated in the heat of Pele's anger, the dragon ducked, nonplussed at the return volley.

Ha-Set merely stood shaking his head with Isa standing beside him. Her dander was up too, and it showed as all her feathers were on end expressing her anger. Her wings extended to their full twenty-foot length as she interposed herself between the angry Gods and Ha-Set, who was attempting to push her out of the way so he could see. "Would you get out of the way?"

"They're trying to squish you!" Isa bit out through gritted teeth.

"I can take care of myself. Now move!" Ha-Set said with frustration.

Khebechet was torn between laughter and mortification at the behavior of her fellow deities. Watching the situation above rapidly

devolve into a brawl, she took out her spear, planted it on the floor, and formed a protective silver dome over all three of them. It took shape just in time as rocks formed from the clash between lava and seawater rained down on top of them. Khebechet remarked in a low tone to Isa and Ha-Set, “At least I got dinner AND a show before my sentence gets carried out.”

Ha-Set started laughing despite himself. Isa began to calm with their temporary safety. She grumbled as she folded her wings down tightly. “I fail to see anything amusing.” Yet more rocks and other less identifiable debris impacted the shield. “They’ve all lost their marbles,” she added.

“Which is what’s funny!” Khebechet giggled. “They’re trampling over more laws than I have!”

“Exactly!” Ha-Set agreed. “They just proved my point,” he said, his voice tinged with disgust.

Just at that moment, the doors slammed open with a crash that reverberated through the entire building. The fight ended abruptly. Everyone turned to watch the new arrival.

A giant black panther strolled nonchalantly through the doors and took her slow, sweet time to boldly make her way to the floor. Khebechet dropped the shield as the cat approached. She bowed her head in respect as her friend and mentor came near. Anubis, who had been waiting for this moment, backed up and waited for his Sister to have her say. *Right on time as always.* Anubis grinned toothily.

“Lady Bastet, you are acknowledged,” Ma’at said gratefully into the silence won by the entrance of the Mother of Cats.

“And what makes some of you think I will allow my priestess to face the final death at your hands?” she purred loudly enough for all to hear. “For this, you will answer to me. Khebechet! Take your seat,” Bastet ordered.

Khebechet moved to do her Lady’s bidding. Bastet strolled to Isa and ran her head under her hand. “Isa, you too,” the goddess said. “Ha-Set will be fine.” Isa hugged Bastet around her neck, nearly having to tiptoe due to the cat’s size, and then scampered to her seat.

Bastet faced Ha-Set. “You look well, General,” she purred. “Much better than last I saw you.” She paced around him, making Ha-Set feel rather glad not to be a mouse.

“Lady Bast,” he acknowledged. He privately wondered what her angle was. He found himself having mixed feelings. Somewhere inside him, he found anger simmered, and he paused briefly to

wonder at it but shoved the emotion away as unimportant at present. He also somehow found comfort in her presence. “They have proved my point,” he told her.

“Yes, they have,” Bastet agreed. “Don’t leave just yet. You are not finished.” She turned to address the amphitheater, pacing around the edge of the floor as she spoke.

“Our body of law also dictates that none may interfere with the actions or destinies of another Power’s avatars, priests or priestesses,” Bast said. “Khebechet is not only daughter of Anubis and the Lady of Cooling Waters, but she is also Ka’Ali, sworn high priestess and MY prime oracle. Thus, while I agree this court has the right to question recent events, it does not have the right to pass Sentence without my approval.

“There is another complication with your plans to end my priestess,” Bastet told the assembled Powers. “She is tied by love and by an unbreakable promise to the destinies of these two. Until that promise gets fulfilled in its proper time, she may not deviate from her path. This proceeding comes dangerously close to interfering in that proper time.”

“But Khebechet must be punished.” Athena was still unmoved.

“And what would you accomplish by that?” Ha-Set growled. “So she did it. She doesn’t claim otherwise. But shouldn’t you be focusing on the future and not the past? And you are not counting the fact that we killed more of the demons than we let out! So how do you keep this kind of score?” He waved at them all in disgust. “This whole thing is a farce!”

“Easy, General,” Bast purred softly to Ha-Set alone. “While I appreciate your support of Ka’Ali, and your willingness to fight for her fate even as you hold the Spear of Destiny,” the cat goddess sounded amused, “we should avoid provoking hot tempers. Remember, you cannot lose while you hold the full authority granted to you as its bearer. You need not fear. The moment you stepped onto the floor, this battle was over.”

“Lords and Ladies, of the Court! Lady Bast,” a deep female voice rang out over their heads. “May I interject?”

Bastet looked around to the speaker. “Go on?”

Freyja stepped forward, holding her naked sword in her hand, pommel up. “Perhaps I can propose an alternative that would be acceptable to all.”

“And that is?” Bastet asked her calmly.

“It is true that I hold enmity for Loki and his dire plans. In that alone, I would stand with any who thwart him,” Freyja began. “But

it seems to me that we have a larger concern than mere punishment. As General Ha-Set has pointed out, punishment does not solve the problem of the escaped daemoni, but what it would do is prevent further action by one who is, as we have seen, adequately equipped to successfully take them on and win. I have fought dread lords, and I too, know they do not go down easy. Killing Khebechet would be, wasteful shall we say, to those here who are practical.”

“Can we get to the point?” Hades was again bored with the entire lengthy proceeding. His own foresight showed him how this would end. He wished they’d just get on with it.

Freyja eyed Hades, but she was unwilling to start another brawl and cut short her speech. “Put Khebechet where she will do the most good. Have her fix what she broke. Send her to Midgard in mortal skin to hunt daemoni there unhindered. If her path is already tied to these two, who must return to Earth, send her to be with them. The Jyrr’Khun’Ari class angel is herself hiding in human skin. Isa, in this case, Mary Lou, is of the appropriate age to be the proper vessel, and she is strong enough to bear a demi-god without it killing her. Anubis can oversee those matters as it is his daughter he will send back through the Veil.”

Isa looked up sharply. “Wait, whoa, whoa, what?”

“It is simple. Love trumps all else,” Freyja declared. “That is the greatest law of the Greater Divine. I, for one, will not take on the karma of disrupting the natural course of true love and soul-bonds, whether they are, or are not, romantic in nature and fulfillment. Never in the history of the multiverse has that action ended well,” Freyja pointed out. “I stand for Khebechet,” she finished simply and returned to her seat.

Isa stared after the goddess open-mouthed. “Do I have anything to say about this?”

“Of course you do,” Bastet said before she was interrupted by a sharp cry from Khebechet.

“No!” Khebechet objected. “Never again!” Her talons bit into her palms, spilling bright blood on the floor. “I have been too many times, and it often takes centuries for me to put myself back together again. Let me hunt as I am. I don’t care how long it takes, just don’t send me back!”

Anubis stepped forward from his place and laid his hand on Khebechet’s shoulder. With her father’s presence at her side, she quieted and attempted to restrain the wild energies flaring around her.

"Khebechet speaks truly. Seldom has she returned to us having died a peaceful death," Anubis spoke sadly.

"To die a warrior's death is a great honor. Have you lost your courage?" Tyr, from the Norse Pantheon, challenged from his seat.

Khebechet laughed, a hollow sound that echoed with despair. "No. I faced the Abyss without flinching, but to be stripped of power, of memory, and sent to the nonexistent mercies of man absolutely terrifies me. Very rarely am I given the warrior's death in battle or allowed to live my natural span as it should be. Brought down by treachery, bound and tormented for days or weeks. That is the fate that has awaited me there."

Freyja stood from her seat once again. "In the spirit of fairness, show us. Naturally, we should have all of the facts before proceeding."

Khebechet's hand shook as she threw her memories to the viewing panels for all to see. "This was my most recent incarnation."

The bright gold of tall grasses stretched as far as the eye could see. Stalking forward, her golden coat and black spots blended in well. The cheetah slipped between the dry stalks, her eyes on an antelope.

The rumble of a truck shook the ground beneath her paws. She paused, slinking lower to the ground. The foreign sound of laughter touched her ears, and the truck changed direction. She was seen.

"I had cubs at the time," Khebechet interjected at this point, her voice tight so that it wouldn't shake. "I didn't live long enough to get back to them."

She waited until she was certain they were headed towards her before she moved. Springing out of cover, she pushed her body as far and as fast as she could. It wasn't enough. Already in motion, the truck paced her yard for yard. A loud sound, sharper than thunder, pierced the air. She changed direction, desperate to get away and return to her little ones.

Another shot rang out, and she felt pain and heat pierce her shoulder, the bone there splintering. Her right foreleg gave way beneath her. Yowling in pain, she tumbled. The world spun out of control as her speed drove her into the ground again and again. She felt something in her hip crack as she struck a rock and lay still.

There was more laughter as the men stopped their truck and got out. Panting and unable to move, she waited for them to give

the killing blow. It was not quick as she had hoped. They kicked and beat her as she lay there, unable to respond until she could no longer see, and her spirit finally slipped free of her form.

KAs the memory concluded, Khebechet spoke again. “I would have understood if they had hunted me for food or if I had been taking animals from farms. I understood the defense of territory and the need for meat. But no, they only wanted my head and my pelt. The rest they left for the hyenas.”

Growling set up in the crowd. Wolf and CO-YO-TE’s eyes gleamed with anger. Yemaya, the African goddess of fertility and childbirth, was also enraged. “How DARE they! Khebechet, I am sorry.”

Ha-Set spoke quietly. “Most men have been taught by other men that animals do not have souls as we do.”

“That was supposed to be a vacation!” Khebechet exclaimed and rounded on Ha-Set. He winced at her next words. “They simply killed me in cold blood!” she sobbed, heartbroken with tears falling down her face. “The time before that was even worse!”

This time she slammed her hand on the panel hard, and the scene changed. “That time, I was human! Did I have a soul then?” Khebechet demanded.

“A couple of years after Joan of Arc was murdered, it was about the year 1433 by their calendar. The horrors I witnessed during the preceding five years led me to decide I had to do something. I was helping women and children in France, and Spain escape the birth of the Inquisition as it tore across the continent. From the French Valais area in what is now Geneva, Switzerland, that holds the dread lord Temple of Apollyon, the Inquisition spread much like the Black Death. It was an evil plague of fear, suspicion, and torture.

“I saved as many innocents as I could during the spreading hysteria, but it was not enough. I had a large house and grounds in Toulouse, France, near the border with Spain containing an easily concealed space beneath the basement. Someone... one of my friends, I think, betrayed me to the Church.”

The scene unfurled on the stone to reveal a dungeon. Torches blazed on the walls. With her hair shorn and burns up and down her bare arms, a woman lay strapped to a tabletop in a vertical

position. Iron bands secured her arms and ankles with another across her throat. Blood dripped down the wood at her back and pooled beneath.

A man sat in front of her at a desk. He wore an embroidered tan vest and a poufy white-sleeved shirt over breeches. His hair was cut to neck-length and slicked back with oil. A large ledger sat open in front of him, and he held a quill in his hand.

“All you have to do is confess, and this will all be over with in short order,” the man said. He remained expressionless, almost clinical in his demeanor.

Defiant, the woman in front of him merely bared her teeth and hissed at him. “If the Hell you speak of exists, I am quite sure that you and yours will burn in it.”

The man turned to the guard behind him. “Again. Make sure they do a better job of it this time.”

After she was taken away, the scene dissolved into incoherent impressions of screaming and blood. The only clear point came when a man held a burning torch to the left side of her face. He remarked offhandedly to the man guarding the door, “Witches aren’t supposed to be pretty. We need to mark her up a bit more to give the crowd a good show.”

“I had no way to tell how long I was trapped down there. I remember pleading, ‘Oh God, let it end!’ They did not break me or make me confess to whatever it was they made up for charges so they could take my land for themselves. They would have tortured me longer, I think, but infection was setting in, and fever would have taken me.”

The scene shifted again. The woman stood chained in a cart carried by two guards and paraded through the streets until they reached the center of the town square. A wooden platform was set up with wood and oil ready for her execution. They tied her to a stake on the platform and set the wood beneath her on fire.

“I was incoherent with fever by then. All I knew was these people hated me. There was no real explanation. I was left with only fear, pain, and death,” Khebechet said.

Khebechet turned around to face the crowded amphitheater again and allowed the memory to envelop her form. She stood before them with her back shredded by the cat-o-nine-tails, a ragged tunic hanging from her body half torn away. Bone showed

through the burns on her face, and bruises covered her body. Khebechet's fingernails and toenails were ripped away. They watched as she closed her eyes and the scene played out on the panel behind her. Her body blackened as the fire consumed her.

As soon as the memory ended, Khebechet shook off the imprint of that past life on her physical soul body. She stood shaking in reaction, unable to speak as the trauma was too fresh in her mind.

"Khebechet," a gentle but firm voice spoke to her. The Archangel Azrael went to her and took her hand. "That was not the will of our Lord God Elohim. Our Heavenly Father does not condone such actions," he assured her. His face was a mask of anger.

The assembly was silent for several moments, and then the noise swelled. The archangel stayed by Khebechet's side until the yelling in the amphitheater began to quiet. Khebechet said nothing further. She simply nodded and took comfort in the archangel's warm aura.

Isa had watched the scenes play out in horror and found herself crying. Khebeshet hadn't told her about most of what had been shown. She looked at Ha-Set, who looked back at her and shrugged helplessly. The rage he found burning inside him at the dishonor to the Greater Divine had no outlet.

Isa rose from her seat. "I can guarantee few things," she began as she addressed the Ladies of Justice. "But what I can do, I will," she paused. "My own life on Earth hasn't been without its trauma to me. My right to self-determination has already been taken from me by rape and neglect, and it is difficult to suffer a man's touch or trust enough to do this. But, if you send her back while I am alive, I will do whatever is necessary to protect her while she finds her feet again. I will raise her to know the principles and powers so that she can freely use her gifts to better the world. When she's of age, and the Lethe no longer clouds her memories and her gifts, we will hunt together."

"I, too, will do what I can," Ha-Set interjected.

Bast nodded in approval. "It will be well," she said. "However, Ha-Set, your path must diverge for a time so that you can best use your own gifts. You can take comfort in knowing all of you will be watched over and guided where possible. For now, we must await judgment."

Freyja also spoke to the Ladies of Justice from her seat. "While I understand Khebechet's trepidation, many of our number even now live their lives with the younger race of man. Mankind as a whole must awaken, and they need their spiritually gifted,

particularly at the turning of the ages when progress may arise out of turmoil. I believe this to be the best course of action given the circumstances presented to us.

“Midgard is at the next turning of the age, and those before us are well equipped to help shape the course of events,” Freyja continued. “In addition to this, Khebechet must learn to understand what happened to her, and she must find a way to forgive before she is whole. When she is ready to hunt, may she do so successfully,” Freyja concluded.

“Lady Bast?” Ma’at addressed her directly. “Do you, will you, accept a term of your priestess in the earth realm under the watchful eye of the Jyrr’Khun’Ari? It is this, or it is execution to the final death of personality by our laws for the crime of releasing daemoni from the Abyss.”

“I approve of sending her to the earth realm for a full life term,” Bast acknowledged as she looked deep into Khebechet’s frightened eyes.

“Does anyone object?” Ma’at asked those crowding the amphitheater in her full guise as Principle of Justice. Athena sniffed but stayed any further objections. The rest simply awaited pronouncement as they knew it was practically settled.

“Themis, Dike, Lustitia?” Ma’at called the other judges forward. “It is time for the decision of this court.”

Themis came forth and placed her hand on Khebechet’s shoulder. “By official proclamation, in the custom of the Principle of Divine Order and Law, the merciful and unanimous decision of this court is to stay the execution of Khebechet. She will be banished to the earth realm to spend a term of life there as a mortal. There she will use her gifts in defense of the realms and for the benefit of mankind. Anubis and Bast are to oversee this is done in a right and proper manner in time so that she has self-determination and is in full possession of her Self. May our Divine Creator’s blessings go with her.”

“If that is the will of this court and my lady Bastet, then I will cede to it,” Khebechet formally acknowledged her sentence.

At the end of the proceedings, Ma’at rang the bell once Themis returned to her seat. “This court is closed.”

kuld, displaced from Khebechet’s side by Bastet’s arrival, pushed through the crowd of well-wishers to speak to her. “You

made many allies here today, all three of you. You all displayed uncommon courage in the face of terrible odds. Regardless of her contrary comments, Athena too is impressed.”

“It didn’t sound like she was impressed. It sounded like she was pissed,” Ha-Set observed.

“Ah, but Athena was doing her job to provide a counter-argument. Athena loves brave warriors in any Age, Kenneth,” Skuld smiled. “She will be watching you when you step into future battles.”

“Oh, you mean somebody remembers my name?” Ha-Set grumbled.

“We all do,” Skuld told him. “But Khebechet remembers you from your last contact in the mortal realm. Using your Egyptian name minimizes confusion while you accompany Khebechet and Isa this side of the Veil.”

Khebechet added. “Like the rest, it’s a use-name and not your True Name anyway, General Ha-Set,” she teased.

He reached over and ruffled Khebechet’s hair, not in the mood to argue since they’d just won a much bigger argument. “Okay, whatever,” he said.

“Auntie Skuldi? What happens next?” Khebechet asked Fate.

“Ah, that would be telling,” Skuld fondly winked at her. “But I imagine you will all want to return to the Temple to regroup and plan your next moves.”

“Do we need to go back across the river to get back? I want to go home,” Isa said. “I’d like to rest for a while and go flying before I have to give up my wings again.” She looked longingly at the sky. “I feel like a caged bird.”

“Home to our families sounds good,” Ha-Set remarked. “Peace and quiet would be even better.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Isa said. “But I imagine I’ll have to go back there sooner rather than later.”

“We don’t have to cross the river Styx now. That is the only way to get here, but we can open a Gate to leave. We just can’t do it in here. We have to do it outside,” Khebechet answered Isa’s question. “If a defendant could open a Gate inside the court, that would be problematic, don’t you think?”

“I can see that,” Isa replied.

Thoth moved through the crowd and nodded acknowledgment to them in passing. His magic quill was auto-writing in an Akashic record book. Ha-Set watched him walk by and had a sudden

inspiration. “Hold on just a moment, you guys.” He hurried after Thoth.

“Thoth?” Ha-Set managed to catch up with him. “Can you teach me how to do that?” He pointed at the quill and then looked closer. “Hey, is that...?”

“One of your soul-bonded’s feathers? Yes, young man, it is.” Thoth answered Ha-Set’s quizzical expression in as dignified a manner as he could muster.

For a moment, he was speechless, staring at it. “Oh-Kay... then.” He struggled with the sudden mental image of Isa molting and dancing feathers. It made him almost forget what he was about to say. He shook his head to clear it. “What I meant was... um, yeah. Can you teach me a scribe spell?” he finally managed to ask.

“You could always write things down yourself instead of relying on a spell,” Thoth told him. Because Ha-Set still held the Spear of Destiny, Thoth could not read his true intent.

“I don’t want to write on paper,” Ha-Set assured the keeper of Akashic Records. “I want to engrave something so that I can hide it in plain sight.”

“I see,” Thoth replied. He looked at the teen with his head tilted to examine him with one bird’s eye. “I think you will find that Khebechet can help you with what you desire. She has learned much over time, though she does not always use her knowledge wisely.”

“Thanks,” he told Thoth and hurried away.

Once the crowd had thinned, Ha-Set managed to pull Khebechet aside. “Can you teach me a scribe spell?”

“You really need to be more specific than that. There’s a lot of different scribe spells,” Khebechet told him.

“I want to engrave something,” Ha-Set said. “Something hard.”

“Sure, just don’t write on daddy’s temple walls. He’d get mad,” Khebechet said.

Ha-Set smiled at her with amused suspicion. “There’s a story there, isn’t there?”

“Well... there may have been more than a few bottles of Shadowflower wine and a limerick or two involved,” Khebechet admitted, giggling and only slightly embarrassed. “So! Getting back on track, is it metal, crystal, stone, wood, or bone?”

“Wood,” Ha-Set said, bumping the spear against the ground for emphasis.

“Ah, ok,” Khebechet said suspiciously and then shrugged. “Should be fine as long as it doesn’t blow you up... again.”

"So, does that mean yes?" Ha-Set's eyes had a mischievous twinkle.

"Meet me in the Temple gardens. We'll want to practice on a few sticks," Khebechet told him.



Late evening found Isa again riding the air currents over the Summerland. She sighed with content as she sped over the landscape in a long glide toward the Temple. Isa knew her companions were in the gardens. She flew around the grounds until she found them with heads bent together beside one of the gazing pools.

"What are you guys doing?" Isa asked curiously.

Khebechet took a stick from the ground and waved it above her head. "We're writing on sticks! See?" She sounded unusually chipper.

"I see that." Isa stared hard at Khebechet. "You usually sound that happy only when you're up to something."

"Me? Do something? No, not this time." Khebechet grinned at her. "I'm innocent."

"Yeah, okay, whatever," Ha-Set snickered.

Khebechet pouted at him playfully. "You have no faith in me."

"I have absolute faith that you will be into something at all times." Isa told her. She plopped down on the stone edge of the pool.

Ha-Set looked sideways at Khebechet. "She's just upset *SHE* doesn't have sticks."

Isa snatched a stick up. "Ha! Now I have the stick!" she proclaimed. She pointed it at them playfully like she was holding a sword.

"Yeah, but can you write on it?" Ha-Set laughed.

"Sure! Hand me a pen!" Isa giggled and waved it around some more. Khebechet grabbed Isa's stick as it whizzed past her nose.

"Hey! That's my stick!" Isa objected.

"It was my stick first! I wrote on it!" Khebechet exclaimed.

"Fine! I'll get another stick!" Isa let go and grabbed the other one from under her soul sister.

"I wrote on that one too!" the sticks clacked together as Isa and Khebechet squared off.

Ha-Set, not wanting to be left out of the fun, grabbed two sticks and started a free-for-all with both of them.

Anubis didn't have a hard time finding them. He simply followed the sound of laughter and clacking noises. He smiled when he rounded the corner and saw them having fun. The change was a huge relief from watching these three fight for their lives. He hated to interrupt, so he simply sat down until they noticed him.

"Hello, Father." Khebechet backed up, going still and quiet.

Anubis addressed them. "It will soon be time for Isa and Ha-Set to return to the Earth Realm. Ha-Set has a promise to keep. We will discuss the choices available to you from here upon your return."

He turned to Khebechet. "Bring me the Lethe, if you would. Two cups will be needed for after the matter of the Spear of Destiny is handled."

Khebechet dipped her head in a formal acknowledgment. "Ahyi, my lord father."

Khebechet turned to go, and Isa placed a hand on her shoulder to stop her. "First, I have a question. What do you want your name to be in the mortal realm this time?" Isa asked her.

Khebechet paused for a moment, thinking. The matter of a name was a serious one, even if it was only to be used for a single lifetime. "I think that Keira would be appropriate for this day and age."

"Keira sounds pretty. I like it," Isa responded.

Khebechet smiled back at Isa somewhat sadly, placing her hand on Isa's, where it rested on her shoulder. "Thank you. It's a rare thing to have the privilege of choosing my name." She turned away to do Anubis' bidding.

"Come, you two... if you are ready?" Anubis asked them.

"Yes. I am definitely ready now," Ha-Set grinned real big. Isa merely nodded but looked at Ha-Set quizzically, wondering at his enthusiasm.

"Where do you wish to be sent?" Anubis requested Ha-Set's formal declaration.

"The Vatican," Ha-Set replied, still grinning. "I'm going to put it where nobody will find it."

Anubis reached out to the arch over the entrance to the garden and slid his talons between Summer and the Earth realm, creating a bridge between the two points. "This portal will stay open until you return," Anubis assured them. "You are still on this side of the Veil. When it finds itself in its resting place, the Spear of Destiny will return to the physical plane."

"That works for me," Ha-Set nodded in satisfaction. "C'mon, let's get this over with."

"Right behind you," Isa assured him. "So like, where exactly are we going?" she asked after they stepped through the Gate.

"There," he pointed.

"Whoa! This place is huge!" Isa exclaimed with a gasp.

They walked through Vatican Square and entered the Vatican Archives building. A set of spiral stairs led to several areas that contained numerous shelves of old hand-copied books, glass cases, and museum-quality artifacts. They searched each room systematically. Eventually, they came across a glass case holding a spear that looked much like the one Ha-Set held in his hand.

"Bingo!" Isa said. "I think we found it."

"Yep," Ha-Set agreed. The cover was stuck tight when he tried the case. "Just a minute while I get this loose," he said. Finally, the stubborn clasp released, and he lifted the replica out of its case. Ha-Set was about to lower the Spear of Destiny in place of the fake when Isa suddenly grabbed Ha-Set's arm.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded. "Where in all the levels of Hell is the *REAL* one?"

"What do you mean?" he asked her with as innocent an expression as he could manage.

"What the fuck? Don't act all innocent with me! Look, right there! Made in China?" she pointed out the words that appeared burned into the shaft of the Spear of Destiny.

"This IS the real one!" he told her and ducked as she took a swing at him.

"You better damned well explain yourself! I will go over your head if I have to," Isa threatened. "I'll tell the archangel you switched it!" She glared at him and crossed her arms.

Ha-Set looked at her angry expression, and suddenly his trick didn't seem so funny. *But, he thought to himself, if it's good enough to fool her, this is going to work.*

"I'm sure the archangel knows exactly what I'm doing! Besides, do you remember in the garden where we were writing on sticks?" Ha-Set asked her.

"Yeah, what's your point?" Isa's eyes narrowed. Her expression cleared as she got it. "Oh! You mean that's what you were trying to do?"

"Yes," he shrugged. "You could trust me better than that, you know."

"That's sacrilege!" Isa objected.

“It’s a Roman spear. It will be okay. It’s not like it is God Himself. The engraving will keep anybody from trying to use it for evil purposes,” Ha-Set told her. “They will think this is the fake.”

“You wrote on the Spear of Destiny.” Isa threw up her hands. “Well, go on then. Put it in there so we can go.”

“Inscribed,” Ha-Set said as he did what she told him. “If it is good enough to fool you, then this is the best way to hide it! Now, what to do with the actual fake?”

“Put it back where we got the real one?” Isa suggested.

“Nah, no reason to bother with that. Maybe I’ll just throw the fake spear in the river.” When Ha-Set closed the case, it took on the quality and appearance of an odd overlay to their eyes. It merged back onto the physical plane of reality just as Anubis had said it would.

“There, that as they say, is that.” Ha-Set dusted off his hands and picked up the fake Spear of Destiny, and they turned to leave.

19

LETHE

hebechet stood holding two large, long-stemmed goblets upon returning to the Temple garden. Each cup was made of carved gray stone and covered in raised images of gods and man. The goblets were full nearly to the rim with the water of forgetting from the River Lethe.

Anubis took one of the goblets and beckoned Ha-Set to walk with him. They left Khebechet and Isa alone in the garden.

"I would say that I'm going to miss you, but I suppose that doesn't apply since I won't remember much," Isa said to Khebechet.

The two walked past the gazing pool into the most private section of the garden. Flowers hung heavy above their heads, filling the pure air with a sweet fragrance. Isa drew in a deep breath, savoring the delicious scents.

"The soul always remembers even when the mind doesn't," Khebechet replied. She stared down into the stoneware cup at the silver Lethe water. "You just won't know who you are missing."

"Another empty place in my life. I guess I don't have enough of those," Isa wrinkled her nose. The flowers were giving her the urge to sneeze. "My family doesn't support me in much of anything, and I have to go back and look over my shoulder constantly and be put down all the time. It's... trying, to say the least."

Khebechet hissed lowly, a sound like steam rising off hot metal. "Friends are the family you choose. I've always been there for you, even if I can't do much from here. Please, my sister, listen not to the opinions of idiots."

Isa nodded. "I try, but it's constant. Being a Sensitive in the realm of mankind is stressful enough. It's hard not to withdraw when everyone around me just seems to hate me. I don't understand it. I reach out with love, and either they seem to think

I've got an ulterior motive, or they attack where they think I'm most vulnerable."

"I understand. It's one thing to suspect that people fear and hate you. It is another entirely to know and feel it as we do. We're empaths, so it's difficult for others to understand who don't share that Gift," Khebechet agreed and heaved a deep sigh. "I don't know what to tell you, especially since you know my feelings on the matter. All I can do is be there; however I can."

Isa sighed and looked over at the stoneware cup Khebechet held to her chest. Her soul sister was staring down into the Water of Forgetting with a frown. "I guess I should drink that now," Isa whispered slowly. "How much should I drink this time?"

"Lethe is tricky. You should probably take a little less than usual," Khebechet told her. "Usually, I see you drink about half the cup. In this case, you will need to remember enough to become fully aware after a time. Besides, total amnesia would be unfortunate."

"Right," Isa nodded. "Some things I'd like to forget, but what I will probably forget is Ha-Set and everything that's happened here."

"You heard my lady," Khebechet told her sternly. "Your paths will diverge for a time. As I told Ha-Set several millennia ago, you two will see each other again. Besides, when we Hunt, you will have plenty to occupy you."

"Alright, then I am ready," Isa said. She took the goblet and glared forlornly at the sparkling fluid inside. "I will remember it all in time?" She sighed. "Then just enough... for peace. It will be time to begin to know my duty when you come. Just maybe, perhaps, someday, we can be happy after I have fulfilled my promise," Isa whispered and tilted the goblet to her lips. She swallowed seven times. Her eyes were sad as she handed the cup to Khebechet.

"Bast, Anubis, and others will help when it is time, sister. Have faith that all will be well." Khebechet hugged her fiercely. She wiped a tear as she stepped back. "You won't remember what happened here, but don't forget to have some fun when you get back, okay?" Khebechet grinned a little through her tears. "Come, Anubis is almost finished talking to Ha-Set."

Anubis pulled Ha-Set aside and led him through his Temple to the Observatory, where they could see the stars. Ha-Set quietly spoke first.

"I will take the Lethe," Ha-Set told Anubis resolutely. "I want to forget all this mess and go on with my life. I'm young, and I have a lot of time ahead of me to move on. I want to go do things and see things."

Anubis grinned, showing his teeth. “Ah, yes, ever the wanderer you are, but you are correct in that you need to live your life without being buried in the horrors you have seen. You and Isa will need to choose your paths from here. You will need to decide how much Lethe to drink before leaving,” Anubis told Ha-Set. “For your service, it is not required. Consider, however, it will bring you some measure of peace.”

“I don’t want to forget everything,” Ha-Set replied, looking over his shoulder at the door where Isa had exited. He did not elaborate. Instead, Ha-Set chose to keep his own counsel.

Anubis knew his intent. The young man could be Read again since he no longer held the Spear of Destiny.

Anubis continued, “If there is anything from your time here that you feel you must remember, hold it in your mind as you drink so that it is not washed away. Keep it close to you as you return through the Veil. The memories that you wish to leave behind shall not return until you again cross to our side when you leave your mortal skin in death of the flesh.”

“Water of forgetting,” Ha-Set murmured thoughtfully as he accepted the gray stone chalice from Anubis. “So I can drink a little and forget a little, or I can drink all of it and forget everything.” He contemplated the cup he held.

“As with all things, it is a matter of free will,” Anubis told his companion. “Your strength of Spirit will require more than a sip. If you drain the cup, you will have no memories from your time on this side of the Veil or past lives until you truly wish to remember.”

“That is a lot of fluid. I’ll probably have to take a piss.” Ha-Set grinned.

“Irreverent as always,” Anubis said dryly.

Ha-Set tipped the cup to his lips and drank twelve swallows. About half of the water was gone when he handed the cup back to Anubis.

“That should do,” Anubis said. “The ladies are returning. I will send you both back together. Skuld has arranged for Bryan to meet you for a ride home since you can’t just pop out anywhere while you possess your mortal form still. You need to emerge from the Rainbow Bridge at a stable Gate location.”

“Isa can’t carry me now,” Ha-Set observed. “I hope we don’t have to jump off a cliff again.”

“Not in a manner of speaking, no, although you might have to help her get down from your climb,” Anubis told him with a slight grin.

“Where are you sending us?” Ha-Set asked Anubis.

“The humans currently call the place Ozone Falls,” Anubis told him. “The falls are full and will allow you to emerge in full sunlight about halfway down while the light is angled for the rainbow.”

“Oh boy!” Ha-Set remembered the difficult rock faces at Ozone. “I’ve climbed there recreationally,” he told Anubis with concern. “It’s dangerous, and Isa won’t be able to fly anymore, so how do we get her...”

“Down?” Anubis interrupted. “It’s no more dangerous than what you’ve already undertaken. Have a little more faith in her than that.”

“I’ll try to remember that when she’s panicking,” Ha-Set replied dryly.

They heard the door open behind them and turned around. Ha-Set knew his concerns were well-founded when he saw them walk in.

Isa’s eyes were an even blue-green again and looked somewhat glassy. Her hair was quickly lightening from blue-black to light reddish-brown and shortening. As he watched, she folded her increasingly transparent wings down into her aura, where she again hid them. If he hadn’t known her nature, he would have thought her just an ordinary girl.

“Nice disguise,” he muttered.

“What?” she responded, slightly confused.

“Never mind,” Ha-Set told her and took her hand. “Let’s go.”

Anubis guided them out of the Temple and to the Gate at the edge of the garden. The tall figure again slid his talons between realms and pulled the Veil aside as if drawing a curtain away from a window. A different world revealed itself in the opening. Bright light assaulted their sight, and the sound of falling water roared in their ears from below.

The rainbow sparkled with moving water droplets, brilliantly colored in warm and cool hues. Its transparent light ended on a damp, gray rock face. Holding hands, the two teens stepped out on the Rainbow Bridge as their other companions slowly faded away behind them.

“ere, take hold of this, and whatever you do, don’t let go.” With that instruction to Mary Lou, Kenneth placed her hands

carefully on two solid rock outcroppings. He jumped for his own handhold when all sense of anything else solid vanished.

Just as he'd predicted, Mary Lou began to realize just how far up she was. She had no rope and couldn't fly. The result of that realization was also just as bad as he'd thought it would be.

"Ken?" she managed to gasp. Her voice was higher than normal and ended with a choked squeak. "How do we get down?"

"I'm working on it. Now hush," Kenneth told her sternly. "For starters, stay calm while I look at where we are." He made an effort not to swear. He settled for grinding his teeth. She was in a precarious position and would have to go sideways before she could go down. He was in a better place with more hand and footholds.

"You're going to have to come to me," Kenneth told her. "We have to go to the right about fifty to eighty feet. The climb will be easier from there down."

"How?" she asked with a tremble in her voice.

There was nothing but open air beneath her where she clung to the side of the cliff face. Mist from the waterfall filled the air and began soaking through her clothing. The rocks beneath her fingers were slick with moss and damp. Silver sparkles lingered behind her eyes every time she blinked. The Lethe still slithered through her thoughts, blurring her memories and perceptions.

"I'm scared, I'm stuck, and to make this worse, the Lethe is making me dizzy," Mary Lou complained. "But... at least my hair isn't falling in my face." She didn't remember putting on a barrette this morning, but the one in her hair seemed to be doing its job.

Far below, she could see that the rocks of the cliff face underneath them came up at an angle. If she tried to go straight down, she would fall because the cliff's rocks would simply be out from under her. It was impossible to go upward as the cliff face curved up and angled out way past their heads. She saw that to the right of them, Kenneth was correct. It would be the only way down without letting go and falling the last fifty feet to the rocks below. Eyeing it, Mary Lou realized the rock face, far to their right, straightened out enough to do a vertical climb down – if she could manage to move.

"Keep three points of contact at all times. Move slow. I can't do it for you. You have to do it yourself," Kenneth told her firmly. "Look and feel as you go. Don't try anything fancy. You've had the strength training. You can do this!"

"I can do this," Mary Lou repeated and tried to slow her racing heart. She had no choice but to trust him once again. Carefully, she

shifted her weight and let go with her right hand. She felt along the sharp edges of the damp rock for another handhold.

Kenneth caught his breath and held it as he watched Mary Lou slowly shift position and shift again. “There you go!” he told her with a slight grin. Showing his own nerves wouldn’t help her at all. “Now, just stay calm and follow me.”

Slowly they made their way across the rocks. They were part of the way across when Kenneth also experienced a wave of disorientation. He struggled to remember how he got where he was and shook his head to clear it of the cobwebs.

“Are you okay, Ken?” Mary Lou asked with concern.

“The Lethe is getting to me too,” Kenneth told her. “We have to get down as quickly as possible,” he muttered to himself. “This is going to feel like one hell’uva hangover tomorrow.”

Damp and dirty, the two teens inched down the rock face the last few feet to the bottom. Mary Lou could hear Bryan’s familiar voice as he hailed them from across the rushing water below Ozone Falls.

When Mary Lou’s feet eventually touched the broken slate grey rocks at the bottom of the falls, she found that her trembling knees could no longer support her. A nearby flat rock became her savior as she collapsed from fatigue. She could feel the edge of an asthma attack threatening to close her throat and fought panic as she remembered she had no inhaler with her. She forced her shaking body into relaxation as she refused to hyperventilate and make it worse. To her relief, the pressure in her throat gradually eased, and she was able to enjoy the beauty of her surroundings.

“You okay over there, Mary Lou?” Kenneth called to her as he looked up at Bryan, waving at them from across the pool at the base of the falls.

“I just need to sit here for a few minutes and rest,” she replied weakly.

Kenneth nodded and stretched. He was relieved that they had both safely gotten down off the cliff. The pain in his forearms and neck drew his attention. He gingerly placed the fingertips of his right hand to his neck. He was puzzled when they came away bloody and with charred flakes of skin on them. “What the?” He frowned to himself and then shook his head.

He looked up to see Bryan picking his way over the rocks towards them. "Hey, guys!" Bryan greeted them excitedly. "What the heck happened to you, and where's the Spear?"

"It went the way of Mt. St. Helens," Kenneth snarked, baring his teeth slightly.

"You look like hell, and you're bleeding," Bryan said as he looked them over in concern."

"Well, man, that's what happens when you're dragged through it," Kenneth replied with a careless shrug.

"How's Mary Lou doin'?" Bryan asked.

"Isa's fine, just tired from the climb," Kenneth said.

"Who's Isa?" Bryan said in confusion.

"What?" Kenneth asked him in return. "Who are you talking about?"

Bryan eyed his friend warily. "Dude. I think I best check you over for head trauma. You're not making sense."

"Nah, I'm fine. I prob'lly just slipped climbing down the cliff," Kenneth told him.

Bryan looked up at the falls and the sheer cliff face beside it. "Maybe next time y'all could think about using rappelling gear. Ropes would make that a lot easier." He saw blood oozing down Kenneth's neck and was puzzled. It came from wounds that didn't seem to be healing the same way every other injury had in the past few months. Between that and his friend's evident confusion, he was worried.

He picked his way carefully over the jagged rocks to where Mary Lou was hunched over with her elbows on her knees. Bryan squatted down to where he could meet her eyes. "How 'bout you, you okay? Two weeks, going on three, you've been gone. Your grandmother's been worried sick."

Mary Lou just wrinkled her nose and sniffed at the mention of her family. "I'm alright," she told him softly.

"What happened?" Bryan asked her quietly.

She looked at him directly with a haunted expression. Bryan's question brought on a wave of disorientation, and her memories were becoming more distant and confused as if she had woken from a dream. She struggled with articulating the horrors of that dream and found that she couldn't. She settled for telling him the simplest version of the truth. "We took care of it. It's done," she said. "The Spear of Chaos is gone forever."

Bryan looked into her eyes a moment more and nodded. For now, he was satisfied.

“Let’s get you guys back home then,” he told her. “I’ll take you over to Skuld’s place to get cleaned up and pick up Ken’s car. There will be fewer questions that way.”



Ghe drive over to the farm passed quietly, with Kenneth and Mary Lou disinclined to talk. Even Bryan’s typical exuberance wasn’t enough to draw them into a conversation.

Gravel crunched under the tires of Bryan’s car as he pulled into the driveway and came screeching to a halt. “Damn!” he exclaimed. “Where’d the barn go?”

He continued past the pristine meadow where the barn had once stood. To his relief, the house was still there. Bryan parked his car in front of the porch beside Ken’s car. It wasn’t disturbed. All three teens piled out of the vehicle.

They knocked and the door opened of its own accord on squeaky hinges. Inside it was spooky, empty, and silent. Skuld’s house had the air of a place that was abandoned for years though there was no dust. Lights turned on at a touch, and the water ran.

The only soul around was the large red cat perched on the roof. Silently the cat flicked his tail and watched them with luminous eyes. It didn’t take long for Kenneth and Mary Lou to shower and change into clothes someone left for them.

As they pulled away from Lady Fate’s home for the final time, Kenneth looked behind them in the rearview mirror and grinned to himself. One memory remained close as the rest faded despite the Lethe. Kenneth saw himself and Bucephalus race over the field as one.

THE  END

To Be Continued...

Watch for *Book 3* of
The Annals of Aeturnum Series

**DAUGHTER OF DEATH:
EXODUS TO EGYPT**

About the Author



Photo by Keira Holladay

Mary Lou Wells is an award winning, international author and public speaker who studied Art and Business at Roane State Community College and ITT-Tech. She worked for several years managing a medical transcription company and breeding horses. She is a winner of the 2021 Firebird Book Award for her second novel Spear of Destiny: Finding Bucephalus which follows Spear of Chaos: Legend of the Undead.

Mary Lou is also author of the internationally acclaimed nonfiction horse breed book The Illustrated Guide to the Morab Horse which has sold well in the USA, Canada, Australia and Japan. She lives in Tennessee with her three amazing kids and a talkative Australian Shepard. Mary Lou is pictured above with her beloved Egyptian Arabian horse, Shaikh AlJamaal.