

The Artificer

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... and with each new location, I realized there was so much more to the world than most ever realized, you just had to know where to look. Even now as humanity pushes to cover the globe there are still pockets of the strange world that was once our own. Some are hidden amongst us; some are still out there waiting to be found. Even with all our advancements this world is much bigger than we think. ~ from the journal of Prof. Emily Soneto.

Prologue. Sleepless Nights

Bedford, Colorado. 2024. Present Day

Maria lay in bed staring absently at the ceiling, wishing she would fall back asleep, but such a feat had been a problem for as long as she could remember. When she was young, her father said it was because she was such an anxious child, but a doctor had discovered it had more to do with her sleep cycle, and, thanks to modern medicine, it wasn't something she dealt with as often anymore. However, lately she had enough on her mind that she imagined sleep would be hard even for those who didn't struggle like she did.

Lost in thought, she ran a hand through the soft curls of her brown hair and looked over at her husband, who was deep in the throes of sleep. He was a meek man, with pale skin that clashed with her warmer complexion, and a short crop of reddish-brown hair, that she was thankful their daughter hadn't inherited. He had been by her side for over a decade, but she couldn't help but wonder how many more nights she would be able to roll over and find him there. Even though she could reach out and touch him, he felt so far away, as though she was staring at him through a screen, somewhere distant, despite appearing like he was right there. For the last couple of months strange, near unexplainable things had been happening around their daughter, and while the stress had been compounding on both of them, she knew her husband was teetering on an edge that she wasn't sure he'd come back from.

At first, she felt he had been handling the strange occurrences happening around their daughter pretty well. He had kept calm whenever they found her playing with a toy that neither could remember buying her, and when all of their daughters clothes had suddenly turned purple, he had been angry but had treated it as no more than a simple accident, but it wasn't long before they became hard to explain away. He'd managed to do so when the neighbors swing set ended up in their backyard while Amber was out playing, telling himself it had to be a prank by some neighborhood kids but when they came upstairs the other day to find their daughter's bedroom carpet had been replaced by foot high grass, she had felt something inside him break. She had felt it like it had been her own sanity that had crumbled like broken glass, just as she felt his anger when he had a bad day at work or her daughter's fear after she'd woken up from a nightmare. The emotions of those around her were a near tangible radiance that all exuded.

Maria continued to stare at her husband until a familiar sense of guilt began worming its way through her and she returned to staring at the ceiling. The events occurring around their daughter had brought back memories of a night she long since buried and even longer since she had convinced herself had never happened, but with each passing day she became less sure.

'Greg... Amber... Is all this my fault?'

The thought created a pit in her stomach that threatened to swallow her whole. She didn't want to lose her husband, even after all these years, and all the ups and downs, she still loved him, but, moreover, she didn't want Amber to lose her father. She was all too familiar with what that was like, and while there were times when she felt he wasn't the best husband, she always felt he'd been a great father. Before a couple of days ago she had felt sure that if anything happened between them, Greg would remain in Amber's life, but now she didn't know. The feelings she had gotten from him for the last couple of days disturbed her, and if she told him now what she had come to fear, she felt all but sure he'd take the chance to run. She was just happy he had to work late that afternoon, and he hadn't witnessed the rain skipping their house when Amber wanted to go outside and play.

As time slowly crept by in the late hours and Maria let her thoughts wander freely, in hopes they would eventually lead to sleep, something occurred to her, brought on by other memories she wished she could forget. It wasn't the first time the thought had crossed her mind recently, but it was the first time that it stuck around. Turning back to her husband, it occurred to her that she could do something about her worries, at least in regard to Greg. She could always *make* him feel better about what was happening. She might be out of practice, but she thought it was still there, like a soft buzzing buried deep in the back of her mind.

For just a brief moment an honest consideration ran through her mind, but it was almost immediately followed by a fresh wave of guilt that made her roll over in the other direction.

As Maria lay there, admonishing what she had just considered, however briefly, there was a loud *pop*, followed soon after by a low *creak* from somewhere in the house. While she didn't hear anything, a foreboding feeling filled her body, like there was a charge in the air that carried the diffused scent of ozone, causing her to sit up and focus her *sixth* sense.

When her mind reached out and touched her daughters, instead of feeling the muted emotions of sleep, she felt a deep fervorous panic.

There was someone else in the room with her daughter.

Maria launched herself across the bedroom, shouting for her husband to wake up as loud as she could muster.

"Greg!"

No response.

"Greg!"

She was already stepping into the halls not daring to wait for him.

"Greg! Wake up!"

Her husband moaned and grumbled something incohesive, barely awake and not picking up on the panic in her voice.

'Please be wrong. Please be wrong.'

From the door of her and Greg's bedroom to the door of Amber's was less than fifteen feet of hardwood hallway, the bathroom and the stairs on either side between them. Maria flew down the hall, unsure if her feet ever hit the floor, before she was at her daughter's door and bursting through with a thunderous crash.

On the far side of the quaint room, whose bedding and dresser and many colorful posters made it clear it was the room of a young child, was a window overlooking the backyard. It was large enough th Maria had always been worried that one day Amber would somehow tumble out of it, whether by accident or childhood bravado, which left her insistent that the window stay closed and locked most of the time.

The window was gone, now just a rectangular hole in the wall that let in the warm night air. Framed by the moon light, a tall, lanky figure crouched on the window seal. Slung over their shoulder was the unmistakable silhouette of her daughter, hands and legs bound, but still struggling to get free.

"Stop! Put her down!"

Maria started towards the would-be kidnapper, unsure what she was going to do but determined to get Amber away from them. The room was small, it only took a few large strides to get close enough to reach out and pull them back inside, but the figure leapt as Maria tried to grab them, causing her to stumble and brace the wall to keep from tumbling out. The kidnapper landed without so much as a grunt of effort and looked up at Maria, fixing her with a pair of burning orbs, before taking off at an unnatural sprint.

Chapter 1. A Perfectly Normal Day

Suburbs, Greeley, New York. Present Day

1.

Robbie used the collar of his paint-stained shirt to wipe the sweat from his eyes and took a few steps back, carefully looking over all the drywall he'd just finished. *'Looks pretty good,'* he thought approvingly, as he took out his phone to check the time, *'Shame everyone else left almost an hour ago.'* He sighed and tried to clean his hands on his equally dirty jeans. He liked working construction, even if he wasn't great at it. It was hard but satisfying work, which was more than he could say about all the other jobs he had tried since he had *retired* from his previous profession. At the age of thirty-seven he had more work experience than most for his age but none of it, before the last two and a half years, were things that he could put down on a resume. As tempting as it was, he figured putting things like *'tomb/dungeon guide'*, *'curse breaker'*, and *'trap removal'*, on his resume would only get him laughed at. Even six months in, he still felt lucky that his boss at K&S was willing to hire him and teach him the basics at his age.

Feeling no rush to leave, Robbie meandered about the partially built apartment, making sure no one had left out any tools that could easily be whisked away in the night, until he stepped out onto the apartment building's uncompleted third floor and stopped to look about the soon to be neighborhood, enjoying the breeze as it rustled his short crop of dark hair. After a lifetime of trancing about ancient castles, lost temples, and ruins of all kinds, it felt strange, but also cathartic, to now be someone who was building buildings that one day may be the remains of a forgotten city that someone else might explore, however unlikely that may be.

Standing there, staring out at the array of half-built buildings oddly reminded him of a Persian village he'd once explored, though instead of being half built, the sixteen-hundred-year-old village was half decayed from time and neglect.

Pakistan. 2016

The wear and tear of the ancient stone and clay buildings, let Robbie know he found the right place as soon as he saw it. While the village wasn't exactly

“undiscovered”, what was once a large town for its time, was located far and away from any modern city, and was surrounded by nothing but open wasteland. Anything of apparent value had been pillaged almost a thousand years ago, which left Robbie the first non-archaeologist to bother with it for hundreds of years. The thing was, not *everything* of value had been found, missed by centuries of travelers, treasure hunters, and archaeologists alike. At least that’s what the people who had hired him were willing to bet quite a lot of money on, and Robbie’s business partner had been inclined to believe them.

‘Too bad Em and Marco couldn’t make it.’

Standing on the hardpacked, dying plains, wind whipping his clothes, he set aside his binoculars after he spotted the village and wiped the dirt and dust from around the large patch he wore in those days, to cover the scarring and disfiguration beneath. He focused on where he knew the village to be and let his normal vision fade, and his *extra* sight take hold. Without the distraction of physical sight and the glaring light of the sun, the protective magic rose into the air like an ethereal tower. The magic that protected one of the buildings was old, but still active, and had kept it, and whatever it held, hidden all this time.

As soon as he arrived at the edge of the forgotten town, he spotted several round, footlong, insectile creatures, on and around many of the buildings nearby. *Pests* like them came in all shapes and sizes, and were found throughout the world, drawn to wherever there was *standing* magic. The *rolka* blended in with the muted wasteland, and scurried about on ten spindly legs, looking to inject their prey with a venom that acted as a mild anesthetic. Individually the *rolka* weren’t terribly dangerous but they were quick to swarm and fed with a ferocious abandonment.

It didn’t take long for the first of them to come skittering his way, but he made quick work of any who got near, scorching them with an elemental stone of fire.

He made his way through the decaying, sunbaked remains of the old village and found his query at the end of a row of buildings that only held two or three walls each. It took little effort to remove the spell that hid the building from sight and even less to remove the barrier that kept anyone, and anything, from entering.

Because of the barrier, the large stone structure was much more preserved than the surrounding village. Having been protected from the elements for all these years, the mostly stone building was still largely intact, although Robbie suspected it had spent some time abandoned before a traveling scholar, and likely a *witch*, had decided to make it their hiding spot.

With the barrier down, Robbie stepped inside the ancient home and took a moment to marvel at the glimpse of time that once was, before he got back to the task at hand.

If not for his ability to visualize magic, he might not have ever found the roughly three-square feet of the floor that had been enchanted to look like the rest, but he soon got to work removing the illusion and the barrier around the wooden hatch that really sat there.

No light came from or reached whatever lay beneath, so Robbie began searching through a small, old leather satchel and removed several items that should have struggled to all fit inside the bag. He put a couple of the items in his pocket but put the faded gold amulet around his neck and placed a square cut gemstone in the center. The unusual gem was a purple so dark it was almost black on one side, and a light, wispy green on the other. Closing his eyes, Robbie's focus turned inward until he felt the ebb and flow of his life energy, *aura*. With practiced ease, he shifted that energy beyond himself and filled both the stones and the amulet with it, until the stone, and the runes on the amulet started to glow.

He then tied a string around another stone the size of a walnut husk and lowered the stone into the hole, activating the magic stored within as he did so. The stone became like a small sun, illuminating the deep cavern below, and filling him with a sense of excitement.

After taking a heavy, broken chunk of wall from a nearby building and using it to anchor the string holding the lightstone, Robbie turned his attention back to the amulet and made sure he could feel the subtle, humming reverb and stepped over the edge. Using the magic stored within the stone, that was amplified by the amulet, Robbie slowly lowered himself several dozen feet into the unnaturally made cavern. As he descended, he scanned the room for any signs of traps and

tried not to be distracted by the treasure trove of old tomes and scrolls that filled the many bookshelves, or by all the cases and caskets and the infinite potential of what was inside. His employer was only interested in the ancient literature that adorned the shelves, and anything that could be easily sold for cash. That left Robbie with any *artifacts* he might find and want to add to his collection, regardless of value. Catching no obvious signs of magic, Robbie gently touched down near the center of the cavern and made a beeline for a large wooden chest that he chose at random.

That chest contained more scrolls, but a smaller, nearby chest held a number of jewels and other trinkets. Making a mental note of where *that* particular chest lay, Robbie continued to wander around, peering into chests and barrels and occasionally pulling a scroll or a tome from the shelves and giving it a look over. The scrolls held little personal interest for him as they were mostly written in languages he did not recognize, but the chests and barrels contained everything from jewels and weapons to clothes and a variety of personal effects. He found many types of powders and minerals that he assumed were ingredients for potions or alchemical endeavors. He even found a barrel of black powder that he believed was a form of proto gunpowder. While he spent nearly an hour amusing himself with the contents of the cavern, Robbie was largely disappointed by what he found as there were no artifacts or anything of personal interest. That was until he spotted a small chest tucked away in a corner.

Awkwardly placed behind a barrel and in between two shelves, Robbie nearly missed it completely and only found it when he caught the faintest wisps of magic. The innocuous chest was no different than a dozen others he had already rummaged through, except for a heavy metal lock. Double checking that the wisps of magic were coming from within the box and that there was no magic protecting it, Robbie greedily picked up the wooden chest, unable to hide his excitement.

There was a loud, mechanical, *click*, as a slab of stone rose a few inches beneath where the chest sat. Cursing himself for his oversight, Robbie tucked the chest under one arm and ran to the nearest bookshelf and began hovelling scrolls into his old leather bag, wary of whatever was about to happen. The cavern had clearly been created by magic, and he had foolishly assumed that meant there

wouldn't be any traps that weren't magic based; a mistake he knew better than to make.

At first, he thought the walls were caving in as the whole cavern started to shake but then he heard a distant roar of something rushing towards him. Robbie's heart sank. He had a gut wrenching feeling he knew what was going to happen and only had a few seconds to decide what he was going to do. He had enough time to get out of there and save whatever he could fit in his bag, but hundreds of scrolls and tomes would be lost. Robbie set the chest down and pulled out three aqua blue gemstones and six round, flat grey stones, each with a rune carved into them.

Feeding the stone embedded in the amulet, Robbie rose into the air until he hovered above the shelves and had the other stones floating in front of him, primed and ready. His eyes combed the cavern, trying to figure out where it would be coming in from but there was no wall that was barren and no obvious crevasses that indicated the wall had been tampered with.

The sound of rushing water hit a deafening roar just before one wall split open and a torrent looking to drown any intruders and destroy whatever secrets might be held within the cavern walls came pouring in. Several shelves and caskets were destroyed in an instant before Robbie could react, and the lightstone came loose from its perch and fell towards the rushing water, plunging the cavern into darkness.

Cursing, Robbie unleashed the magic stored within the aqua blue stones and the six grey stones, which acted like his amulet to enhance the magic. The temperature in the cavern plummeted and the deadly rush of water began to freeze, but not quick enough, forcing Robbie to pour more and more into the stones until the magic outpaced the onrush, trailing along until it created a massive, horizontal pillar of ice that traced through the tunnel, all the way back to where it had been stored for centuries.

Breathing heavily, Robbie lowered himself to the ground, wary of any other traps he might have missed. Surveying the cavern, he estimated he had managed to save roughly two thirds of what lay inside. He spent several minutes berating his mistake before he began to devise a plan to get what remained undamaged to the

surface. Although the cavern was much cooler compared to the dying plains above, it wouldn't be long before the pillar of ice would begin to melt unless he was there to keep freezing it.

Present Day

A high-pitched *ding* followed by a low vibration shook Robbie from his reverie and he begrudgingly checked his phone to see who it was. He groaned as he looked at the automated text which stated, in bold letters, that his electric bill was fast approaching; it was the second such reminder he had gotten that day. These reminders and the growing pile of unopened mail, all of which wanted his money, were dark stains on his idealized image of a normal life. He liked this job far more than the others he had tried, but like the other entry level positions, it wasn't exactly cutting it when it came time to pay the bills most months. Though his house had been bought at a time in his life when money had not been a concern and was fully paid off, he now barely made enough to pay his bills and the taxes on the house, and that wasn't counting the months that he had to have the costly salve imported, so that he no longer had to wear a patch across his face, as he'd done for much of his life.

Still, even with the ups and downs, at that moment, he was content to just stand there, watching the world drift by, enjoying the slice of *normalcy* he had slowly carved for himself.

The moment was short lived however, as another text came in as he went to put his phone back in his pocket, this time from his boss.

"R u still at the site or close by? If so can u check and see if Nick rembered to bring all the generators in? Ill come back if not."

Robbie just stared at the message for a long moment, the thought of having to move any of the bulky generators by himself was daunting and made him wish he still kept his elemental stones on hand. He thought the smaller ones wouldn't be too bad but if either of the two larger generators had been left out, he was going to have to track down a dolly and something he could use to strap the generator onto it. Briefly he considered telling his boss he had already left or just ignoring the text until later, but instead he begrudgingly replied,

"Yea I got it".

2.

While the automated bill reminder had left him feeling like he should go straight home from work, the closer he got to the small New York suburb, the more the thought of stopping by *The Coda* for a beer, began to sound more and more appealing. Never much of a heavy drinker, The Coda had nonetheless become a regular part of his week, usually stopping by two or three nights after work, to have a beer and converse with some of the locals. Having spent his childhood and much of his adult life on the road working and living out of hotels and apartments that rented by the week, becoming a regular at either a bar or a diner had become something of a goal after he struck out for a normal life. Even when he bought his current home almost six years prior, cumulatively he had spent less than a year staying there until he retired two and a half years ago. It had taken some time and close to a dozen bars and restaurants, before he found somewhere close to home that he felt both comfortable and content to sit down without his guard completely up. Not so small as to be considered a dive bar, The Coda was still a place where everyone mostly knew each other, yet they all had treated him like he'd always been there, right from the start.

After saying hello to a few of the regulars, Robbie made his way to the lacquered wood bar and found the usual Thursday bartender behind the counter. He

liked Jessica even though everyone complained that her drinks weren't strong enough. She was always ready to greet him with her cheerful smile and would ask about his day, seemingly genuine in her curiosity, which made it hard to be mad at her for the drinks.

He sat at the bar while he drank his first beer, enjoying the musty but cozy atmosphere, content to relax and let his mind wonder as the tension from the day slowly slipped away from his muscles. Once he had a drink warming his stomach he peered about the bar until he spotted a couple that he sometimes played pool with and went over to chat with them, until one of the other regulars inserted himself into the conversation. The aged, portly man was one of the few regulars that Robbie didn't get along with and he soon used the excuse of needing another beer as a way to get out of the conversation. The first time they had ever spoken it had been pleasant enough but when Jared started talking about his life and his time as a pilot, then as a biologist, then as a manager of a construction firm, Robbie realized why he had been warned about this guy by some of the other regulars. Often making the mistake of voicing his thoughts before he could stop himself, Robbie had called the old man out on his lies, who had flown into an indignant fit after that, and now, over a year later, never missed a chance to besmirch Robbie the moment his back was turned.

Robbie remained at the bar after that. His thoughts soon trailed back to work, and he mentally went through and checked off a list, trying to remember if he'd forgotten to do anything back at the jobsite. Despite the long hours he felt that it had been a pretty good day. A pretty *normal* day.

3.

With the exception of Wednesdays, when The Coda had its wing night and he and a few other regulars would eat and drink until they felt sick, Robbie rarely stayed for more than two or three drinks, preferring to go home once his stomach was good and warm and make himself something to eat, before sitting in front of

the tv until his eyes grew heavy and he had to fight to finish whatever half watched movie or tv show that was on. That night, lost in his thoughts, he decided to order a fourth then a fifth drink, despite his better judgement.

Unlike his fourth beer, Robbie just stared at the fifth after Jessica brought it to him. The longer he stared at it the more he started to feel like he should call it a night, but he wasn't quite ready to leave, caught up in the movie that silently played on the tv behind the bar and enjoying the occasional bouts of conversation. So, for a while he just continued to sit there, mildly aware that his drink was getting warm, as he tried to work up the motivation to leave.

The door to the bar swung open, letting in the evening light and a newcomer, whose arrival caused an odd silence to sweep across the bar as almost all eyes turned to face them. The silence was heavy in the air, but it only lasted until the door swung shut, before it was replaced by a measure of unapologetic murmurs. Whatever the newcomer was wearing *clonked* against the hardwood floor as they made their way to the bar.

The newcomer came and took a seat next to him despite several open spots along the bar. When Jessica asked what they wanted, they spoke with a voice that was soft but clear, "A glass of your finest bourbon." Even before she turned to speak to him, fixing him with a smile he caught out of the corner of his eye, Robbie had a sinking feeling deep in his stomach, as if there had been a sudden shift in the weather, that signified his *normal* day was about to be over. "Hi. How are you?"

Facing away from the newcomer, Robbie ignored her, acting as though he hadn't heard, wondering what he had done, either as a child, or in some previous life, that had caused him to have such an unfortunate lot in this one.

After Jessica finished pouring her drink, the stranger took a generous sip of the amber liquor, taking a moment to savor the taste before she voiced her approval. For a minute she sat there sipping her drink and Robbie started to think that maybe, just maybe, she really was just a stranger at the bar.

"Are you Robbie Parker?"

'Ah shit. I knew it.'

Robbie continued to ignore her for the moment, choosing to take a long pull from his beer as he pondered over the pros and cons of trying to ignore her all together. *'If she knows who I am she must have put some serious effort into finding me and is probably not going to be dismissed that easily.'* Deciding that ignoring her would be too taxing, and possibly lead to confrontation, he turned to face her and was caught off guard by her looks and eccentric, but elegant dress. She wore a pristine black dress that was form-fitting on top and frilled out wide at the waist. He would have thought she'd come from a ballroom or gala except for her fashionable black boots, that gave her at least three extra inches of height. Pale skin and lips, contrasted well with both her outfit and her dark hair, which was bound and curled like she'd just stepped out of a salon and was on her way to a wedding. Her makeup, likewise, looked professionally done, her eyeliner was black and was outlined with shades of aquamarine that accentuated her large blue eyes, and with nails to match. Completing the outfit was a black parasol that she held closed on her lap, twirling it absently. The makeup and fanciful getup made it hard to tell how old she was, but Robbie guessed she was at least a few years younger than him.

'She looks like she just stepped away from some Victorian themed photoshoot,' Robbie thought. To buy himself a few more seconds he acted as though he hadn't heard what she'd asked.

"I asked if you are Robbie Parker?" as she spoke, she fixed him with a smile that lit up her pale features and likely left people eating out of her hands.

Under different circumstances Robbie thought he could be one of those people, but this lady set off warning bells louder than his hormones. "No, never heard of him. My name's Tim." He gave the woman a polite smile and turned around to try and catch Jessica's eyes so he could close his tab and get out of there, but she was talking to another customer at the other end of the bar.

The woman's tone was still soft, her voice still calm, but it had lost the falsely sweet edge as she leaned in and whispered, "Don't be rude, I know who you are."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about lady. I told you my names Tim,” he avoided her gaze as he spoke, still trying to get Jessica’s attention, who he was starting to suspect was avoiding looking his way.

“I know *who* you are Mr. Parker. Or would you prefer I called you *Mr. Eriksson?*”

Robbie tensed hearing that name and tried to play it off by letting out an exacerbated sigh. “Well then, what was the point of asking?”

“It’s called being polite. Something that’s clearly foreign to you.”

While he was more than a little tempted to argue that point, he decided that was likely the drink talking and that he needed to approach this with a clear head, or at least as clear as possible under the circumstances. “Sorry. I suppose I was being a bit rude. Please, call me Robbie.”

The woman’s smile widened, and she held out her hand like she really was a Victorian woman, which made Robbie wonder if she expected him to shake her hand or lean down and kiss it. “Janvier Lenoir.” Robbie didn’t know much French but had to stifle a laugh at what he thought was clearly a fake name and gave her outstretched hand a polite squeeze and waited for her to speak her peace. “There is something that I was hoping to acquire your help with. Something I think you would be perfectly suited for, given your profession.”

Robbie fixed her with a look of mild confusion and raised an eyebrow as he asked, “You need minor repair work done around your house?” The humorless narrow-eyed glare that she gave him told him that she didn’t find him funny, so he pivoted. “Okay fine, I get what you meant, but I’m retired.”

“Really? Your associate, Mr. Chamberlin, insisted you only said you were retired to raise up your price.”

Robbie felt his eye twitch at the same time as his hand, spilling a tiny bit of beer onto his shirt. Cursing, he grabbed a handful of napkins off the counter and started dabbing at his shirt. *‘Screw you, Gary. Just let it go.’*

“I’m sure he did. I apologize but me and him no longer work together. He’s a bit of a vindictive ass and sent you this way to... well to put me through this. I hope you didn’t travel far, and if you need a hotel recommendation or something I could probably help, but I assure you, I’m very much retired.”

“I understand,” she said sympathetically. For a second, she returned to her drink and for the second time that night Robbie made the mistake of thinking he was in the clear. “However, I still need your help, and I think I have an offer that will tempt you out of retirement.”

“I’ve heard that before. No offense Ms. Janvier, but you would have to give me a damn good reason to come out of retirement.”

The woman’s smile grew wide, almost sensual, as she leaned in and whispered, “Please, call me Lenoir. And what if I offer you *one-million* reasons.”

“Are you serious?” Robbie asked skeptically.

“Of course. Money’s not a problem.”

“No, I mean did you seriously just say that? What were you practicing lines in the car before you came in here?” The warm, flirtatious smile fell, replaced by an unamused sneer. Robbie awkwardly cleared his throat as he continued to internally berate his former client handler, and stood, doing his best to look sympathetic. “I’m really, truly sorry ma’am, but I’m not interested right now.”

While his words weren’t entirely true, he wanted to get out of there before he could think about his looming bills and really consider listening to what she had to offer. So, if Jessica wouldn’t look his way, he would just walk over to her and pay his tab.

As he made to step around her, the cladly dressed woman once again leaned in close enough to whisper in his ear. “I’ve travelled a long way to see you Mr. Parker, sorry, Robbie. The least you can do is he my offer.” The longer Lenoir spoke the more he caught traces of an accent.

With deep regret he said, “Fine, but do you really want to have this conversation here?”

“Not particularly. In fact, I have a vehicle outside waiting to take us somewhere,” she looked about the dimly lit room, clearly not impressed by Robbie’s regular stomping grounds and decided on, “more private” in an attempt to avoid saying something rude.

Robbie bit back his initial response, and the two after that, forcing himself to think before he spoke, a task that had always been easier said than done, especially when he had been drinking. While she was being amicable now, he had the feeling that Lenoir would have no problem causing a scene and would do so if he kept saying no. He didn’t really want to talk with her about whatever she had in mind, nor did he particularly want to go to a second location with her. So instead, he agreed to go with her, with the plan of walking out of The Coda and getting as far away from her as possible.

4.

After he paid his tab, Robbie followed Lenoir outside and found a large, sleek limousine parked out front. As they approached, the driver’s door opened and a tall, strange looking man stepped out of the vehicle and walked around the limo to open the door for them. Something about how he looked made Robbie feel uneasy. There was something wrong with his features, though it took Robbie a moment to realize what it was, and another moment to be sure that it wasn’t just from what he had to drink. They were all misfitting. His ears, his mouth, his nose, were all a little small or too large for his face and slightly off center. Added to that were his clothes. While they were well kept, the suit he wore barely fit him, even the driver’s cap was too small for his large head.

Lenoir started to get into the limo, and Robbie stepped right around her and the driver, making a wide beeline for a nearby alley that would let him cut across the block and was too narrow for a car to follow. The plan was to get out of sight then double back for his car once they took off looking for him, but he only got a

few steps away when he stopped dead in his tracks as a small hand was placed gently on his shoulder.

“Now Mr. Parker, you weren’t about to do something rude again, were you?” Purred the voice behind him. Robbie tried to speak but no words came out. His vision was beginning to blur at the edges, but it had nothing to do with the alcohol. He tried to take a step forward, but his legs began to wobble, and he had to catch himself against the roof of the limo to keep from falling over. “Oh my! You should sit down before you hurt yourself.”

The words hardly registered to Robbie; he was finding it hard to stand as his legs continued to grow unsteady. A roaring static buzzed in his head, making it hard to think. The more he tried the more his mind felt like it was wobbling as much as his legs. With great effort he managed to take a few steps away from Lenoir, still leaning against the limo to help hold his balance.

“Wh... Wha... What did... you d-do to me?” Robbie tried and failed to keep his voice from shaking as much as the rest of his body.

“Nothing I swear!” Lenoir started to take a step forward but seeing the look of distrust in Robbie’s eyes, decided to take a step back instead, “I have that effect on people sometimes. It will go away shortly, I promise. Why don’t you come sit down before you fall over, and I’ll explain everything.”

Distantly he heard himself say, “Yeah, okay”, and a moment later he was sitting, his legs no longer shaking, now just his head. He was unaware of Lenoir getting in the limo behind him or her speaking to the driver, who eased the limo out onto the road, heading toward the preplanned destination.

Chapter 2. Can You Help Me?

1.

As reality came back into focus, Robbie was surprised to find himself in the back of a spacious vehicle he did not recognize. He blinked several times, wondering if he was actually dreaming.

“Hey, that’s it. You’re alright. Just focus on my voice. You’ll be back to yourself in a moment.” Between the fog of his mind and the pounding in his head it took him a few seconds to recognize the voice and remember what had happened before he slipped into lucidity. Alarmed and on the defensive, Robbie’s eyes shot open wide to find Lenoir’s doll-like features looking at him with concern. Not just concerned though, he noted, there was something else in her eyes, but his head was hurting in too many different ways to piece together what. “I’m sorry about that, really. It happens sometimes when I touch people, though I wouldn’t have thought someone like you would have that reaction to magic.”

A wave of panic struck him, that he quickly pushed aside, noting an odd stirring deep inside that accompanied it. “I see.” They rode in silence for several moments, listening to the steady hum of the limo’s engine as Robbie gathered his thoughts, trying to decide what to say next. He had at least a dozen questions, but he felt one of them took priority. “What *are* you?” Although their numbers were scarce compared to humans, many descendants of the *fae* and *demon* clans still called this side of the *In-Between* home. If just her touch could discharge magic, Robbie was sure she wasn’t human, at least not entirely.

“A bit rude to ask that so bluntly, don’t you think?”

“Not any more rude than taking off while I was still out of it.”

“Now I... Very well, I suppose you have a point, even if that doesn’t make mine any less valid. But, to put it as bluntly as you asked, I’m a *halfling*.”

“Hmm,” Robbie said nothing but eyed her closely.

“Not the Lord of the Rings kind,” she responded with a practiced eyeroll.

“I know that,” he frowned as he spoke and continued to look her up and down, “and I also know that some halflings show signs of their lineage.”

“Oh? Do you know a lot about fae and their lineage?”

Robbie shook his head, not sure if the tone in her voice was curiosity or condescension. “I wouldn’t say *a lot*, but I’ve known a good handful of halflings, and even a couple of *changelings*, over the years.” Still wary of her tone and the look she gave him, Robbie refrained from mentioning the other thought that ran through his head, in response to her question. Although other unions occur, most changelings and halflings were sired by *elves* or the *sidhe*, and most elf-halflings had either the pointed ears or the sharp, hawklike eyes of their nonhuman parent, if not both, giving him a good guess as to what her father was.

“Well, like I said, I am a halfling, though, more importantly, I am a *witch*.”

Robbie felt his throat dry out with those words. “Oh.”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Now, now, don’t be mean,” she fixed him with a dramatic pout, but it was clear she got some measure of pleasure at the concern in his words.

“Sorry, just caught me by surprise is all.” Robbie tried not to show his alarm. All fae and their offspring had *some* magical ability, but if this woman really was a witch, then she possessed a mastery over magic that went beyond innate ability.

“I suppose that’s fair,” Lenoir said teasingly, “Would you like a drink? You’re sounding a little hoarse.”

“I, um, sure, thank you.”

Leaning forward, Lenoir rapped lightly on the tinted glass divide, which rolled down just a crack, filling the back with the sounds of a lively saxophone and guitar duo playing a catchy, funk inspired beat, carried on a wave of ice-cold air.

“Do you need to make a stop madame?” came a low, cool voice that was almost as chilling as the air that was pouring through the crack. Having not heard the driver speak until now, Robbie was taken aback, not really sure what to think about the voice that came through the partisan, that in no way matched the man he’d seen.

“No Haakon, just a water, please.” Robbie could hear a plastic cooler being unzipped and moments later the window rolled down just enough for the water bottle to be passed through.

“Anything else madame?”

“No, that will be all, thank you.” Lenoir turned and held out the bottle for Robbie. He took it, but his eyes didn’t leave the glass partisan.

“What - uh, who is that?”

“He is my servant, but he is also my *protector*. You would do well to show him respect.” Lenoir sat back, turning her head to stare at the passing blur of trees, homes, and offramp gas stations.

Robbie’s thoughts stayed with the strange driver a few moments longer as he considered what he might be and started to wonder if his strange looks were the results of a badly cast glamour. *‘Although if she’s really a witch, why does it look so bad?’*

“So, what is it that you want my help with?”

“Well, to put it simply, I need your help getting through a barrier and potentially some other such obstacles. We’ll be arriving at our destination in just a minute. It will be easier to explain once we get there.”

“And what is our destination?”

“*The Emerald Inn.*”

“The hotel?”

Lenoir nodded.

Robbie frowned but didn’t say anything. The Emerald Inn was the closest thing the New York suburb had to a *luxury* hotel, which mostly meant the rooms were a little bigger than most of the hotels in any of the nearby towns but was twice the cost, and all the employees were forced to dress like they were working

at a ritzy Vegas suite. He couldn't imagine why they would be going there to talk but decided not to question it aloud.

The hotel was on the other side of town, around ten minutes from The Coda, and they were soon pulling up to the "*lavish*" building.

As they pulled into the hotel's parking lot, Robbie considered hopping out of the limo and taking off at a sprint, even though he knew it would be in vain. He was willing to bet they knew where he lived, had even possibly been waiting for him at his house and decided to come looking for him when he hadn't shown up. He decided he needed to stay on the woman's good side until he knew what she wanted, and if she was really what she claimed to be.

2.

Even though the hotel room was rather spacious, Maria continued to pace the same trail between the large, comfy bed and the door, in the half hour or so since she'd woken up. She had hundreds of questions, perhaps more, but the one that she kept coming back to, even well before she'd been left alone, was, '*What am I doing here?*' Sure, she was here because her daughter was missing but it didn't answer why she willingly came to this hotel, in some small highway town she'd never heard of, eighteen hundred miles from home and, presumably, her daughter. Was she really so desperate that she followed the one person who believed the fear induced delusion, she *thought* she saw that night? Not only believed but appeared to have answers to her questions and claimed she knew someone who could help. How much had she hesitated when the eccentric Janvier Lenoir told her that she would need to fly from Colorado to New York, to meet the man who could help her? Had she hesitated? She couldn't remember. Much of the day felt like a blur.

'*Lenoir... What is it that you want?*' Feeling attuned to other's emotions like she was, Maria had always felt confident in her judgement of character. She had made a career out of getting people to invest large sums of money in various

projects for schools and other public functions throughout the state, by being able to figure out what makes a potential investor “*tick*” and figure out what they needed to hear to get them on board. For some she would appeal to their pity and morality, while appealing to others greed by explaining how much donations can be written off come tax season, and how much the donation would do for their image and the potential for future gains that could come from it. She had confidently walked into meetings with heads of companies who had never opened their wallets to the public, but right now she didn’t feel confident about anything. She didn’t *think* that the woman was lying to her, but she didn’t feel sure, like she normally did. She hadn’t felt sure about anything since Amber was taken.

As she continued to wear away the carpet undertow, dreading another text from her husband, and too afraid to check the last couple he had sent, she decided that grief and fear was the simple answer to her question. Irrational fear and grief had become a simmering stew in her mind and left her ready to believe some nutcase with a crazy story about monsters rather than to accept that some very *real* person had taken her daughter.

At a quarter to seven in the evening, almost two hours after Lenoir left, Maria decided to accept that she had made a huge mistake, and that it was time for her to face the truth and go home. She needed to fix things with Greg while she could, and she wanted to be there if her daughter turned up or the police discovered anything. She spent a few minutes trying to decide what to do next. A part of her wanted to wait until Lenoir returned. The woman had been kind and caring and had both flown her out there, and had rented a hotel room so she could rest, without asking for a dime. Maria felt wrong just leaving a note, but she worried that if she stayed, Lenoir would convince her of this crazy story again. She looked around the room but there was no paper to be found, so she decided she would go down to the front desk, sure they would have something she could use, even if it was a piece of printer paper.

Despite her burst of confidence, it took her several minutes to convince herself that this was the right call. Slowly, she psyched herself up and went down to the overdone lobby and got paper from the lady at the front desk

When she got back to the room, Maria went to work scribbling a goodbye/thank you note but paused as she noticed the sound of approaching footsteps. Her heart skipped a beat as she waited to see if whoever was out there would walk on by, but a couple seconds later the door's electric lock buzzed and three people stepped inside.

The distinctly guised Lenoir stepped in first, while the peculiar looking chauffeur held the door open for her and a tall, dark-haired man, dressed in such plain clothes that the contradictory clash between the two was almost comical. She wasn't sure what to expect of someone who was in association with a person like Lenoir, but this certainly wasn't it. The woman may be dressed a bit strange in Maria's opinion, but everything was clean and pristine, from her clothes to her makeup, to her hair, especially her hair. A hairdo like that would take hours at the salon yet she had somehow done it while Maria had slept on the plane. She even kept her chauffeur in pristine threads, even if they were not properly tailored. The stranger on the other hand was dirty, at least by comparison. Not that he looked unclean per say but she had little doubt that the man had been working with his hands, either by profession or hobby. Both his dark shirt and jeans had small tears and flecks of paint on them, as well as dust or dirt, probably from something he'd been carrying.

'This man can help find my daughter?' Just looking at him Maria had some serious doubts about that. He was just some guy. By the looks of him Lenoir might have just driven around until she found a construction worker waiting at a bus stop. The feeling she got from him was even a sense of confusion.

"Oh, good, you're awake," Lenoir said before gesturing to the stranger that accompanied her, "Mrs. Wilson, this is Mr. Robert Parker. I believe he can help us find your daughter."

Not sure what else to say, wishing she had decided to leave sooner, she held out her hand and said, "It's nice to meet you Mr. Parker."

The man took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze while giving her a smile that told her he felt as awkward about this as she did. "Please, call me Robbie."

“Maria,” She paused for just a second before deciding *‘the hell with it’* and asked, “Do you really think you can help find my daughter?”

Robbie didn’t answer right away, looking taken aback for a second before he looked over at Lenoir with a questioning stare. If she understood the question he was trying to ask, she gave no indication. With a sigh he turned back to Maria and said, “I don’t know yet. Do you mind telling me what happened?”

For just a second Maria considered telling him she did mind, if for no other reason than to see his and Lenoir’s reaction. The truth was, she really didn’t want to relive everything, especially with a total stranger. She wanted to get out of the hotel and find the first flight home, but, to her own surprise, she found herself sitting back on the bed, thinking. Certainly, she didn’t really believe her daughter was taken by monsters. Even as she told herself this another part of her said, *‘Yes, I do’*. As crazy as it sounded, a part of her really did believe it. The part of her that trusted her eyes and what she saw that night, and what she had been seeing for months happening around her daughter but had tried to ignore.

Perhaps because of this, or maybe because she hoped that he would tell her she was crazy if he heard her story, she wasn’t sure, Maria started telling him about the night her daughter disappeared, not mentioning any of the strange things that had been happening around her and omitting how she knew her daughter was in trouble.

3.

It didn’t take long for Maria to tell her story. Robbie didn’t think it had taken more than a minute. Though he had a decent idea as to what went down the night her daughter went missing, ultimately, he was left with more questions than answers.

“It took a few seconds for the shock to wear off, but as soon as it did, I ran downstairs and out into the backyard but there was no sign of them.” When she

finished, she looked up to him with the faintest glint of hope in her eyes. Hope that he might actually be able to find her daughter.

He knew he needed to say something but all that came out was, “I see.” *‘Smooth Robbie, real smooth.’* “Could you describe this person in more detail for me? I know it was dark, but did you get a look at their face?” *‘Alright that’s a little better.’*

Maria hesitated to answer and looked to Lenoir, who gave her an encouraging nod. Emboldened and a little embarrassed, Maria fixed Robbie with a look that dared him to laugh and said, “I don’t think *it* was a person. Like you said, it was hard to see, part of it might have been the moonlight, but I swear it was a gaunt old man, with burning blue orbs for eyes, and a truly evil smile.” Maria tried to hide the tremor that went down her body, but Robbie couldn’t help but notice.

“Well, shit,” Robbie murmured aloud, unintentionally.

“So, do you believe me?”

It occurred to him at that moment that he could say no, and this could all be over. He certainly wanted to, and he had a sneaking suspicion that at least a part of her did too. The problem was he really did believe her, or at least he believed that *she believed* what she was saying was true.

From a young age Robbie was able to see the auras of people around him when he really focused. Because a person’s aura was a reflection of their life energy, the essence of who they were, it was constantly changing in reflection of what the person was thinking and feeling, turning people into living light shows for those who can see them. Interpreting all the minute changes and fluctuations was nearly impossible, but, over time, he learned to recognize strong changes and what they meant. Moreover, he had gotten good at telling when people were lying, as the act caused a subtle but noticeable shutter in a person’s aura, although it wasn’t fool proof, and he generally didn’t like viewing peoples auras if he didn’t need to. Right now, he was wary of the two women’s intentions and wanted to be sure he wasn’t being set up.

“Yes. I believe you. I don’t know what exactly you saw but anything with fire for eyes isn’t human.” He doubted that’s exactly what she had meant but it amounted to the same thing.

Robbie watched a mix of emotions wash over Maria’s face that reflected in the iridescent glow of her aura. Surprise? Relief? Fear? Hope? Trying to understand what all the cascading colors meant was a maddening endeavor, one that had once threatened to break his mind long ago, creating scars he could still see clearly in his mind’s eye.

“Do you think you can help me?”

There was that question again. ‘*Do I think I could help her?*’ He wasn’t sure. In fact, he was thinking that what she told him wasn’t enough to go on, as he tried to decide how best to answer her question. He turned to Lenoir, who had remained quiet for a while now, off to the side, silently twirling her parasol. “Before I answer her question, can I talk to you for a minute?” Lenoir smiled and told him there was a small balcony they could step out onto. He nodded and turned back to Maria. “I’m sorry, but before I can give you an honest answer, I need to clear up a few things. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, it’s alright. Take your time,” she gave him a weak smile and gestured toward the sliding glass door Lenoir had just stepped through.

Chapter 3. Flattery and Memories

1.

The warm evening sun seemed wrong somehow after listening to Maria's story and certainly out of place standing there with Lenoir in her gothic gown. The steady rumble of the nearby highway and the chatter of several of the hotel's guests filled the evening air with a layer of noise that Robbie fought to tune out while he

tried to get his thoughts straight. He looked out over the mess of shops and restaurants nearby, not really seeing anything in particular. As he stood there, a feeling like static filled the air, and he turned to see the witch twirl her parasol in a large overhead circle while muttering words that had no sounds. She repeated this three times and finished by tapping the end of the parasol to the ground. The moment the parasol made contact with the balcony it was as if someone hit mute on the world; everything went silent.

“Ah, much better.” Lenoir smiled as she spoke, satisfied with her work.

‘I suppose she really is a witch.’ With the right equipment he thought he could *probably* make a silent bubble similar to what Lenoir had done but it would have taken a lot of time and likely a lot of trial and error. He continued to stare out onto the world for a few moments before he finally asked, “So, you ready to tell me what this is all about?”

“I would think that’s obvious. I need help getting the girl back and you seem like a good sort.”

He started to ask her what she meant by that but pivoted, deciding if he was going to get anywhere, he needed to stay on track. “Look I don’t know what you think you know about me-

“Quite a lot.”

- but I’m not a private detective. I don’t know how to track down a missing child. If anything, I *WAS* a magical locksmith, and occasional tomb raider. I can’t help you find this girl. I could probably point you to someone who can, but that’s about it.”

“Really? That’s not what I heard. You were described as a *“Jack of all trades”*. I heard you can do by yourself what would normally take a team.” Robbie felt a touch of embarrassment tinge his cheeks, but he didn’t rise to the bait. She took a couple steps towards him and looked up at him with her bright doey eyes. “I have to admit, I’m rather impressed by the tales I’ve heard. I bet there’s others you could tell too, no?”

“Uh, well, I mean perhaps if I thought about it for a minute. Heh.”

“Well, you’ll have to tell me some time.” Lenoir took another step closer, eyes locked with his. “I think my favorite story was about the family you helped in Berlin. It’s such a beautiful thing you did for them.”

“Really? I feel like I was just kind of there and didn’t really do much.”

“Though that time you broke the curse plaguing that Peruvian town is rather exciting.”

“Aw, yes, well, I’m sure whatever you heard was greatly exaggerated.”

“I even heard about the time you razed a French village after you found out they -.”

“Enough!” Robbie’s voice was like a gunshot in the magically made silence. Lenoir took a step back, acting hurt, but looked away when she saw the rage flash across his eyes. He cursed his former business partner, sure that only he could have told her about that time. *‘I’ll kill that old man if I ever see him again. Of all things to tell her... that day. That damned day.’*

Memories that he’d set aside went racing through his mind, dislodged from the deep reaches where he’d hoped they would forever remain. From the beginning, the job had been rife with oddities and warning signs that he didn’t notice until it was too late.

2.

Only twenty-four at the time, Robbie, who’d gone by a different name then, remembered how annoyed he was having to meet the client in person, despite having Gary act as a go-between. At the time Gary had gotten him a few jobs, but it was still a few years before they would go into business together. He distinctly remembered looking over to Gary, who had been driving the rental car from the

airport to the remote French countryside, and saying, “Why the hell am I paying you if I have to meet the client still?”

Gary sighed and loosened his tie. He rolled down the window, which whipped back his greying hair, and lit a cigarette before he answered. “How many times do I gotta tell you kid, the client specifically requested to meet with you before offering you the job.”

“No, I get that part. What I’m saying is, why am I bothering to give you money if I have to go meet them still?”

“Because you want to walk away from this having made some money.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Trust me, okay? I know you, and I know enough about the client to know she’ll have you wrapped around her finger if I’m not there to run interference.”

They had argued most of the way there, Robbie finding different ways to complain about having to pay Gary and still meet the client, and Gary reminding him that Robbie had hired Gary in the first place because he was tired of getting suckered into low paying jobs after hearing a potential clients sob story.

They met the client at her lavish manor, which overlooked a small village of cottage homes. Only one road for cars ran through the village, cutting through the center and up to the manor. Several residents sat outside their homes, a few small groups gathering here and there. It was then that they noticed the first oddity, and what Robbie would later recognize as the first red flag. The village seemed to be a pretty even mix of humans, elves, and halflings, which itself wasn’t unheard of in the European countryside, but all the adults, to the person, appeared sick or injured. On the contrary, as far as they could tell, none of the kids had any apparent injuries or maladies. Though unlike the adults, who all appeared oddly cheerful, despite their condition, the kids just stared at them with little to no expression, and all were wearing the same white shirt and dark shorts.

Both the manor and the village were owned by an elf-halfling named Fleur Auclair, a young woman with long, pale hair and the distinct pointed ears of her elf heritage. She met them in a large, heavily decorated office on the first floor, rolled in on a wheelchair by a young elf-halfling boy, and flanked by two well-armed guards, the first adults they met that seemed completely healthy.

“This is quite the village you have here ma’am,” Gary remarked, after introductions were made.

“Thank you. I’ve made it my life’s work to help the meek and injured, regardless of what they are, or where they’re from.”

After some brief pleasantries, Fleur gave them an overview of what the job would be; recovering an artifact hidden deep in the forest and protected by magical traps. “Of course, I can’t give you the details until you’ve agreed to a contract. I wouldn’t want you going and gathering it for yourself.” The halfling spoke the words in a friendly manner but Robbie heard the threat underneath. He also noticed the men waiting just outside the room they were in. Another red flag.

The artifact in question, Fleur believed, had the power to heal her and everyone in the village.

“That’s impossible,” Robbie had said, speaking up for the first time since they’d made introductions, “Healing magic is essentially like alchemy. It’s more of a transmutation, which requires other components. I’ve heard it said that some *Saljarheim* born witches, and those on par with *Fae Lords*, can heal without some kind of sacrifice, but that’s it.”

Fleur’s irritation was immediate and apparent, as she failed to maintain her falsely sweet persona. “You couldn’t possibly know that.”

“I do. Artifacts are kind of my thing. If there was a known artifact that could heal people, I would have heard of it before now.”

Before Fleur could spit out her retort, and before Robbie made things worse, Gary spoke up, fixing her with a grin that could charm the devil, and assuring her

that Robbie was just worried that this artifact might not be what she expected, and that he didn't want her to get her hopes up.

“Then I thank you for the warning,” Fleur said with a false smile, “Rest assured, you will be paid regardless of the artifacts function.”

Robbie had hoped the most arduous part of the job would be the two, half-day hikes through the forest, there then back, but almost everything went wrong, as they so often did when dealing with magic and artifacts. The men Fleur hired were competent, made up mostly of ex-military. They had remained vigilant and listened to Robbie's warnings. Even still, only one of the five men made it back to the French village with Robbie, bloodied and battered but still breathing. If that had been all, it would have been enough to haunt his nightmares for years to come.

As per the stipulations of their contract, Robbie had left the artifact sealed in the ornately decorated box they found it in, but after handing it over, he couldn't help but wonder if that had been a mistake. For a brief moment, as they waited for Gary to confirm the payment had been transferred, Robbie pictured himself diving for the box that the halfling manically clutched. For years after he was left wondering what could have been if he had.

As they were leaving through the foyer, Robbie was given one last chance to act. Later he knew that as long as he lived, he wouldn't forget the horror on that child's face and in his voice when he came running around the corner and started shouting. Robbie might not have known what the child was saying but it was clear he was asking for help.

“S'il vous plaît, monsieur, emmenez-moi avec vous! Ces gens sont méchants! Vous devez nous aider!”

Before he could react, a man in khakis and a brown, collared shirt came racing around the corner and grabbed the boy by the arm, yelling as he dragged the

boy across the hardwood floor, only stopping briefly to give Robbie and Gary an apologetic smile.

This time Robbie started to act, stepping forward and calling after them but Gary grabbed him by the shoulder before he could do anything and gestured with his eyes to the armed men that were escorting them.

Robbie ranted and raved the entire way through the village, exclaiming something weird was going on there and that they needed to do something for those kids, but Gary remained silent, foot never leaving the gas pedal until they were well and clear of the village. “Alright, listen, I did some snooping while you were gone and you’re right, the kids are frightened, AND miserable. Turns out Ms. Auclair’s sweet, charitable act is mostly just that, an act. At least when it comes to the kids. She’s actually a horrid bitch, surprise, surprise, and forces all the kids to attend school at the manor. The courses are hard, the teachers are assholes, and she likes to sit in on lessons and torment students when they get things wrong. The kids are then made to spend the afternoon taking care of the more disabled villagers and are pretty much at the beck and call of the rest.”

“The boy that pushes her around started shaking when he saw we’d returned with the artifact,” Robbie interjected.

“I bet he was. As bad as she is now, the kids only have to deal with her during school time, since she can’t easily leave the manor. If this artifact is the real deal and she starts walking again, well, I’m sure some of those kids already wished they were still at the orphanage.”

“But we - .”

“Let me finish, let me finish. Now really listen, because this is the important part. Evil comes in all shapes and sizes in this world, and it can be hard to watch. Especially when it's right in front of you. Now, I’m not going to sit here and pretend my heart doesn’t go out to them, but sadly, they’re not much worse off than most orphans around the world. I know your bleeding heart’s pounding in your

throat over the injustice, but there comes a point where you're going to have to learn that you can't save everyone."

"I know but - ."

"Need I remind you that you are a glorified locksmith and occasional treasure hunter. You're not a superhero."

Their flight back wasn't until the next morning, so the pair got a room at a hotel near the airport, and Robbie tried his best to take his mind away from the village and let it go, but it was to no avail.

When the sun had been set for a couple of hours and Gary's silence was taken for sleep, Robbie made to leave the hotel.

"What're you doin'?" Gary grumbled; eyes still shut.

"I'm going to catch a later flight. I'll see you when I get back."

"Hmm. Fine. Just don't do anything that requires bail."

From the time he arrived back at the village, well after midnight, to the time he fled the burning countryside was largely a blur, but two moments stood out, crystal clear along with the rest of the memories that had been stirred up. The first was when he first arrived back at the village and was confronted by a large group of villagers that no longer appeared meek and injured. He recalled looking in as many of their healthy, but shame-filled eyes as he could, when he asked them where the children were.

The second moment that stood clear in his mind's eye was shortly after that, after he had fought his way to the roof of the manor and confronted the mad half-elf, who no longer needed a wheelchair. He could still hear the chilling sincerity in her voice when she said, "Society abandoned them. Every one of them was an unwanted child taken from the streets or the homes of desperate drug

addicts. For the last few years, I gave their lives purpose. Now I have given them purpose in death. How few can say that?"

Chapter 4. The Job

1.

Robbie continued to stare at the witch for several moments while he bit back the rage that had sprung upon him with blinding speed. It wasn't just the reminder of a memory he wished he could forget but the sudden flip in emotion made him realize what Lenoir was trying to do. "Be warned *witch*, try and charm me again and this conversation is over." There was more that he wanted to say but it was never wise to threaten a practitioner of arcana.

"My apologies. It wasn't my intent to turn on the charm, just a little flattery. But to your earlier point, I do not need someone to track down the girl. I already know where she is."

Surprise momentarily making him forget his anger, he asked, "You do?"

Lenoir fixed him with another practiced eye roll and shook her head disapprovingly, all traces of shame gone. "I do. Finding where she is was the easy part. She's in an old office building not eight miles from her home. The problem is getting inside and getting to her. You see, a barrier's been placed over the building, as were a number of enchantments to keep people away. Most of them are pretty basic and wouldn't be a problem, except there is one particularly tricky and powerful enchantment. A spell that keeps out anything that isn't human."

Like that, Robbie felt like the pieces were finally falling into place. As a halfling any magic that kept out nonhumans would affect her, regardless of her appearance. "So, you want me to take down the enchantment so you can get in?" A trace of excitement shot through him. If all she needed for him to do was to take

down an enchantment, then he thought he might have to slap the *semi* next to his retirement status again. Only, *'What's the catch?'*

“No, not exactly. I want you to go in with Haakon to get the girl.”

'And there it is.' “Why would you want me to go in? Why not go yourself?” The smile that Lenoir continued to wear faltered for a moment, and Robbie got the feeling she was trying to think of something to say. *'Great. Here we go.'* With slight hesitation, Robbie let his normal sight fall so that he could view the witch's aura. When Maria had been telling her tale, and Robbie had been viewing her aura, the witch had been out of sight, standing behind him, and he had let his vision return to normal before Maria finished speaking, so he never got a look at Lenoir's aura.

The moment Robbie turned his extra sight onto the witch, the world became a mess of brilliant colors as her aura plumed into view. For most humans their aura appeared as a halo of color slowly drifting from the body, rising a few inches before fading like technicolored steam, while most nonhumans colors were often denser, more like smoke, rising off their body in a bloom, especially those who have a strong connection to the *Prime Mana*. Lenoir's aura drifted from her body for several feet and interweaved with some magic she'd cast around herself, wrapping her in a cocoon of colors. It wasn't the most intense aura he had seen, but it was still a lot to take in.

'Whoa. So that's the aura of a witch.'

Perhaps it was the look on his face, or perhaps he wasn't as sly as he thought he was being, but Lenoir quickly realized what he was doing. “You know it's impolite to look at a girl so intimately.” She pouted and turned to the side, covering her chest with her arms as though he could see through her dress.

“Ha. Ha. Look, we both know you were about to lie to me, and I still have many questions. I just wanted to be ready to call you out.”

“Fine,” Lenoir said dramatically, not even trying to deny the accusation, and turned back to face him, “I'm an open book.”

“Good. Let’s keep this simple. Tell me what’s really going on. Why would a *witch* need *my* help in the first place?”

“It’s like I said, I was able to track the child to the building she’s being kept in. I was even able to take down most of the protections, but when Haakon and I tried to proceed, I was unable to enter. It took a little while, but I figured out what all the enchantments are. Whatever took her didn’t want someone like me or, more likely, someone like it, to come by and try and take her.”

“Alright, but that still doesn’t answer why you need *me*. Shouldn’t you be able to take it down yourself?”

Lenoir’s bright cocoon of aura darkened a little, reflecting the melancholy expression that she looked out upon the world with. “You know, asking that might be the rudest thing you’ve done today,” she began, while her aura continued to darken, “but I suppose it is relevant, so I’ll tell you. The short answer is, no. The spell is powerful, and the magic is quite intricate and... and even though I’m a witch, my powers are rather limited.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean just that. As a halfling my access to magic is limited by my lineage. Since my father was a truly pathetic creature, my ability to pull from the *Primua Magicae* is minimal.” For just a moment Lenoir’s aura changed when she mentioned her father. Instead of a number of slowly fluctuating colors, her entire aura became a crimson inferno of rage, as though all around her had gone up in flame. “No matter what I do, my abilities as a witch are very limited. Seeing through a simple illusion and taking down a barrier is one thing. That’s child stuff. Much more than that is beyond me, however.”

“And you expect there to be more than that?”

“That’s right. I want you to go with Haakon so you can take down any traps or obstacles this creature might have put up. Even if you got me into the building there’s a chance that there’s other traps that are beyond me. Also, while ideally Haakon will take care of the kidnappers, if something were to happen that left us separated, I have little means of defending myself.”

Robbie told the witch he needed a minute to think and turned to look out over the muted world, not wanting to be distracted by Lenoir's aura. Looking out onto the town from the balcony he was more than tempted to leave. *'We're not too high up. I could probably jump from here and make a run for it, but... would I even get that far?'* A part of him wasn't so sure. Powerful or not she was still a witch, and he had nothing with him to protect himself. The thought made something deep inside him stir once again, which in turn made Robbie shutter as he forced the feeling to the side.

Robbie was roused from his thoughts by a sudden bout of laughter. He looked over to find the witch staring at him with a bemused grin.

"What's funny?"

"You. I can see on your face that you're overthinking things. I didn't even know someone could look so serious."

Robbie closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples, trying not to grow more flustered than he already felt, "Look I'm going to be straight forward with you. I don't believe for a second that you're not hiding *something* from me."

"Why is that?"

"Because in this line of work people always have secret motives."

Lenoir laughed, "I suppose you got me there, but this is a real job, not a set up. I simply need your help to get the girl out of there."

"Uh-huh. Right. So, why did you get involved with this in the first place?"

"What do you mean? A small child was taken by a monster! She needs protection! How few there are these days that are even capable of such a task!" Tired and growing more irritated by the second, Robbie fixed Lenoir with a pointed look that made it clear he did not believe her. "Oh, fine. The answer to both of your questions is the same. The girl is like me. A halfling. One with the potential to be a rather powerful witch. I'm sure you can piece the rest together."

Robbie felt like he could. The girl may be young and untrained, but if Lenoir was right, the girl could be turned into a powerful weapon for whoever had her, be it demon, fae, or otherwise. *'Or she could be an equally powerful apprentice to another witch.'* He knew that witches were increasingly rare in the current day and age, for all he knew Lenoir could be one of only a few remaining. "So, it's not about keeping her safe but gaining you a new apprentice." It wasn't a question.

With a dramatic flair Lenoir put her hand to her chest and gave Robbie a wounded stare, "It can be both. Yes, I want to train the girl, but the idea of some demon or other monster getting their hands on her is enough to make my skin crawl. Besides," Lenoir paused, her wounded look faded, and was replaced with what appeared to be genuine pain, "I know what it's like to be her. Young, with all these unexplained powers, and no one to teach you."

"And you feel confident your servant can take care of whatever has taken her?"

"I do."

"Even though you don't know who or what it is?"

"Based on its actions and description I believe it's likely a demon."

"Fine, but that's like saying it's likely a dog. Doesn't exactly narrow it down much. Plus, I've never heard of a demon with fire for eyes, which means it was probably glamour, and that means it just as easily could be a fae."

"True." For a moment Lenoir chewed on her words before she asked, "Have you ever heard of *Filli Mirukam*?"

"Can't say I have."

"They're a cult of demon radicals who reside in the city of *Dudaa'an* and often act as thugs for hire. Murder and kidnapping are their specialties, and one of their members is said to dawn the guise of a sickly man with burning eyes. I have no proof it was them, but it's the kind of work they would take."

“And you think your chauffeur-bodyguard guy can take on a group of crazy demons.”

“I do. Haakon will take care of *whatever* might have taken her, demon or otherwise.”

The sheer assuredness in her answer surprised Robbie. Whether true or not, she doubtlessly believed her servant could take on such a challenge. *‘That’s a sobering thought.’*

“I see,” Robbie frowned, “but how do you even know she’s there?”

“How do you think? Magic. I said I’m not powerful. I can’t cast grand spells, or use battle-magic, or take down complex enchantments, but I didn’t say I was incompetent. I used a spell to track her there and have had someone keeping a close watch ever since. If anybody leaves, I’ll know.”

“Alright but why are they still there? Shouldn’t they take her back to Duda’a or something?”

“I can only speculate. I get the feeling that something went wrong during the kidnapping. A lot of magic was used that night, on a level that draws attention. Perhaps they’re laying low until people are done snooping around.”

Robbie took a few moments to mull it over before deciding the witch was probably right, at least to some extent. “Does Maria know any of this?”

“Not the exact details. She knows her daughter’s special, and she knows it’s because of the father, the real father, even if she denies it to herself, but not to the extent of things like demons and fae. I figured if I overwhelmed her with too much information, she wouldn’t believe a word of it. My plan is to explain everything *after* her daughter’s been rescued.”

Robbie stared at her for a moment. From what he could tell she wasn’t lying, and he had enough experience trying to explain the supernatural to people to know that people could push back harder if you tried to explain too much. As though quantifying it made it less real somehow. “Good. If I were to take the job, I don’t want her involved any further. She already has enough on her plate without also

worrying about fae and demons. If possible, I'd like to give her an out, tell her this was all a mistake or something. How did you guys get here? I don't believe either of you said where you came from. Do you think it's possible to get her home without her knowing the truth?"

Lenoir hesitated a moment but said, "I suppose that can be arranged. We came by plane, so I'll need to think of an excuse to send her on a different flight, but I think I can manage."

"Good. Thank you."

"So, you'll take the job?"

Robbie took a deep breath, running over everything she'd told him before he spoke. "There is something that's bothering me still. If you weren't planning on telling her anything until after her daughter is safe, why involve Maria at all? You could have done all of this and kept her out of it until her daughter was rescued."

Lenoir's wicked grin came back in full force, a glint of pride in her blue eyes. "True, but based on what I gathered about you, I figured that if you met her in person and heard the story from her lips, it would be hard for you to say no."

'Bitch.'

2.

Maria had almost gotten up to leave as soon as Robbie shut the sliding door behind him, but the hulking form of Lenoir's chauffeur left her glued to the bed. She felt foolish for sharing her story with these strangers. She felt foolish for listening to Lenoir and coming here in the first place. But most of all, she felt foolish for getting her hopes up, even if for just a moment, and the longer the pair stood out there talking, the worse she started to feel.

"Can I get you something to drink Mrs. Wilson. You're looking a little pale."

Maria nearly jumped when the deep voice broke the silence. “No, I’m alright.” She wished the chauffeur had stayed in the car or had gone outside with the other two. He had been nice enough to her, perhaps too nice, but something about him didn’t sit right with her, and she wasn’t sure it was just his looks.

Nearly ten minutes had gone by since the pair stepped out onto the balcony and Maria decided enough was enough. She was going to leave, and she wasn’t going to let them stop her, even if she had to run down the hall screaming. The moment she went for her purse, the door slid open, and the odd couple stepped back into the hotel room. Before she could change her mind Maria quickly spoke, not looking directly at either of them. “Look I’m really sorry for wasting both of your time but I need to get home to my husband and wait for word on my daughter.” Maria swung her purse around her shoulders and risked a glance up at Lenoir as she added, “If you want to leave me your contact information, I’ll send you some money for the hotel and plane ride. It will take a while, but I promise I’ll pay you what I can.”

Instead of the fashionable woman, it was the newcomer who answered, surprising Maria, and stopping her in her tracks. “It’s fine. In fact, I think that’s for the better. I wasn’t really sure how to say this, but I don’t think I’m the right person to help you.”

She was thrown off even further when Lenoir added, “He’s right. There’s been a mistake. You should return home. I’m terribly sorry for dragging you out here.”

A large part of Maria realized she should feel relief and take the opportunity to run for the hills. She expected to meet resistance and they had given her a clear pass to leave, but the small part of her that felt something wasn’t right spoke up before she could stop herself. “You’re lying.”

“Excuse me?” Robbie asked, taken aback.

“I said you’re lying.”

“What makes you think that?”

“It’s not that I think you’re lying. I KNOW you are lying.” Robbie looked at Lenoir, who looked equally puzzled, before he asked her how she could possibly know for sure. “I – I just can. It’s hard to explain but I can tell what people are feeling and when people are lying.”

“I see,” Robbie said slowly, “I guess that makes two of us.”

3.

Maria was surprised by just how excited Robbie’s words initially made her feel. Over time she had grown to assume there was no one else with her unique gifts. The excitement was tempered though, as the pair spoke further. What he experienced with lights and colors was far different than her own experience. For her there were no lights, no guesswork. At least not often. She could feel the emotions as if they were something for her to reach out and touch, and experience for herself, with little doubt as to what they were.

“And they called *me* a prodigy,” Robbie murmured. A perturbed look crossed his face, and he added, “Be glad this ability went largely unnoticed.”

“Actually, I don’t believe your gifts are the same,” Haakon said, speaking for the first time since Robbie and Lenoir had stepped back inside.

“Why is that?” Robbie asked.

“Simple. What you’re doing is viewing a person on a metaphysical level, whereas Mrs. Wilson is touching others minds with her own by a psychic connection with the world around her. Masterful as you may be, you are using an ability inherent in all people, albeit one that is seldom used these days. She, on the other hand, is using a gift born to maybe one in a hundred million people. The closest thing you have in this language is an *empath*, but in times past her gifts would have been noted and she would have been trained to be a shaman or priestess. To put it another way, you two are using completely different tools to

accomplish the same task.” All three of them just stared at the chauffeur, until he began scratching at his off-centered chin uncomfortably.

Lenoir broke the silence, laughing when she said, “Even after all this time, you never fail to surprise me.” She turned and looked over at Robbie and then Maria. “Now, we’ll have to arrange a flight home for you. I’ll have Haakon call for a car to bring you to the airport, and I can also have someone pick you up and bring you home, if need be,” her gaze drifted back to Robbie, “If you don’t mind waiting, Haakon and I will bring you home.”

Before Robbie could speak Maria spouted, “Wait a minute. We weren’t finished. Before, you said you can’t help me but that was clearly a lie, so what are you really up to? Can you find my daughter or not?” The look Robbie and Lenoir shared told Maria that this was something they’d discussed.

Robbie sighed. “I – It’s complicated. It’s not just a matter of finding her. Getting her back is going to be a challenge. I can’t make you any promises, but you’re right, I do plan on doing everything I can to get your daughter home safe.”

Maria stared at him for a long moment, feeling completely nonplused. “I don’t understand. Why lie?”

“Honestly? I figured I’d give you a way out. You already got enough to worry about, without adding things like fae and such to them, but then you had to go and call me out.” Robbie gave her a friendly, apologetic smile that Maria returned, but hers was hollow and did not reach her eyes. She’d been smacked in the face by the reality of his words. If she accepted their help, then she admitted to herself that her daughter had been taken by a *real* monster, and all that that implied. Her head was starting to spin. There were so many feelings running through her, she thought she was going to shut down. In that moment she wished more than anything that she had taken the out they had tried to give her and had walked on out the door without another word. “Guess you’re in it now though.”

Chapter 5. Tools of the Trade

1.

Robbie trailed behind as they left the hotel room and made for the elevator. He had mentally chewed out Lenoir after her blatant admission of using Maria just to secure his help, but he had to admit that she had his number on this one. He wanted absolutely nothing to do with the witch or demons, but it sounded like they would need someone with his skillset, and if he felt like he could help save this woman's child and chose not to, the guilt would eat him alive. Still, he was having trouble trusting the witch and couldn't help but wonder if this was really a good idea. Lenoir may have been forthcoming, *eventually*, but he couldn't help but wonder if there was something he was missing. He doubted she'd told him the whole truth, but he wasn't sure that necessarily meant it was a trap. He racked his brain for answers but came up short. *'One thing at a time I guess.'*

"Are you alright?" Maria asked, pulling Robbie from his thoughts.

He looked up to find her standing by the elevator, looking at him with genuine worry. For a second he wondered how his face must look for her to show such concern, but then he remembered her gift. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a lot on my mind."

Not much was said as they made their way to the limo, and waited for Haakon to check out, nor during the fifteen-minute drive from The Emerald Inn to Robbie's home on the outer edge of Greeley, New York. They were all too lost in their thoughts, wondering, worrying, what the next few hours, let alone the next few days, would bring.

2.

Robbie's home was a late eighties, two-floor house that sat on six acres of mostly unused land. He had bought the home in part for the property, liking the distance between him and any immediate neighbors, but the house also needed a lot of work, and he had been excited by the prospect of upgrading it, both inside and around the property. Remodeling the kitchen, adding a garage, possibly having a pool dug out and installed, or perhaps a small greenhouse, maybe both, and so many others. So many visions had filled his head when he purchased the home, but all of them, besides installing central air, had fallen to the wayside as the years went by. Before he had always pushed them off, feeling like he was never home long enough to see them through, but now the thought of remodeling or putting an addition on the house made his wallet throb with pain. So instead, the house remained largely as it had been when he first bought it, the only addition he ever added were his belongings.

The limo pulled into the cement driveway, which had needed to be repaved since before he bought it, making Robbie wish he had his car and could have come home alone, and met up with the others after. Before he could scoot down the lengthy limo seat, the driver was out and around the vehicle, opening the door for him.

Hastily Robbie got out of the limo and started toward his front door, hoping to avoid the very question Lenoir called out after him. "Aren't you going to invite us in?"

"Nope," Robbie replied as he slipped past the door and locked it behind him.

Finally alone, Robbie closed his eyes and leaned back against the door. For a few moments he considered putting up protections and refusing to leave the house until they went away. This was all happening so quickly. Rarely had his jobs been so time dependent. He was used to having plenty of time to prepare for whatever the job may be, both mentally and professionally. Most of the day had been so ordinary, so innocuous that a part of him wondered if the last hour had really happened, but a peek out the side panel revealed the limo was still there. *'Suppose that was wishful thinking.'*

He took a few deep breaths then checked to make sure his alarm system was on and went upstairs and got in the shower. He wanted to rinse away the day, but not wanting to take too much time, he was out and drying off just a few minutes later. After fighting with his closet, he managed to find both a pair of jeans and a shirt that weren't ripped or paint-stained, and grabbed a duffle bag, filling it with a change of clothes and a couple other mundane things, before taking a minute to carefully apply the expensive salve around his right eye.

The two-floor home had two bedrooms on the second floor, and since he lived alone, he kept his artifacts, as well as a number of other prized possessions, inside the extra room. The door was reinforced, as was the frame around it, and required three different keys to unlock it, all of which were custom-made, and kept hidden in separate places in his room.

Over his career he had handed over much of the treasure, works of art, and items of historical value that he found but that didn't mean he hadn't kept things for himself, beyond just artifacts. With all that he gathered and now collected in one place; he had ostensibly made himself a private museum. The *safe room* was lined with several large bookshelves, though only one of them actually held any books. The others were filled with all manner of trinkets, statues, and weapons of various conditions, spanning many eras and most continents. Each item was paired with a label that said what it was and where he had found it. Most of the collection was in at least decent condition, but one entire bookshelf held actual junk; broken bits of pottery, tattered clothing, pieces of wood and stones from crumpled buildings that were thousands of years old.

In the center of the room sat three sizable, shatterproof-glass display cabinets, all of them secured with heavy padlocks, and weighted down to make them hard to lift or knock over. Much of what filled these shelves were totems and effigies of all material, except for one display which was all gemstones. These items came in all sizes and shapes, both mundane and strange, looking like junk or abstract art. Just looking at the displays there seemed to be no rhyme or reason for what was there, or how it differed from what filled the bookshelves lining the walls, but each and every one of them was an artifact imbued with magic.

“Well, this is a bit lackluster to what I was expecting.”

Robbie turned around, trying not to jump out of his skin, and found Lenoir standing right behind him; the looming form of her driver just a few feet behind her.

“How the -.”

“Magic!” Lenoir waggled her fingers like a stage magician at the end of a trick.

“What are you doing in here?”

“You know, you really ought to set up better security,” she said ignoring his question, “Those display cases are full of artifacts and rune stones, surely a man of your talent could put together something to keep people out.”

“Yeah, I could!” Robbie said angrily, then added, more to himself, “But I can’t afford another lawsuit like that.” Lenoir snickered while her driver stood there trying to look apologetic, though it came off as more confused than sorry because of his off-center features. “What do you want? Why did you break into my house?”

“You were taking too long, and I was curious. I wanted to see the renowned Artificer’s collection. Though like I said, it’s not as grand as I was expecting.”

“Yeah well, this isn’t a museum. It’s a private collection. And these artifacts are tools. Tools for a job that I no longer work.”

The witch made no effort to hide her disappointment, but she was still craning her neck to see what he had. “Still.”

“Where’s Maria?”

“She’s in the limo. She didn’t feel right coming in without your permission.”

“Good. At least *she* has some common courtesy. Now, go wait in the limo. If I wanted you in here, I would have invited you in.”

For a second it appeared like Lenoir was going to argue but her driver placed a hand on her shoulder and said, “Come on madame, let him finish getting ready. We have a long journey ahead of us.” Seeing the driver while hearing his low, gravelly voice, still left Robbie feeling as though something had misfired in his mind. *‘What the hell is up with him?’*

He watched as they went down the stairs and listened until he heard the front door open before he turned his attention back to the task at hand. He didn’t actually care if the witch saw his collection; he was angry that they had barged in, and even more angry, and embarrassed, that they had gotten so close to him without him noticing.

Robbie spent a few minutes carefully going through his artifacts and filled a small, leather pouch, with runes etched around the brim. With as little information as he had to go on, it was hard for him to decide what to bring. Many of the artifacts were specialized for very specific circumstances, so he tried to grab ones with as broad of purposes as possible, along with a number of rune and elemental stones. Once he felt satisfied with what he gathered, Robbie hurried back to the limo, stopping once to make sure the witch had not fried his alarm system, then again to spare his home one last look, wondering, as he always did when he left for a job, if this was the last time he would see it.

3.

It was nearly a two-hour drive to the airport, where Lenoir evidently had a private plane waiting for them. “*Geez, just how rich is this lady?*” Robbie thought when Lenoir told them the plan. They would fly Maria home before the rest of them would begin working on “*finding*” her daughter. It wasn’t an outright lie, but Lenoir and Robbie were doing their best to avoid explaining the logistics of what they planned to do.

Not long after they left his home, Robbie got the feeling that Maria was fighting back the urge to ask him something. “If you want to ask something, just do

it. I promise I'll answer anything I can to the best of my ability." While he had not wanted to involve her further, now that she was, Robbie wanted to be as open and honest as he could be.

"Thanks, I appreciate it. It's just, I'm not sure how to ask..."

"What is it I do for a living? What makes me qualified to try and rescue your daughter? Something along those lines?"

"Exactly. Are you a PI for monsters or something?" Maria gave a dry laugh and shook her head. "It sounds ridiculous to say that out loud."

"Yeah, I imagine so," Robbie chuckled, "but no, I'm an artificer. One who specializes in finding things, and getting to places others can't."

"I'm sorry but I don't know what that is," Maria said.

"It's alright, I wouldn't expect you to. An *artificer* is someone who can activate the magic stored within artifacts, which are items imbued with magic. Usually created back in the days when the lanes between our world and Saljarheim were still easily accessible, and fae and demons came and went as they pleased," Seeing the befuddled expression on Maria's face, Robbie added, "Uh, that last parts not important."

"Okay, ignoring everything you said at the end there for a moment, are you saying you can do magic? Like a wizard?"

Without thinking, Robbie's eyes darted to Lenoir, who remained silent. "No, not exactly. Humans can't learn arcana. We have no natural connection to the *Primua Magicae*, or the Prime Mana, as most call it these days. All magic comes from this source and those who use magic do so by drawing it in from the Prime Mana. The somewhat exception to that is artifacts. Technically the magic did come from the Prime Mana originally, but it's been stored inside the artifact. By using a technique called *Rae'Hal*, a person can learn to manipulate their life energy, and with it, even a human can use the magic stored within artifacts. Of course, both things are easier said than done and require a lot of work," While he spoke, Robbie took out the old leather pouch and began looking through it, "For most people it

can take years to learn how to activate the magic inside an artifact, let alone master it.”

“The exception to that rule being him of course,” Lenoir chimed in, “In fact, to many he is known as *The Artificer*, as most who call themselves an artificer are merely collectors or have mastered the use of one or two artifacts.”

“That’s true,” Robbie said with a touch of embarrassment when Maria looked back at him curiously, “but it wasn’t something I ever called myself.” He removed two things from the leather bag, a pale green stone, and a white cloth that was wrapped around something and set them on the seat next to him.

“That bag is an artifact too, isn’t it?” Lenoir asked, peering at the leather pouch intently. The part of him that was still angry at the witch’s earlier intrusion told him to put the enchanted bag away without a word, but he tried to remind himself that he was working for her now, even if it was reluctantly. Robbie pulled the strings to close the bag before he tossed it to Lenoir, who sat across from him.

“That’s right. Open it and look inside.”

She did as he instructed and peered into the depths of the bag, at least for a second, before her eyes began to water and she started to blink rapidly, until she had to look away. “Real funny.”

“Yeah, you need to use Rae’Hal to look inside, just like using any other artifact,” Robbie laughed, “It’s pretty disorienting otherwise. It might just be a bag, but it is one of the most complex bits of magic I own. It’s storage exceeds its size by keeping things just out of phase with our world, in the In-Between.”

“Unlimited storage in the palm of your hand,” Lenoir muttered, bemused, “that must be worth a fortune.”

“Maybe. It was given to me in lieu of payment for a job. And the storage isn’t unlimited. Best I can tell it’s based on weight. Which makes sense if you considered the fact an enchantment that powerful would be one-part ritual and one-part calculus equation. That kind of magic has to be incredibly concise, which means they would have had a chosen weight they were aiming for,” Robbie

hesitated for a second but smiled when he added, “For a while I put the weight around fifty-five pounds, and for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why they chose that weight, until I realized that was about twenty-five kilograms.”

“And how long did it take you to think about the metric system?” Lenoir asked teasingly.

“Longer than I care to admit.”

Maria laughed and pointed at the things he’d pulled out of the bag. “So, what do those do?”

“Ah, yes. I could see that look in your eyes, so I thought it was best to just show you. Seeing is believing after all.” Robbie held up the pale green stone so she could see it. “This is an elemental stone. These and rune stones are the most common type of artifacts, since gemstones are easy to imbue with simple magic. I have them for all elements, and multiple full sets of runes stones, though I only brought some with me. I used to carry them all, just in case, but over the years I’ve found some are a lot more practical than others. Now watch.” At first nothing happened as he tried to shift his aura into the stone. ‘*Come on. Come on. I can’t be that out of touch.*’ For a long moment he was worried nothing was going to happen but then the stone began to glow, softly at first, and the back of the limo was filled with a gentle breeze that could have come from a cracked window. After a few seconds the stone began to glow brighter, and the wind increased until it was whipping Maria’s hair, this way and that, and gently pushed her against her seat. Robbie laughed at the death glare Lenoir gave him as she desperately tried to keep her hair in place and left the wind circling for several more seconds before he cut off his connection to the artifact.

After that Robbie removed the white cloth around the second artifact and showed them a stack of what appeared to be broken tiles, bundled together with string, but after staring at them for a few seconds, Maria realized all the edges were perfectly smooth or rounded.

“This is the *Nuru-Inyayo*, though I call it the *Pathfinder*. It may not look like much, but the magic inside is tremendously more complex than what’s in the

elemental stones.” Even more than before, he struggled to connect to the artifact. The tiles would start to glow and rise an inch or so into the air before falling back into his hand. For over a minute he just stared at the tiles, growing more and more self-conscious as he did so. When the tiles finally rose into the air, floating and swirling around his palm, Robbie let out an audible sigh of relief. “As the name might suggest, this artifact helps guide you along the safest path to your destination. You see that grocery store we just passed? If I wanted to get back there, all I have to do is picture it clear in my head and...” The glowing tiles rose up and formed an arrow pointing back in the direction they were coming from.

“That’s amazing,” Maria said. Even Lenoir looked interested.

“It certainly is something, but it’s not perfect. I have to know exactly where my destination is or to be able to picture it clearly, so I mostly use it to find my way back after I’ve gathered whatever I was searching for.”

As Robbie was putting the artifacts back in the bag Lenoir asked, “So, what else do you have in there? I’m curious as to what the tools of the trade are.”

Feeling she was genuinely curious, Robbie opened the bag and began describing some of the things he brought, “... an amulet that amplifies elemental energy, a few effigies of assorted use, some enchanted string, a pure-iron shiv, and stones. Lots and lots of stones.”

“Stones, really?” Maria asked.

“Yup. Rocks, stones, minerals; it’s like I said before, they’re by far the most common artifacts. Lenoir got a glimpse of the cabinets and can attest that one of my displays looks like it belongs in a hippy crystal shop, and so does the inside of this bag.”

Lenoir and Maria both laughed, and Lenoir said, “That can’t be all.”

“Well, it’s not like I brought everything with me, and if we’re being honest a lot of artifacts aren’t very practical, since the magic within them is too specific. I’d maybe go as far as to say useless, unless you’re looking to sift through dirt for minerals, or find water. Rune stones, which are meant to enhance aspects of life

and magic, are also highly specific, so unless you need help with your harvest or want help keeping your cows healthy, you're never going to use most of them."

The rest of the drive was spent with Maria asking a nearly endless volley of questions, as every answer Robbie gave seemed to invite even more.

Chapter 6. Watching. Waiting.

Loa'Eman stood on the sidewalk, unseen by prying eyes, and stared endlessly at the large office building across the road, just as she had done for almost three days. Like her, the building in question remained unseen to the naked eye, but she could see it just fine. To her the world could be seen in layers thanks to the *hydren-eye* all six-horns possessed. Not only could she see the magic surrounding the building, but she could still see the building beneath it.

Over the many long hours, the demon noticed at least a dozen others, demons and fae, who, like her, had been tasked to watch and report back to their masters, likely with the same orders to act if anyone came out of the building.

She hated being here, deep in the human city. The sun that filtered in through all their filth felt wrong on her pale, sallow skin, even through the dark habit-like gown and headdress she wore. The wind was constantly forcing humanities nauseating stench onto her, leaving her feeling ill and violated. Even the noises they made as they went about their daily lives made her want to take the clawlike ends of her fingers and bury them deep in her ears, so that she may get some sense of peace, but she had been forbidden to do anything that could affect her duty.

When the assignment had first been given to her, she'd threatened to gouge out her eyes in protest, but *Belmore* had stopped her. Despite what he said, she knew she was being punished for protesting his choice to throw their hat in with *Maldrik*. She and *Krvik* had been the only ones to push back, and they had been handed every awful task and assignment ever since. Worse still, Belmore had

practically given her over to Maldrik, who kept her under control with the *Suron Lileagl*, which left her adherent to all of his commands.

With nothing else to do but stand there and think, Loa'Eman spent countless hours imagining how she'll kill Maldrik when he finally slipped up. She knew that realistically she would need to strike quickly, as she wouldn't get a second chance, but she wanted nothing more than to take her time, spreading out his misery over days as she broke him both physically and mentally. Imagining each gruesome act was the only thing that gave her a modicum of joy during her tedious endeavor.

The hours ticked away without end, nothing changing, besides the position of the sun and the moon, until late on the third night, when something approached from down the street. Something that clearly knew she was there.

"You are better off not coming any closer," Loa'Eman warned, still looking up at the building. Until then all the watchers had acted as if the others weren't around, but she had figured it was only a matter of time before someone got bored or was ordered to make a move.

The foot-tall fairy came to a stop ten feet away, unseen, its tiny wings beating rapidly, making a low, distinct hum. "Wow, you're pretty good lady. How did you know I was there?"

"*Mirukam's Gift* allows me to see beneath the veil of magic. Besides, you're not exactly a stealthy creature. You hide from si but nothing else. I felt you *and* heard you coming from down the road." She almost asked him how he knew that she was there, but decided against it, knowing that getting a straight answer out of a fairy was a tedious task.

"That bad, huh?" the fairy laughed, his squeaky voice ruining the casual demeanor he was going for, "Yeah, this isn't exactly a prime gig, you know what I mean? I don't know if I've ever been so bored before." Loa'Eman tried to ignore the fairy, but he kept chatting away regardless. "Seriously, I don't get what the big deal is, but the ol' boss lady says we gotta keep an eye on this place."

“I will give you this singular warning fairy, speak to me again and you *will* meet your ancestors on this night.” The air around them filled with a charred scent and the charge of magic.

Without a word the wide-eyed fairy began to float backwards, finally wary of the demon before him, but paused when something began to stir within the building they were tasked with watching. It was not the first time Loa'Eman had felt the phenomena. Whatever was going on inside was causing magic to leak from the building and through the barriers. It alarmed her deeply, but when she reported it, she had been told to ignore it.

“What the hell is going on in thee?” the fairy asked.

Loa'Eman ignored the fairy's cries of pain as he began to burn, her gaze never once wavering from the building she'd been vigilantly watching. *'Damn you Maldrik. And damn you Belmore. This gamble is not worth the risk. If this backfires and Filli Mirukam is destroyed, I swear by the Great Beast himself, I will kill you both.'*

Chapter 7. Parsing the Truth of it All

1.

Despite traveling around the world for most of his life, at times on the dime of wealthy businessmen or politicians, Robbie had never flown on a private jet before. He'd been treated to his fair share of first-class trips, especially when Gary was negotiating his deals, but driving alongside the runway and up to a private hanger was a surreal experience. The plane was fitted with eight comfortably spaced, luxury seats in the front, each of which could be inclined to act as beds. In the middle was a small lounge area, complete with two large couches, a bar, and a small dining area, with a kitchen and private room in the back.

Lenoir told them to sit where they'd like, except for one seat at the front which was Haakon's. The large man had seemed unwell when they arrived and made a beeline for his chair without a word to anyone else. The chair that was designated Haakon's had the kind of seatbelt worn by jet fighters, and he wasted no time putting them on. Lenoir emerged from the private room a moment later and handed him a wooden totem, with a swirling spiral carved into it and cast with silver.

"Is that an artifact?" Robbie asked.

"It is," Lenoir replied, "For a normal person the magic inside would put them in a trance indistinguishable from sleep. Unfortunately for my old friend, that kind of magic does not affect him in the way it would most, but it does allow him to reach a meditative state that greatly dulls his awareness. Sadly, it's the best I can do for him."

"What do you mean?"

Lenoir knelt down and took Haakon's free hand in hers. "Sadly, Haakon has not felt the true embrace of sleep in many centuries. What's more... he is *deathly* afraid of heights," Lenoir snickered.

"I am not *afraid* of heights," Haakon barked, "I have a healthy and reasonable dislike of them." Everyone but Haakon laughed.

"Have you tried a *Sofandi Stone*?" Robbie asked.

"I'm sorry, do I look new to you?" Lenoir asked incredulously, "I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer."

Once they were in the air both Robbie and Lenoir got a drink at the bar and sat down on the oversized black couches. For a while, little was said, but Robbie took the opportunity to discuss something he didn't feel right talking about in front of Maria.

“I already told you my offer, one million, so long as the girl is brought home safe,” Lenoir said dismissively.

“Yeah, okay, but the thing is, you know, I normally would get these things in writing.”

“What? Do you not trust me?”

“Well...”

“You know it would be less hurtful if you just said no.”

“I suppose so. To be honest, I’m having a hard time getting a read on you. You dropped the manic witch act the moment you got my cooperation.”

The witch closed her eyes and shook her head disapprovingly. “You really are painfully blunt, you know? Did the thought ever occur to you that I’m just tired from spearheading this endeavor?”

“Sure, but I doubt that’s all there is to it.”

Lenoir tried to give a dramatic sigh, but her heart wasn’t in it. “You can relax, half the money has already been transferred to your account. Check and see if you like. You’ll get the rest when Amber’s safe.” While Robbie tried to decide if it was rude to take his phone out and actually check, he noticed Lenoir looking over to make sure Maria wasn’t getting up to join them. “Now it’s my turn to be blunt. There is something that’s bothering me.” Even before she said it Robbie knew what it was going to be. “I was surprised to see you struggling to use those artifacts. Based on all that I gathered, one would think you were a real spell-slinger.”

“Yeah, I imagine I didn’t leave the best impression. Thing is... people exaggerate. Besides, it’s been a long time since I’ve been able to use artifacts like that. Admittedly, there was a point when I could wield a dozen elemental and two dozen rune stones at once, and take down barriers with just black tourmaline, but after the...,” Robbie trailed off, painful memories leaving a shadow across his features, “it just got harder, and I got older, to top it off. Don’t worry, using artifacts is like riding a bike. I may not be able to race at high speed anymore, but I

can still ride. I'll get my part of the job done, so long as your man can do his." He knew he shouldn't judge Haakon based on his fear of heights alone, but he was lying to himself by saying that he wasn't concerned.

"Haakon will do his part; of that I assure you. I chose him as my bodyguard for a reason after all."

"And that would be?" Robbie thought she seemed irritated with his question, but he wasn't going to back down just because she felt inconvenienced, "I understand that you're confident in him, but I don't know you two at all. I'm going out on a limb for everyone involved in this. I'm just making sure I didn't sign my death certificate by doing so."

"Very well, I guess there's no harm in telling you now. Haakon is a warrior. Born in a time when that truly meant something. He has fought both demon and fae, along with many others who once called Saljarheim their home, and has been doing so since long before the Americas were known to the rest of the world. When it comes to anything you may face, he is more than capable of handling it."

"Oh," Robbie managed lamely when Lenoir finished. He wasn't sure what he was expecting her to say, but it wasn't that. "If you don't mind me asking, what is he? Even most fae don't live that long on this side of the In-Between."

"He's human. Same as you."

"That's not – how is that even possible?"

"Can't you guess? The answer is rather simple."

"And that is?"

"Magic," she said with a wink, but quickly added, "It is his story to tell you, if he chooses. It's really not my place. Although if you find yourself curious, be warned; he might not seem like it but Haakon's a talker. Once you get him going it's hard to get him to stop."

Robbie sat there quietly for a moment; he didn't want to irritate her further, but he felt that he had to ask, "If he's human, why is he under a glamour?"

To his relief the witch let out an amused giggle before she said, “Well, after almost a thousand years of life, Haakon’s natural appearance can be a bit unsightly to others, so I’ve always had to place a glamour on him whenever we go out. While his current glamour is a little unsightly in its own right, it doesn’t stand out nearly as much as his true face and is punishment for previous behavior. You see, recently I tried my hand at something different and constructed the glamour to try and resemble what he looked like at his *prime*. As he put it. It wasn’t easy, but it was a reward for his services, and I ended up doing a pretty remarkable job, if I do say so. A little too good actually. To my unfortunate surprise it turns out he’s rather vain when it comes to his looks. So much so that he kept getting distracted while driving. After paying for a number of bumpers, and a handful of tickets, I changed the glamour to something he would not want to look at.”

2.

While Lenoir and Robbie got up once they were in the air, Maria remained in her seat for some time. An hour ago, she wouldn’t have thought it was possible to be more overwhelmed by her thoughts than she already had been over these past few days, but after talking with Robbie and Lenoir, she had so much bouncing around her mind she thought she was going to pop. Unlike Lenoir, who had kept her explanations vague and always seemed to skate around direct questions, Robbie had been relatively straight forward and gave Maria more information than she could possibly process. He even apologized after a time, when he realized just how overwhelmed she was with everything he was telling her.

With all that had been happening around Amber, and after seeing Robbie’s brief demonstration, the idea of magic had been relatively easy to accept. What she was struggling with the most was everything else he told her, about the people and creatures that shared the world with humanity, unbeknownst to most. People and creatures that hailed from another world.

“Wait, I’m sorry. Are you saying elves and fairies are aliens?” Maria had asked when they were still in the limo on the way to the airport.

“What? No. Well, I mean, technically yes, but they didn’t come here in flying saucers. They’re not from another planet, per say, so much as from another realm of existence,” Robbie said, “Now a days we call that realm Saljarheim, but it has been known by many different names throughout time and different cultures. *Parilok*, *Yōsei no Sekai*, *The Other*. It’s the world that lies closest to us in the In-Between, which is another realm of existence, one that acts like a membrane that keeps our worlds separated. For many years this barrier was thin enough to be easily crossed, and these creatures ran abundant in our world. That all ended around fifteen hundred years ago, when for some reason the distance between our two worlds began to increase, making the journey difficult, and severely lessening the access to magic in our world, as it seeps into our world from theirs. The creatures of Saljarheim left in mass over the course of the next few centuries from what I understand, but some stayed, particularly those less magically inclined and unable to make the journey without aid from someone more powerful. Although not everyone with power returned to Saljarheim either. It was during this time that the vast majority of artifacts were created, though the practice goes back to when the *Old Ones* first came to our world.”

“So, this world, these creatures, are they where we get our fairy tales from?”

“For the most part.”

Maria felt her throat go dry as she tried to figure out how to ask her next question. “Earlier you said something about demons. So, uh... they’re... they’re real?”

“Ah, right. The short answer is, yes, they’re real. With that said, language can be a bit finicky sometimes. Over the years the term “demon” has been applied to many creatures, real and fake. In the modern supernatural world, the term is usually used to refer to *The Horned One*’s, who, like the fae, are a collection of multiple races that share a similar ancient ancestor. While they come in all different shapes and sizes today, they are the descendants of The Great Beast, *Mirukam*.”

“What are they like?”

“Hmm. Truth be told, most of what I know about them is from what I’ve read and been told. I’ve had little interaction with any over the years. Demons tend to live in small settlements and villages, far away from humans and even fae, but they seem like an intense lot.”

“Don’t forget spiteful and vindictive,” Lenoir remarked, “and they stay away because they have a dislike for humans, and most fae, that is only matched by the sidhe.”

“You’ve mentioned the sidhe a few times now, separate from fairies, but I thought the sidhe were just a name for Irish fairies?” Maria asked. Both Robbie and Lenoir laughed but there was no humor in it.

“To call them fairies isn’t exactly accurate, but Ireland is where some tales of them survived, becoming the fairy tales that were passed on. I’ve never seen one myself, but I’ve heard them described as somewhere between elves and fairies in appearance,” Robbie answered.

“That’s fairly accurate,” Lenoir agreed, “Elves with wings on their back and hate in their hearts. We’re lucky that even back in our world’s heyday of magic, the sidhe largely kept separate from others.”

They had talked for over an hour about fae, demons, and magic, but Maria managed to avoid asking the one question that was bothering her the most, as it would give her an answer that she wasn’t sure she was ready for.

It took some time, but Maria finally worked up the courage to get up and walk over to the lounge. She was surprised to find Robbie alone at the bar, while Lenoir sat over on one of the couches, and made her way over to Robbie, who she knew would give her a straight answer.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course. Although I’m surprised that you’re not at your limit for supernatural bullshit.”

“I am beyond my limit for supernatural bullshit, but this is something that I need to know. It’s about something you said before. You said it was impossible for humans to use magic without artifacts. Are there any exceptions to that?”

“Ah,” Robbie said and began awkwardly tapping his fingers against the bar, “I thought this might come up.”

“And?”

“Look, let me preface this by saying, I’m not an expert on these things. Artifacts, ruins, underground mazes, those are the kinds of things I know, but that has kept me tangentially near the rest of the supernatural world. To *my* knowledge, the only way a human can use magic is with artifacts.”

Like demons, she had gotten the crash course on fae, their courts, and, more pressingly, their offspring.

“... while fairies are more prominent, the elves and sidhe, are generally more powerful. These two courts can also, uh, have children with humans. Giving birth to either changelings or halflings, depending on which parent was the mother. Halflings are born to humans and changelings are born to fae or other nonhumans.”

At that time, she had already felt ready to pop, but now the bubble protecting her mind burst and silent tears began rolling down Maria’s cheeks. “So that’s why they took Amber? Because she’s a halfling?”

Robbie stood and started to reach out to try and comfort her, but he hesitated. “Yeah. From what it sounds like, she has some serious magical potential.”

‘And there it is,’ Maria thought. The answer she already knew, to the question she didn’t want answered. *‘So, I really... Greg... I’m so sorry.’*

“What are they going to do to her?”

“I’m not sure.”

Maria knew he was lying but she didn’t call him out. The tears were coming harder now, no longer silent.

Without a sound Lenoir seemed to glide in, ushering Robbie away before wrapping Maria in her arms. “It’s going to be alright darling.” For a while the two stood there while Maria cried, all the pain and insanity of the last couple of months crashing through the broken dam in her mind. At some point Lenoir guided them to the couch, and Maria fell asleep crying, her head resting on the witch’s lap.

3.

For the next two hours Robbie bounced back and forth between the bar and his seat, trying desperately to get some sleep, but to no avail. It was a problem he faced often before a job, a combination of nerves and anticipation.

After tossing and turning for a half hour, Robbie once again got up to walk over to the bar, but this time he found the witch sitting there, nursing a glass of wine.

“You too?” Robbie asked.

Lenoir shrugged. “I closed my eyes for a little. Unlike you, I have the luxury of resting while you and Haakon rescue the girl.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t look like sleep’s in my future at this rate. Not that it would do much good anyways. I couldn’t tell you the last time I got a restful night’s sleep.”

“I think I could help with that,” Lenoir said, gesturing at a dark purse sitting on the bar.

“No thanks. I’ll pass on whatever witches brew you got in there.”

“What do you possibly think I’m offering you?” Lenoir asked teasingly.

“Unless it’s Tylenol PM I think it’s a bit late for me to take anything for sleep.”

“I suppose so,” The witch laughed and swirled her cup, watching the red liquid dance around the glass, “Do you mind if I ask you something serious?”

“I suppose not.”

“I know we just met but I don’t understand you. Most people would give anything to do the things you can do and see the things you have seen. So why are you trying to roleplay as a normal person? It seems rather foolish to me that you would give all that up, just because you’re not as spry as you once were.”

“Excuse me?” Robbie glared at Lenoir. The rush of words that tried to come out made it hard to speak, but finally he settled on, “I’ve been putting my life in danger since I was a child. Why don’t I finally get to say enough is enough?” He got up and started to walk away but Lenoir called after him.

“Wait. I’m sorry, that was out of line.”

For a moment Robbie just stood there, faced away from the witch. He wasn’t too surprised that question had come, but it still didn’t change how much it stung. Not many of the people in his old life seemed to understand his choice to walk away from the supernatural world either. Not even Gary, who was one of two people who knew all the reasons why he retired, and why he could no longer do the things he once could. “You know, I would be lying if I said I hadn’t heard almost those exact words before but honestly, is it really so strange to want something you never had?”

“No, I suppose not,” Lenoir said gently. After a few more seconds Robbie sat back down and poured himself a drink. “Can I ask you something else?”

“I don’t know. Are you going to insult my life choices again?”

“Perhaps. It’s about something that’s come up in a few of the stories I heard about you. Curse breaking.”

Robbie grimaced. “What about it?”

“Is it true you’ve done it?”

“Sure. I’ve come across cursed artifacts before. Nasty things. I always tried to avoid them, but it wasn’t always possible. In theory it’s a lot like taking down a barrier, only more complex, and a thousand times more dangerous. Most curses will rebound at you if you mess up.”

“And what about people cursed by the artifacts?”

“That – that is tremendously more difficult. Even static magic is in flux when placed on a person. If I’m being honest, I don’t have the greatest track record when it comes to cursed people...,” Robbie’s words trailed off, and he appeared to be looking at something that only he could see.

“Sounds like it weighs heavy on you.”

“Yeah.” It was clear to Robbie the witch had more she wanted to say but he chose not to pursue the topic, and she said nothing further.

It wasn’t long before Lenoir went to lay down for the last hour of their flight, leaving Robbie alone to ponder everything that had happened and everything that was to come.

Chapter 8. Arrival

1.

The pathway through the cave maintained a steady descent as Robbie bound forward. At times the path was wide enough to walk two, even three abreast, while at other points he was forced to walk sideways, back against one cavern wall so that his face didn’t scrape against the other. Two pairs of footsteps fell close behind him, but he didn’t dare look back, not wanting to see what kind of condition the others were in. For how long the three of them continued their descent he wasn’t sure, nor was he sure where the soft glow that lit his path came from. All Robbie really knew was that he had to make it to the bottom.

When the path at last came to an end, it opened onto a massive cavern, revealing a large underground structure, surrounded by a massive stone wall, with no visible entrance. The trio approached cautiously, though there was no obvious danger. Standing an arm's length away, Robbie realized just how tall the stone wall was. Even if he stood on Marco's shoulders and Emily on his, they still might not be able to reach the top, so instead he placed a palm flat against the wall and slowly started to walk, searching for signs of magic. As he walked along the wall, he felt something warm and wet start to run down his face and soak into the patch over his right eye. He ran a hand along his forehead, praying it was only water, but he knew better, even before he saw his stained hand. *'Blood!'*

Robbie turned to face his companions, forgetting why he had been determined not to look back, only they weren't there, and instead of being in a vast open cavern, outside of what they believed to be an ancient temple, he was inside, walking down a torch lit, stone hallway. It was too dark to see the other end where he'd presumably come from, but he could just make out what looked like a large door, thirty yards ahead in the direction he was heading. He stood there trying to recall what had happened and how he'd got there, when he was stricken with an alien sensation, like there was a heavy pressure pushing on his mind. He wasn't sure how he knew but something was trying to communicate with him.

At first Robbie tried to ignore it. He wanted to run and find Emily and Marco, in whatever condition they may be in, and get out of there quickly, but the building pressure was too hard to ignore, so he reluctantly made his way toward the large door. Something seemed to whisper in his ear, promising him he would be rewarded if he opened the door. Only it lied.

When he took down the barrier and stepped into the room, the presence changed from something gentle to something ferocious. A wave of primal panic washed over Robbie as whatever had drawn him there no longer tried to hide its intentions. It wanted him. Wanted to consume him. Only he ran, so it settled for the others. When he found the courage to return, what he saw left him paralyzed, all he could do was tear at his hair and scalp, as if to physically pull what he was seeing from his mind. When that didn't work, he ran again, fear the only thing keeping

him moving, keeping him alive, but all paths now led back to *Gluttony*, and its insatiable appetite.

2.

Despite his deep sleep the sound of the limo door being shut went off like alarm bells in Robbie's ears. He sat up, eyes bleary, shirt soaked in sweat but alert enough to reach for the old leather pouch and rummage into it for a round firestone. Before he could locate one, he noticed Lenoir scooting down to sit opposite of him, wearing a bemused grin and carrying a bag that smelled heavenly to his empty stomach. For a few seconds he wondered if he was still sleeping, as he hardly recognized the witch. She not only stopped for food, but apparently had stopped to change, and freshen up her look. Her black gown was replaced with a similar one of royal purple and had added lace gloves and a bonnet, in the same shade. Her hair was no longer up in an elaborate wedding braid but sat heavy with deep curls.

"You stopped and got your hair done?" Robbie asked groggily, unable to infuse his words with the proper accusation.

"Aw, you noticed," Lenoir said, batting her eyes as she draped her parasol across her lap, then tossed the bag of food to Robbie, "but no, I didn't stop by the salon. I had plenty of time on the drive up here to take care of it myself."

Robbie sat up and started looking for his phone, which he found on the floor near the partisan. He checked the time. *6:34am. 'So, it's only been a little over two hours since we left the airport.'*

After arriving in Denver, at a little after four in the morning, Robbie, Lenoir, and Haakon, parted ways with Maria, who believed they were heading in a different direction than her, or had at least pretended to. Despite not being able to sleep on the plane, exhaustion had finally caught up with Robbie and he had fallen asleep not long after they got into the limousine that Lenoir had waiting for them.

“Are we there already?”

“Not quite. We should arrive in Bedford in about half an hour.”

Robbie took a long sip from the warm, disposable coffee cup the witch handed him, while trying to get his thoughts in order. He’d always been one to hit snooze on his alarm at least twice and was fighting now to keep his eyes open. “So, what’s the plan then?”

“Simple. First, you eat, then you and Haakon rescue the girl. If all goes well, you could find yourself on a flight home this evening.”

“Fair enough.” Despite his stomach rumbling at the smell of the food, he wasn’t sure he could eat. Just like sleep, finding an appetite before a job had always been a problem; even more so now as the dregs of his dream still sat with him, making the idea of food borderline revolting.

3.

Their destination turned out to be a set of tall, rather ordinary-looking office buildings just off of the town’s main thoroughfare. Robbie watched as around a dozen people walked in and out of various buildings and a dozen more either walking dogs or heading to some place further down the road. Nothing strange or out of place was noticeable.

“You sure this is it?” Robbie asked.

“Positive.” Lenoir leaned over and pointed out the window toward two buildings they were parked in front of. “Right there. Can’t you feel the magic?”

Robbie nodded after a moment. He could feel the magic, even from inside the limo, and as he stared and focused, opening his eyes to the living energy, he spotted the normally unseeable shimmer of magic in the air, not on or around the two buildings but in between them. He was able to adjust his sight to see the protective layers placed on the building, a six-story tower of fog and sepia light,

with a reflective shimmer, rising up and pushing aside the two buildings next to it. The glassy, fogged look, he knew, was from whatever physical barrier had been raised, whereas the reflective shimmer kept the building from sight. He assumed then that the yellowish-gold glow was the spell that was keeping out nonhumans.

As he sat there, trying to analyze the magic surrounding the building, a thought occurred to Robbie that gave him pause. “This doesn’t make any sense. Dozens if not over a hundred people must work there, yet no one’s noticed it’s gone.”

“Is it any stranger than what you normally encounter?”

“Yes, actually. Most places I get sent to are old. So old they’ve been forgotten about, but this... this is in the middle of town. People come to work here every day. How has no one noticed?”

Lenoir just shrugged and shook her head, “I may be a witch, but I really can’t say. It would take a true scholar to try and explain the intricacies of magic, and in the end, it doesn’t really matter.”

“I suppose not.” It took a few more seconds before Robbie was able to look away from the enchanted building. He had learned long ago not to get bogged down by the details when it came to the ins and outs of magic but something about this bothered him. Once again something didn’t seem right, but he couldn’t manage to put a finger on it. “You said you have something that belonged to Amber?”

During their flight Robbie had asked Lenoir if she had used something that belonged to the missing girl to create her tracking spell. He had told her he wanted to make his own tracking spell, in a manner of speaking, something that would help them if there was magic at play meant to disorient them.

“I do.” She opened up one of the compartments under the seat and pulled out a small paper bag and handed it to him. Robbie opened it and pulled out a small stuffed animal. It was shaped like a teddy bear but was clearly meant to be a grey cat. It was old, the color fading on the arms and legs wear Amber always held them, and it had clearly been patched up by one of her parents. “Will this do? I believe she still sleeps with it.”

“If it worked for you, it should work for me.” Lenoir gave him a strange look that he ignored and took the stuffed toy and placed a silver coin, that was strung on a thin string, around the toy’s neck and gave it a quick look over. He stared at it for a long moment until the coin started to glow, before placing it in his leather bag and removing a round, first-sized ceramic container that had been painted black. Inside the container was a thick, red-brown paste that Robbie scooped up with the tips of his middle and pointer fingers and began applying generous amounts of it around his right eye and down the side of his face.

“What’s that?” Lenoir asked.

“My beauty regiment.”

“Umm...”

Robbie laughed but said nothing else until he finished applying the strange paste. “I have some pretty bad scarring from when some asshole tried to pluck out my eye, and this is the only thing that works to cover them without being totally obvious that I’m wearing some kind of coverup.”

Lenoir eyed him carefully, leaning in close so that their faces were nearly touching. Despite the paste being heavy and far from any skin tone, there were no traces that Robbie had put anything on. “Impressive. I can’t even tell. You must tell me where you get this. I can’t imagine you got that at the local mall.”

“If only. No, this is made by an alchemist in India. I have it imported every few months. This stuff damn near cost me as much as a month’s worth of bills but it’s worth it.”

“Well, you must put me in contact with this alchemist at once.”

“I think that’s going to have to wait until after this rescue mission,” Robbie laughed. Lenoir pouted but Robbie ignored her and took a second to ready himself before he slid down the seat and reached for the door handle. With surprising speed Lenoir slid down to sit across from him and leaned over to place a hand on his arm and told him to wait. He recoiled slightly at her touch but this time there was no dizziness or dreamy sense of bliss, just the soft lace of her glove.

“Hold on a minute. I need to make sure you and Haakon won’t be noticed while you try to get into the building.”

Lenoir rolled down the window, before she closed her eyes and let a set of dreamy sounding words pass through her lips, timed to the rhythmic snap of her fingers. Five snaps. Five words. With each one Robbie could feel the magic pass by him like a sudden gust of wind, carrying a wave of humid, static charged air, accompanied by a heavy floral scent so strong it was disorienting. “There, that should do.” She then slid down the long seat and tapped on the privacy glass which rolled down just a crack, letting in a wave of icy air, and filling the limo with the sound of war drums.

“Yes, madame?” asked the low, hollow voice.

“It’s time to get to work, Haakon.”

“Very well madame.”

Chapter 9. Not the Usual Affair

1.

As soon as he got out of the limo, Robbie’s mind began to race, mulling over the different options to remove the barrier keeping them out. Depending on the strength of the magic and the amount of time he had to work with, he had different artifacts that he liked to use for any given task. He walked up to the barrier and reached out until he was almost touching it. The air nearly vibrated with the strength of the magic at play. *‘Damn, that’s a lot stronger than I was expecting. This is too much for The Horn, even with runes.’* With one of his options eliminated he juggled the two remaining ideas, trying to decide the best approach.

“So, what do you think? Can you get us inside?” came Haakon’s low growl from a few feet behind him.

“Yeah, just trying to decide the best option to...,” Robbie’s words were lost when he turned to face the man he was to be working with and found that the glamour was gone.

A number of images had gone through his mind since Lenoir had told him about her bodyguard. Based solely on her description, Robbie had expected someone who was grievously scarred from years of battle, or a living corpse deep in the throes of decay, possibly wearing armor that would place him to where he was from. What he had not imagined, in all his musings, was a skeleton in a dark, brand-new, three-piece suit and crimson red tie, that looked more expensive than most things Robbie owned. And certainly, he hadn’t pictured a skeleton with a massive beard of fair colored hair, braided with beads of wood and metal. Yet that’s what Robbie saw standing there in the middle of the sidewalk, in full view of the morning sun, and with a pair of heavy looking axes strapped to a leather harness on his waist.

Robbie’s eyes snapped to the limo when he heard the distinct shutter of a photo being taken, followed by a gale of laughter from Lenoir, who evidently found the surprised look on his face rather funny. He stared at her angrily, face growing flushed; he was pretty sure his jaw had actually dropped for just a moment.

The skeleton warrior walked up to Robbie and held out a leather gloved hand while hanging his head in a slight bow. “I apologize for my crude sense of humor. Please allow me to properly introduce myself. My name is Haakon Haroldson, The Dreaded Butcher, but you can just call me Haakon. It is nice to properly meet you, Mr. Parker.”

“Uh, right, you can call me Robbie.” Robbie took the offered hand and was greeted with a surprisingly strong grip.

“Robbie it is then.” The skeleton turned to Lenoir, who was still laughing, and pounded his chest twice while bowing his head before turning back to Robbie and asking if he was ready.

Robbie nodded and turned his attention back to the barrier. The way he saw it, he only had two good options due to the barriers strength, and he wanted to save the *Unlock-Lock*, since he would only be able to use it once in a twenty-four-hour period. So instead, he pulled out an aged, rusted and chipped, brass key, but paused and started to look up and down the road.

“Is something the matter?” Haakon asked.

“Nothing, it’s just weird. I’m used to doing these things underground and up in the mountains, or out in the desert, not on the side of a mildly busy road.”

“It’s alright, my mistress’s magic is in effect.”

Robbie turned back and watched a couple in an SUV drive by, followed closely by a woman in a white sedan who appeared to be yelling, though if it was at the SUV or the small boy in the back of the car, he wasn’t sure. Her windows were down but her words were muffled beyond understanding, blending in with the rest of the noise because of the magic Lenoir had placed around them. On the other side of the street, a man with stark white hair turned to stare at the passing vehicles and started shaking his head, clearly disapproving of what he saw, or perhaps heard. “Yeah, that’s not really the point.” As he spoke, he watched a man on a collision course towards them, coming from down the block. When he was ten feet away, showing no signs that he noticed Robbie, and certainly not the living skeleton that stood behind him, the man came to a sudden stop, a look of confusion spreading across his face. For a moment he just stood there looking like he was fighting to remember something, but slowly he started to turn, heading back the way he came.

“Satisfied?” the witch purred from within the limo.

Robbie ignored her. He could swear that someone was watching them. *‘The witch did say there were other’s keeping an eye on the place.’* He continued to look about for a few moments, but if there were any unseen onlookers, he couldn’t catch a trace of them. *‘I suppose it could also just be my imagination.’*

Putting the feeling aside, he sat down and set an ancient, rusty key onto the sidewalk so that it touched the barrier, and placed his right pointer finger on the

back of the old key, Robbie focused on the flow of his aura, directing it to the tip of his finger and into the artifact. The energy filled the key and activated the magic within. He picked up the artifact and felt the warm, static charged feedback of the stored magic, the sensation filling him with a mix of joy and regret.

“How long will this take?” Lenoir asked.

“I’m not sure exactly. Normally a couple of minutes, but I’m not used to dealing with magic this fresh, so it might take longer.”

Even with his back to her Robbie thought he could see the witch’s frowning face, but she remained quiet. Several minutes passed while Robbie tried to direct the flow of the artifact’s magic, but to his dismay he was making little progress. It was hard not to think about the two people watching him intently and it was even harder not to think about how awkward he felt sitting there, even if no one else could see him. When the five-minute mark came and went, Robbie started growing nervous that he had grown as rusty as the key he held, and that this would be done before they ever got started, but before another five minutes passed, he felt the humming reverb he’d been looking for. With an extra push of his aura the artifacts magic finally took hold.

The rusty key began to glow and lifted out of Robbie’s hand, coming to hover several feet above the ground. A sound, like a giant pounding on the world’s largest door, filled the air until the key turned and Robbie felt the barrier shatter.

Relief washed over Robbie, grateful that the magic had finally worked.

“Not bad I suppose. Though it only took me a minute to work out a spell to take it down last time.”

Robbie took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from his face before he spoke, trying to keep the agitation out of his voice. He had forgotten that Lenoir had already with the barrier previously. “And why are you just now saying this?”

“I was curious to see how you did it.”

Before he could respond, Haakon cut in and asked if he was ready to head inside.

'No.' he thought, but he said, "Might as well be." They started toward the front entrance, but a look over at Haakon made him pause. "Are you sure you can get through the barrier? You don't exactly look human."

"It shouldn't be a problem. I may not have a traditional appearance, but both my soul and bones are completely human."

Robbie really hoped the talking skeleton was right, otherwise they'd travelled all the way out here for nothing. "Lead the way."

2.

Robbie and Haakon stepped off the street and into a warmly lit lobby. The square, tile floor room looked clean, but was mostly empty. A few potted plants were placed here and there to try and liven the place up, and a couple glass tables and metal chairs had been set out for visitors and employees on their break. In the center of the lobby were two elevators, both of which had been blocked off with caution tape and had '*Out of Order*' signs slapped on the door. Only two businesses were on this floor, sitting opposite each other, and to either side of the entrance, with fogged glass fronts and sliding glass doors. A small hall with a metal door at the end was cut into the far wall, almost directly opposite the entrance, that Robbie presumed led to a stairwell.

"You see anything ready to jump at us?" Robbie asked, eyes still scanning the lobby for something, anything, that might signify a trap. There were traces of magic in the air but nothing that set off any alarms. '*Someone's been using magic, and a lot of it. So where are the traps? What else is going on in here?*'

"No. I think the worst that will happen here is that the floors may fall out on us, or the ceiling might crack and come crashing down," Haakon suggested in his low, cold voice.

Robbie looked over at the skeletal warrior, whose boney jaw dropped just a little, in an approximation of a grin. '*Oh great. He thinks he's funny.*' Robbie gave

the lobby another once over, but nothing stood out, so he turned his attention to the short stretch of hallway. The hall wasn't very wide, which meant if the walls did start moving, they wouldn't have a lot of time to react. He let out a tired sigh and muttered, "You don't happen to have a long pole and some droids in the limo?"

Haakon gave him a low, bark of a laugh that seemed to bellow from deep inside the stomach he did not have. The laughter seemed honest, but the sound made Robbie's skin crawl. "I'm afraid not."

"Yeah, well, I'm starting to feel like we should have brought some regular tools as well."

"Perhaps, but it's too late to worry about that now. We were sealed in the moment the door closed behind us."

Robbie whipped around to find that the space where the door had been was now as smooth and blank as the rest of the walls. He walked up and placed his hand where the door should be and let a little bit of aura flow out and into the wall. It was no illusion; the door really had been removed. What was even more alarming was he couldn't get a sense of anything beyond the wall. Remembering the yellow-gold glow of magic he had spotted earlier, Robbie let out an agitated groan. Just because he could see magic, it didn't always mean he knew what it was. He had assumed what he saw had been the enchantment keeping out Lenoir and other nonhumans. Now he realized what it had been, a *seal*. One that activated the moment they stepped inside. *'Dammit, I've gotten rustier than I thought. Although, if that was a seal, then -'*

"How bad is it?" Haakon asked, interrupting Robbie's s.

"Bad. We've been completely cut off from the outside."

"Can you remove it?"

"Not likely. Not from the inside anyways."

"I see. Unfortunate."

"Yeah, you sound real concerned by it."

The skeleton shrugged, “It doesn’t change what we came here to do. All it means is we really can’t fail.”

Robbie had to admit that he had a point, but he did so begrudgingly. *‘Not even a minute in and things are already going to hell. That might be a record.’* Trying to put aside his frustration, he tilted his head back and took a look above them. The ceiling was painted dark like the walls, and was low enough that Robbie could almost reach out and touch it. If Maria’s daughter really was somewhere in this building, he should be able to get an idea as to where she was, even with whatever magic may lay between them. He took the cat out of his bag and fed it aura until the silver coin around its neck began to glow, as if it was being heated by a flame.

“Well, good news is the girls here.”

“Was that ever in question?” Haakon asked honestly.

“Of course it was. I’ve known you people for less than a day; this could be some elaborate trap.”

“Yet, you still came.”

“Yet, I still came,” Robbie repeated, a frown slowly forming, “Putting that aside, we were also going under the assumption that Amber was still here in the first place and hadn’t already been moved somewhere else. I know the witch said she had someone keeping an eye on this place, but it doesn’t mean they couldn’t have slipped past them.” As he spoke, he gave the lobby and adjacent hall a onceover for anything he might have missed and, upon finding nothing that stood out, put the stuffed animal back in his bag and started toward the door at the end of the hallway.

As they drew closer, Haakon held up his hand and the two of them came to a stop. Reaching out, Robbie felt whatever was approaching a couple of seconds before he heard footsteps. The door to the stairwell opened and a man in a navy-blue button up and dark jeans stepped into the hall. For a few seconds, the three of them stood there, regarding one another. At least Robbie thought that’s what the newcomer was doing. It was hard to be sure, since the man had no face.

“Y-y-y-you’re not m-m-mommy and d-daddy.” Robbie recoiled a little at the scared, childlike voice, hearing it not with his ears, but in his mind. “*You can’t be here!*” The disembodied voice roared with anger, as the faceless man’s skin started to bubble up and expand. Robbie felt the stir of magic as the creature writhed before him and realized too late that he made another mistake; he’d forgotten to remove any artifacts from his bag. He started to back away when a rush of air whistled past his ear, from something that went hurling toward the creature.

A loud *crash* of impact was accompanied by the sound of shattering tile when the axe pinned the half-formed creature to the wall, leaving it to dangle there limply.

Neither Haakon nor Robbie made a move for several moments while they waited to see if the creature was really dead, or if anything else was going to come out of the stairway.

“What the hell was that thing?” Robbie finally asked.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

Cautiously Haakon approached and removed his axe from both the creature and the wall, and watched the body slump to the ground, before pulling out a dark cloth from inside his suit jacket and began wiping away the blood and gore, holding the axe aloft so nothing dripped onto his clothing.

“Any chance that’s what took Amber?”

“Not likely.”

“There could be more of them then.”

“Probably,” Satisfied with his work, Haakon placed the axe back in the leather harness, “Shall we continue?”

Robbie hesitated a moment before opening the door, removing a few items from his enchanted leather pouch and placing them in his pockets. As far as he could tell, nothing else was on the other side, but not knowing what they were dealing with, he couldn't be sure there wasn't something that could escape his notice. He slowly opened the metal door, ready to act, but nothing appeared before them to hinder their path. Cautiously, they stepped into a concrete stairwell and headed up the stairs.

"It seems like whoever was supposed to be watching this place for you guys really dropped the ball."

"Perhaps, but it's not as if we found the child's location the *moment* she went missing. There might have been enough time for others to arrive, or perhaps it was a group effort from the start," Enclosed in the stairwell, Haakon's deep voice echoed off the concrete walls, "Can you tell how far Amber is from us?"

"Not exactly, but I'd guess she's on the top floor. I'll be able to tell once we get further into the building." Stepping onto the second-floor landing, the pair was forced to come to a sudden halt; the stairs to bring them to the next floor were gone. "Well, that's different." Robbie crouched down and reached out, checking to see if it was an illusion. "Damn... Come on, let's look and see if there's another set of stairs. Otherwise, we're going to have to get *real* creative."

"Shame the . It would make our endeavor a lot easier."

"Nah, doesn't matter. There's no way in hell I'd get on an elevator with all this magic in the air."

There was another metal door, like the one at the entrance to the stairwell, that Robbie half expected to be locked but opened with ease, and the pair stepped out onto the second floor. Even before the door closed behind them, Robbie got the innate sense that something was wrong. '*No, everything's wrong.*' At a quick glance Robbie might have believed this was a regular office building. The hallway was lined with glass fronts, with names of businesses painted on the outside of each office, but the longer he stared the more he grew uneasy. He tried to read

some of the signs and business titles, but he quickly realized they were all gibberish. The sign for the office to their right read -

To AHOW MLE<SA

BN!!F3G

*Lk9 9!a Tomorrow kK1

The office to their left read equally strange, even having a triangle in one word and a square in another. Worse than the signs were the hallways themselves; they stretched on for entirely too long from what he had judged from the building's exterior and the floor below. There were eight decently sized office spaces on either side of the hallway, before an adjacent hall intersected with theirs, and what looked like another eight offices along both walls on the other side of it.

'How is this even possible?' Robbie wondered, and let his vision shift to catch any magic at play. A moment later he screamed in pain as his senses were overloaded with an abundance of magic that made the world shine like the halls were one giant filament inside a lightbulb.

"Are you alright?" Haakon asked, placing a hand on Robbie's shoulder to help keep him balanced.

"I'll be fine," Robbie said through clenched teeth, "just give me a second." He waited for his vision to clear before he explained the overwhelming magic at play. "Every bit of this floor is enchanted, and at least some of these rooms have someone waiting for us."

"I see." Haakon loosened the leather straps around his two axes. No longer completely shocked at the sight of a walking, talking skeleton, Robbie realized just how nice his weapons were. Each had a handle of polished, dark hardwood, with heavy blades that curved more on the bottom, and a set of five runes carved near the edge of the blade. The axes were identical in size and cut, but they were clearly made from different materials. One had a head of metal that looked like steel, runes painted red. The other blade looked like it was made from a dark gemstone, so dark it was almost black, but was actually a rich green, its runes painted gold.

“Those aren’t ordinary blades, are they?”

“No, they are not. They were a gift from Madame Lenoir. If we’re going to have to go searching for a stairway in each room, they are sure to get their use.” There was a slight edge in Haakon’s voice that made Robbie feel like the undead fighter would enjoy that outcome.

Unfortunately for him, Robbie felt like he had a better idea. “I don’t think we’ll need to resort to that, though I have a feeling they’ll get their use regardless. For right now, follow me. I have an idea.”

The two of them walked to the center of the hallway, wary of each door they passed, and found that the intersecting halls did indeed look identical to the one they were in. Robbie once again removed the stuffed animal from his bag and looked between the different pathways, then down at the glowing coin. It took a few seconds to figure out which way it was trying to pull, but afterwards he was confident it was pulling him toward the path to his right. “Come on, this way.”

The hallway came to an end with a flat, painted over, concrete wall. Robbie ran his hand along the wall for a minute, even trying to push it in at certain places, but it appeared to be just a wall. He was trying to decide which direction the artifact was pulling him in, when Haakon started to chuckle. “What?”

“Nothing. You just look funny. It looks like you’re staring at the stuffed cat like it’s a compass.”

“I’m focusing on the artifact.”

“Sure, but you have to admit, you look a little ridiculous.”

Robbie paused, finally looking away from the artifact to glare at Haakon. “You’re a skeleton in a suit, and you work for a witch who dresses like a Victorian noble with a modern fashion sense.”

“Fair enough,” Haakon chuckled, “so then, what’s the plan?”

“Give me a moment.” Robbie tried to feel for anything on the other side of the wall, but the only thing he could sense was the magic that was sealing them

inside. “Alright, maybe you can help me with this. First, we both need to try and clear our minds. Close your eyes and try to focus on just your body.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Or, um, never mind. Just let me do it.” Trying to ignore the burning in his cheeks was hard, but after a handful of seconds Robbie managed to clear his mind enough to find what he was looking for. Standing there, still facing the wall at the end of the hallway, Robbie latched on to the barely perceivable differences in the strength of the force pulling on the artifact.

“Shall we pick a room to try then?”

“No,” Robbie pointed to the room to their left, “If there are stairs they’ll be in that room.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

“What makes you think it’s that one?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain. Essentially, this artifact acts like an incredibly powerful magnet. By observing where and how it’s pulling, I can usually get a crude idea of the layout between me and what I’m searching for. Only there’s so much magic floating around I can only get a vague sense there might be a way up from over there.”

“That’s impressive.”

Robbie shrugged, unsure if his companion’s words were genuine or facetious. “I’ve gotten rusty. There’s a chance that there’s no stairs at all, and it’s

just a hole in the wall or ceiling. With that said, we've reached the end of our cozy stroll."

Haakon gripped his axes tighter and started rolling his shoulders, as if to stretch the muscles he no longer had. "I was never expecting it to be easy." Without any hesitation Haakon walked up to the glass door to their left and pulled it open.

From where he stood Robbie couldn't see what was inside, but he could feel them in there, their aura's reeked of magic. He made to follow after Haakon, but the dapperly dressed warrior held up an axe laden hand, one gloved finger raised. "Give it a beat before you follow. I want whatever is in there to focus to be on me."

"You sure?" Without responding Haakon stepped inside and shut the door. "I guess so."

Robbie stared at the fogged glass, trying to feel out what was happening on the other side. Clashing emotions swirled inside him like a whirlpool, leaving him unsure and distracted. He didn't want to fight, but he could. It had often been a requirement in his old life. Rare was the time that he'd taken a job that he hadn't had to defend himself or someone else. It was ironic, for more than one reason, Haakon was supposed to be the muscle, but Robbie wasn't sure he would be okay with himself if something happened to the skeleton while he just stood back and waited.

Lost in his thoughts and focusing on what was going on in the room ahead of him, Robbie failed to notice one of the doors behind him open, when the door closed behind Haakon, nor did he notice the nearly silent slither of tendrils that came pouring out of it.

Chapter 10. Stone, Steel, and Flame

1.

The room Haakon entered was a dimly lit square, bare of any furnishings or decorations that would make it distinct. He immediately spotted a metal door on the opposite side of the room, like the one that led to the stairwell on the first floor. *'It seems The Artificer really does know what he was doing.'*

While the room was void of furniture it was not entirely empty. Several grey-skinned creatures meandered in the near-dark, all of whom came to a stop and turned their sunken red eyes on Haakon. Looking upon their crooked shapes, he assumed they had once been goblins, but it was hard to be sure. For a moment he lamented for the demented creatures and whatever cruel fate made them that way, but whatever pity he felt for them faded as quickly as it came. He could once again hear the ringing cry of his twin axes *Sársauki* and *Refsing*. He loved that sound. Their cries reminded Haakon of choir bells, only these bells rung low and deep, and rang out in a hypnotic chorus deep in his mind. The magically forged blades had been named and modeled after the ones he used when he was alive, only the runes on these blades were actually latent with power, and instead of iron with a steel edge, the one blade had been made from *töfran* and the other *ffödstein*. One was a steel-like substance that was more easily enchanted, the other a gemstone harder than diamond. Both were found in the borderlands of Saljarheim, where the world largely remained in a physical state. Transformed into weapons and enchanted by a fae sorcerer, Haakon felt like they would call out to him sometimes, as they were now, and as always, they wanted one thing. They wanted blood.

After nearly a millennia of undeath, there were few things left that made Haakon feel like he was alive again, and battle was one of the things that got his nonexistent heart pumping. He felt it was ironic though, his bloodlust in life had led to his punishment of undeath, now it was one of the only things that reminded him that he had ever been alive in the first place. Many nights during the long centuries since he'd awoken as a draugr, deep within a frozen hellscape at the end of what was then the known world, he had longed for the simple things that he had taken for granted in life, but those things could no longer bring him pleasure or solace. Only the violence that he'd come to disdain could do that now. Whether by intention or not, the cyclical nature of his existence became the true punishment for

the choices he had made in life. However, whenever he answered his axe's call to action, all that slipped away. Whatever guilt he had for revering in bloodshed was temporarily forgotten as a rush of ecstasy filled his being, and he was brought back to the battlefields of his youth.

The first of the misshapen creatures lunged forward, striking with an overgrown and deformed arm that looked more like a cancerous growth with claws than an actual arm. Haakon easily stepped out of the way and into the path of another one. This creature's upper body was much larger than its lower half, so it launched itself forward with one large, muscular arm, the other arm outstretched to grab Haakon, who gracefully spun out the way and struck out with the heavy tōfran steel blade, Sársauki. The blade bit deep into the creature's flesh, cleaving a hunk of grey and deformed meat. The creature roared in pain, but the attack didn't have the effect he had expected, which, while disappointing, still told him something he needed to know. Despite their appearance, these creatures weren't mutated goblins like he first assumed, which meant things weren't going to be as easy as he had guessed.

If he had still been able to smile his grin would have stretched across his skeletal face. "How exciting."

He went to set his axes down so he could remove his suit jacket but all at once the other disheveled creatures began to move toward him, each misshaped and deformed in its own way. They yelled and roared as they came at him, a mass of limbs clawing, swinging, and grabbing. He moved around what he could, only using Sársauki to deflect and hack away at limbs when necessary.

After about thirty seconds Haakon felt he'd gotten into a good rhythm, so, when the top-heavy mutant launched itself with both massive arms, it was time for Refsing. He stepped past the monster's outstretched grasp and brought the gemstone blade crashing down on its skull, the enchanted runes glowing green with power, driving the creature into the tile floor like a boulder had come crashing down on it, and sending out an explosion of splintered ceramic.

Haakon backed away as quickly as he could, moving through the barren office space and temporarily out of reach of the other creatures. At first, he thought

he'd been quick enough to avoid most of the ceramic shrapnel and gore, and where his suit had been ripped, were places that could be easily repaired, but as he combed over his attire, he realized he hadn't managed to fully escape the spray of blood and gore when the creature's head popped. *'Cursed thing. Why was it so full of ichor? Damn. I've gotten sloppy. I knew this suit was going to get ruined, but I didn't think it would be so quickly.'*

The brazen creatures mistook his self-appraisal for distraction and the first one that came charging at him was smashed into the wall by a charged Refsing, while the next one lost a deformed hand to Sársauki. The creature belted out a high-pitched wail of rage and pain, but kept on the attack, lashing out with its remaining clawed hand. Now that he was no longer trying to keep his suit clean, Haakon felt no need to try and dance around his opponents. Slipping inside the outreached claws of his attacker, he used both Sársauki and Refsing to sever limbs and smashed the creature down into the linoleum, which sent out a mist of grey blood, filling the air and further staining his suit. One by one the creatures fell to his blade, until he was left standing there in the center of a mass of limbs and bodies.

He may no longer have lungs but in his mind, Haakon breathed heavily, elated by the rush of the kill, though below the surface he was sickened over his enjoyment of the slaughter, as he had been time and time before.

Coming down from the blood induced high, it dawned on the warrior that The Artificer had never followed after him, leaving him with a sense of dread that began to fill his empty chest. *'He probably just didn't want to get in my way,'* he told himself as he flitted to the door and out into the hallway. He had been gone barely two minutes, but The Artificer was nowhere to be seen. "Dammit." He called for his companion, hoping he had just wandered off, perhaps trying to get a better idea of the magic at play, but there was no response. Haakon gripped his axes and tried to think of the most efficient way to search the other sixty-three offices. He knew there were dozens of creatures on this floor, and he was worried he was already too late.

Cursing, Haakon called out again. At first there was no response, and he readied himself to burst through the adjacent door and slay whatever might be inside, but a cry of pain from somewhere nearby caught his attention.

2.

When the tendrils lashed out, they struck quickly, wrapping themselves around Robbie's arms and legs, and violently pulled him to the ground, causing his head to slam hard against the floor. A ringing pain rattled his mind, and his vision blurred until everything was a mesh of lights, his ability to think straight seemingly gone out the window. He was only vaguely aware of being dragged across the floor and into a room down the hall before being hoisted into the air.

When his mind and vision started to clear, he found himself looking down at what appeared to be a tangled mass of dark green vines. It was a few moments still before he really registered what he was seeing, and that said vines were wrapped tightly around most of his body, holding him suspended in the air. His eyes swept the room, searching for the exit but he wasn't sure where he had been dragged in from, and almost all of the square room was covered by the plant. He tried to wiggle within his confines and get to the pure-iron shiv in his pocket, but he was bound too tightly. As he struggled, a shiver ran through the plant, causing the tangled mass below him to writhe. After a few seconds the mass of vines began to pull back into a gaping maw of long, serrated thorns, and smaller pink tendrils, that glistened with a dense liquid they were secreting.

As the creature revealed its true face, Robbie felt a brief moment of recognition, but before he could place where he'd seen it, the creature began to thrash about the room, slamming him into one of the walls before whipping him across the room to crash and crumble against another. Both blows should have been more than enough to kill him and leave his insides a soup of bones and organs, but Robbie slid down the wall, vision spinning, gasping for air, but still very much in one piece. He had gotten his defenses up at the last moment but

hadn't been able to put enough strength behind them to come out entirely unscathed.

Robbie tried to stand but his world was spinning too fast, and he barely managed to push himself up into a sitting position and began to awkwardly rummage through his pockets. He cursed as he pricked his palm with the pure-iron shiv, but he wrapped his hand around it and started to stand but a tendril slithered up and wrapped around his waist, lifting him into the air before he managed to get to his feet. The sudden speed at which he was thrust upwards almost caused him to drop the shiv, but he clenched his fist and managed to hang on, earning him another fresh cut on his palm. He could feel the warm blood running down his hand and felt the plant-like creature shudder as the blood dripped onto the vine that held him. The metal against his open wound was starting to burn but he held strong and began burying the blade into the thick vines wrapped around his waist. The writhing mass in the center seemed to recoil a little as he repeatedly stabbed and slashed the tendrils with the tiny blade, but it didn't have the reaction Robbie was hoping for.

The fact that the pure-iron had no adverse effect on the creature, when over half of Saljarheim's denizens had some level of aversion to the metal, was disappointing, but Robbie forced the feeling aside and continued to hack away at the creature until it once again flung him across the room. Only this time he was prepared for the impact. The contact with the wall still rattled his insides but he stifled a scream and managed to land on his feet. Robbie wobbled forward as his knees threatened to give out, but he managed to keep his balance. Ready to go on the offensive, he plunged his hands into his pocket while closely watching the creature's many limbs, several of which were rearing back to strike, while others were slithering along the floor towards him. When his fingers found the firestone, he started moving, making himself a hard target for the striking vines. Wrapped tight in his right hand, he focused on pouring his aura into the small stone.

While he gathered his aura, a tendril lashed out in front of Robbie, nearly ripping out his throat, but instead buried itself into the wall, as if it were made of steel instead of plant fiber. Robbie cursed as he ducked underneath the death blow,

and he kept moving until he felt the stone start to shudder, signaling it was about to break. Aiming for the creature's open mouth, hoping to incapacitate it with one shot, Robbie threw the firestone just before a tendril came whipping in from his right, sending him tumbling across the floor. He was still rolling when the creature let out a wail, like the buzzing of angry insect's, as the writhing mass quickly went up in a blaze. With no time to celebrate, Robbie tried to get to his feet but in a matter of seconds there were dozens of burning tendrils flailing wildly and one struck him from behind, pushing him back to the ground.

Doing his best to set aside his rising panic, Robbie hopped to his feet and took off running. He had already realized that he had made a grave mistake. When he threw the stone, he hadn't considered just how quickly the creature might light up, or that he was on the other side of the room from the door he had been dragged in through and a quick look made it clear there were no other ways out. The creature took up too much space and was flailing too wildly for him to move easily. He continued to round the room, dodging flaming tendrils and trying to take shallow breaths, as the room rapidly filled with an acrid smoke. Smoldering plant matter kept threatening to set his clothes ablaze, but he managed to pat out the worst of it as he moved. Just a few feet from the door he reached out for the handle, desperate to get out of this blazing inferno, but a tendril caught him just under his ribs, causing him to cry out in pain and surprise, and sent him rolling away from the door and toward a heap of burning plant matter.

3.

For just a second Haakon thought he was looking into the pits of hell when he threw the door open. A wave of heat and smoke came billowing out, singeing the tips of his beard and sleeve ends of his coat. A flash of anger welled up inside him over the crisp heat that threatened to shave him clean, but he managed to push it aside enough to keep focused. He had absolutely no idea what was happening, but he knew that if The Artificer was in there, he was in serious trouble. With new air to feed on, the flames began to grow until the smoke was so thick it was nearly

impossible to peer inside. For anyone else, locating someone in such conditions would be nearly impossible, but Haakon did not see the world the same way he had when he was still alive. Even as a draugr he had relied on his decaying eyes to see. Now seeing, and hearing, was done through magic. For a very long time he had struggled to explain to anyone how he perceived the world, until the advent of sonar and echo location. A bit of the magic that bound him to his body, mixed with a bit of his aura, was sent out and bounced off the world around him and came back to create a highly detailed image in his mind's eye.

He was aware of the smoke and flames and the mass of burning plant matter, but it did not obscure him from being able to spot The Artificer trying to roll away from the inferno, head and face tucked into his arms. Haakon ran in, hacking away at a barrage of flaming tendrils to get to The Artificer. Without stopping, he holstered Refsing and threw The Artificer over his shoulder, pivoting as he did and darted for the entrance. The blazing creature still raged and flailed as it burned alive, forcing Haakon to veer and bat away more flaming tendrils. Almost to the exit, he was struck from behind, ripping his suit jacket and sending him stumbling forward. They hit the ground, but Haakon managed to use the momentum to half roll, half slide The Artificer out into the hall, before hopping to his feet and closing the door behind them. Still moving, he tore off the remains of his suit jacket and used it to smother the flames eating away at his companion's shirt and pants.

Now out of the smoke-filled room, The Artificer lay there taking deep, wheezing breaths, in between violent coughing fits, while Haakon stood watch, and tried not to think of the damage to his beard.

The sound of shifting rocks behind him caught his attention and he turned, weapons ready, just in time to see a concrete wall fill in around the office front. He peered down the hall, expecting to see the other doors get swallowed by the wall, but the rest of the second floor remained still and quiet. Only The Artificer made any noise, and slowly the coughing fits lessened, and the wheezing breaths became long shutters before finally becoming slow and heavy draws.

Unable to do anything else, Haakon stood vigilant, watching and listening for any sign of trouble while his partner collected himself.

After several long minutes, The Artificer managed first to sit, then stand, still breathing heavily, but otherwise alright.

“An...Any chance you h...had better luck th...than me?”

“I believe so,” Haakon moved to stand closer to his companion in case he lost his balance, “How are you feeling?”

“Like I just smoked... all the cigarettes in a convenient store. It’s still a bit hard to breathe, but... I don’t think it will kill me right away.”

Haakon let out a chuckle and attempted to fix The Artificer with a wry smile, despite his lack of lips. “Come on, let’s move before others get bored and come looking for trouble.”

The pair stepped into the room with the stairwell and carefully stepped around the splatter of body parts that littered the floor.

“What were they?” The Artificer asked.

“I’m not sure. At first, I thought they were goblins, but they had no reaction to the töfran steel in Sársauki. It’s not as deadly as pure-iron, but the effects should have been similar. What’s more, there was something off about them. They were all terribly deformed in ways that don’t make sense.”

“Strange. Perhaps they’re *constructs*.”

“That would be my guess as well.”

“Great,” The Artificer murmured, “This just keeps getting better and better.”

Chapter 11. Welcomed Home?

1.

Maria wasn't sure what to expect from Greg when he picked her up from the airport, but she was preparing for the worst. The messages he'd been sending her weren't exactly encouraging. He was worried and felt hurt, she understood that. He felt abandoned, she even understood that too, but his texts were growing mean, spiteful even. The previous morning, when she said she wouldn't be home that night, his texts had been full of worry and panic that something had happened to her, but by the time the sun was setting, he was beginning to call into question her love for him and their daughter, and the last two texts he sent seemed to not so subtly imply she was having an affair. Even under the circumstances it had been hard to ignore, but she pushed her own anger to the side and did her best to see it from his perspective. She still wasn't happy about it, but she understood he was alone, freaking out over his missing daughter and absent wife, and forced herself to ignore the messages and tell him she was coming home. With everything he'd been saying, she was somewhat worried about how he would respond, but to her relief, he seemed to switch gears and encouraged her to come home. Still, she remained nervous throughout her flight, not willing to believe she had been so easily forgiven.

Despite any misgivings between the two, their reunion was met with love as they embraced; Greg wrapped his arms around Maria as though he was afraid she would disappear if he let go, Maria folding into his arms like she never thought she'd see him again. They would have held each other and stayed that way for a while, knowing that when they let go, they would be one step closer to having to face the reality of their situation, but a chorus of angry horns reminded them they were in front of the airport, so they quickly got into their car and pulled away. Maria was relieved to see Greg give her a warm smile when they finally pulled apart, his own relief radiated off of him, but the feeling didn't last long. Inside the vehicle she quickly felt the air grow thick with tension, as her husband clearly fought his urge to lay into her, likely wanting to let her know what he thought of her jaunt across the country, but to her surprise the conversation remained sparse and light throughout the two hour drive home. Both of them putting in a great effort to keep the conversation away from anything that could lead to them talking about their daughter. It wasn't easy, large portions of the drive were spent in complete silence, not even the radio playing, as Maria slowly drowned underneath

her husband's repressed rage. She had only her thoughts during those agonizing minutes, and they seemed to scream so loud in her head, she started to wonder how Greg couldn't hear them.

It was her hope that she could avoid the topic of her absence until the morning, after she had a chance to sleep and get her head on straight, but it was not long after they returned home that the flood gates broke, and Greg began to question her actions while they got ready to get in bed. The first few questions were asked calmly, almost casually, but after a few minutes his feelings of anger and betrayal bubbled up to the surface, leaving him red in the face and on the cusp of yelling.

To her credit, Maria remained calm and answered what she could, short and concise, if not a little disjointed; her mind frayed to a point beyond exhaustion. She didn't give voice to her own worries and concerns, and didn't try to defend her actions, beyond saying she had not been in the right state of mind. After half an hour, Maria felt the conversation was going nowhere, and Greg was beginning to repeat the same questions, having found Maria's previous answers vague and unsatisfying. Wanting nothing more than to lay her head down, Maria promised him she would explain everything later, but she desperately needed to sleep. He was clearly unhappy about the situation, but agreed without argument, instead going into their closet and grabbing an old quilt blanket they never used, and one of the s off the bed, then started for the door.

"Where are you going?" Maria asked before she could stop herself. The answer was obvious. As unhappy as he was, he couldn't stand to sleep next to her.

"I'm going to sleep downstairs."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"If you want I could..."

"No, it's fine. You take the bed. Goodnight."

Despite her utter weariness, Maria lay in bed for some time after Greg left, staring at the ceiling, a stream of tears silently rolling down her cheeks.

2.

No matter how tired she was, Maria lay in bed awake, the much-coveted sleep continuing to allude her. For a while she tried to convince herself to get up instead of just lying there, but she was unsuccessful. It was the smell of fresh coffee wafting up from the kitchen that finally gave her enough motivation to crawl out of bed. She made her way downstairs, through the living room and into the kitchen, without spotting Greg. She wasn't sure how long it would take for him to start in on her and she wanted at least a few minutes before she had to try and explain her actions again. With just a dash of sugar added, Maria took a long slow sip, basking in the drink's warm embrace. She could hear Greg in the living room a few minutes later, so she topped off her mug and prepared herself for the conversation to come.

While they hadn't actually discussed it, Maria had expected Greg to stay home that day, as he'd done every day since Amber went missing, especially since they had only got back a few hours ago, and he had been reluctant to let the conversation lie. So, she was surprised when she stepped into the living room and saw him wearing the black slacks and light-blue button up, he normally wore for work.

"Hey."

"Hey." At first Greg didn't look at Maria when she came in, instead he remained steadfast and focused on tying his shoes. Only once he finished did he look toward her, and only for a second. In that brief moment, he must have seen the surprise written on her face because he said, "Sorry, I wasn't sure how late you were going to sleep, and I figured one of us needs to get back to work."

"It's alright."

“Okay. You... You still going to be here when I get home?”

‘Ouch.’ “Yeah, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay, good.” Greg turned, and made to leave, but paused after a few steps. Maria saw him chew on his lower lip, as if to chew on the very question that he was mulling over. Despite what he’d just said, there turned out to be something that could not wait until the evening. “Be honest with me, how much did they take us for?”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t play stupid Maria, this person didn’t whisk you away for nothing. I checked our shared account, and since nothing has been withdrawn from there, I can only assume they’ve drained your personal account.” His words started off calmly but by the time he finished speaking there was an edge to his voice, and an almost hostile anger was flooding out of him.

“What – no, I didn’t give anyone any money.”

“Oh bullshit!” Greg was yelling now and took several steps closer to Maria as he spoke. “Look I’m willing to look past this... this... episode or whatever you want to call it, for the sake of our daughter, but you got to be honest with me. How far in the hole are we? The plane tickets alone must have run close to a thousand dollars, that last minute. I mean what were you thinking?”

Maria had to force herself not to flinch back and shy away as her husband got closer. Greg had never been physical toward her, but looking into his bruised, tired eyes, and feeling his anger morph into a blazing rage, she felt sure he was on the verge of snapping. “I’m telling you the truth. I didn’t spend a dime. I’ll show you my bank statement if you don’t believe me. The woman paid for everything. The plane, the hotel, all the food I ate, everything. She even shot me down when I offered to pay her back.”

“Then what the hell did she want?”

“I don’t know! Everything that happened yesterday was like one long, strange dream.”

Greg scoffed and started to pace the living room. “Oh, isn’t that convenient. I bet next you’re going to say you don’t remember what happened.”

Maria gritted her teeth and pushed back the tired, juvenile response that sprung to mind, a low blow that was sure to end in a shouting match, and instead chose her words slowly and carefully. “First of all, don’t go putting words in my mouth. Second, I didn’t, nor was I going to say that I don’t remember. I remember everything, and I take responsibility for my actions. All I’m saying is that looking back feels like it was something that happened to someone else. Like I watched it all on a tv that was far away and now I’m trying to piece together what the plot was.” Tears began to build in the corner of her eyes, but she angrily brushed them away.

Greg’s pacing began to slow and the scowl pulling at his thin features lessened to a frown. “So, then what did she want? What was her reason for getting you on a plane?”

“She claimed she could help find our daughter. Well, more specifically, she claimed to know someone who could help find our daughter, but he wouldn’t help unless I went to meet him in person.”

“Who is this person? Some kind of private detective?”

“I…” Maria paused, thinking back to what Robbie had said he did for a living, “Something like that.”

“And at no point did any of this seem strange to you? Someone just showed up claiming they know someone who can find our baby girl and you just believed them?”

The question hit Maria hard, even though she knew it was coming. The truth was, she didn’t understand why she had been so quick to get on a plane to go meet a complete stranger, almost two-thousand miles away. Standing there now, unable to look her husband in the face, it all seemed so insane, but at the time it had made so much sense. Of course, she had to meet with this man in another state before he would take the job; it hadn’t even been a question. The thought alarmed her.

She did her best to convey this to Greg who, to her relief, had started to calm down and really seemed to be listening. What's more, he'd gone from scowling, to frowning, to looking concerned on her behalf, by the time she'd finished her explanation.

"I – Look, I'm sorry for yelling. Let me call Ed and let him know I won't be in today. Then I want you to tell me everything, from the first time you met this woman, until you got on the flight home."

3.

The work Maria did often had her meeting potential investors out for lunch as a means to, "*wine and dine*", and "*butter up*", representatives of both small and large statewide, and even national, companies, corporations, and firms of all kinds. More than once, she met with someone representing a company or brand that she'd never heard of, so she thought little of it when she left to meet with someone from an online clothing store she wasn't familiar with. The prospective investor had requested to meet with Maria, having been referred to by a previous client from some years back, but with everything going on, Maria had tried to pass off the potential client to one of her co-workers, but the client refused to meet with anyone else. Torn, she had talked with Greg, and admitted she felt guilty going to work like everything was okay. Neither of them had gone back to work since Amber was taken, and while both of their jobs were understanding and fine with their absence, they both knew the cruel reality was that they would eventually have to return to work, regardless of the fate of their daughter, but it was a thought that was still far from their minds. Greg had lent a sympathetic ear, and by the time all was said and done, had convinced her to go to the meeting to try and take her mind off of everything, even if just for a little.

So, the next day Maria drove for half an hour to meet one *Ms. Janvier Lenoir* for lunch. She had never seen the woman before, but she had been told by her coworker that she would, "*know her when she saw her*". It only took a quick

look over the hostess shoulder to spot Ms. Janvier amongst the modernly dressed crowd. After all, it was hard to miss the loudly dressed woman in her gallant, silver silk-dress, and matching elbow length gloves, and whose ebony hair was done up under a lace Dutchess hat.

Maria had to admit she was a little embarrassed to go and sit with the extravagantly dressed woman but did so without blinking and introduced herself to someone she had believed to be a potential investor. This was the last thing Maria remembered clearly, before her memories seemed to distance themselves, like they were no longer happening to her. She explained all this to Greg, before going on to tell him everything that happened between then and when she'd messaged him to say she was coming home, although she forwent any mentions of fairies or demons, and had ended her tale when Robbie claimed he couldn't help her. She also lied and said Lenoir paid for a separate flight back.

Telling Greg about the last twenty-four hours seemed to strongly solidify the surreal nature of her memories. Still, there was some relief to be found talking about it, and it allowed her to piece together her own thoughts and feelings on the matter, in an almost detached, analytical manner.

Greg was silent for a while after Maria finished her tale, so she waited, trying to give her husband the time he needed to process everything, while silently squirming in her skin, hoping, praying, that he would believe her, and that they could move past this and focus on what was important; getting their daughter back.

"So, let me get this straight. After all that, after she brought the man to the hotel, they argued for a while and then they just let you go?"

"Yeah. I think it was his decision."

This was met with more silence, though it didn't last as long. Greg began to nervously drum his fingers on the side of the couch before suddenly standing up, a look of deep concentration pulling his thin features tight, while a confusing mix of emotions bounced off him, leaving Maria unsure of what he was feeling.

"Alright, I think we need to get you to the hospital. Afterwards we can go talk to *Detective Randolph* and see what he thinks."

“Greg, I’m fine. I don’t need to see a doctor right now,” Maria said, taken aback. She wasn’t hurt so, *‘Does he think I’ve gone crazy?’*

“I think you do.”

“Why?” She asked nervously.

“I think I know what happened.” Greg came and knelt down next to Maria. There hadn’t been any physical contact between them since he picked her up from the airport, but now he took her smaller hands into his, a worrying, manic look in his eyes.

“You do?”

“Yes! Don’t you see? These people – what were their names? Lenore? Rob? It doesn’t matter, both names are probably fake anyway. Clearly this woman was drugging you! I don’t know if it was for sex trafficking, or organ harvesting, or what, but I think this woman scouted you and brought you to some man who deals in these sorts of things.”

Surprised by his decoration, it took Maria a few moments to respond.
“Okay... but then why would they let me go?”

“Who knows. Maybe it was bad timing, or maybe he thought you were too old. Whatever the reason, you got lucky.”

Maria had to admit that Greg’s explanation did answer a few things, even if it did seem preposterous. Being drugged would explain the feverish nature of her memories, and the pair being sex traffickers certainly made more sense than the alternative. Yet Maria couldn’t help but believe her eyes, and everything the peculiar pair told her. She truly believed that something supernatural was going on around them. A part of her thought that maybe she was going crazy, but not enough to sway how she felt. Too much strangeness had happened for her to keep denying it. Still, she felt strongly that Greg would refuse to believe it, even if he had gone with Lenoir in her place, so she conceded that he could be right.

“So, you see now why we need to get you to the doctor? Whatever this woman drugged you with might still be in your system. We can go to the police

station then and file a kidnapping report. It might not amount to much but at least we can give their names and description to the police.”

Reluctantly, Maria agreed to go get blood work done but she had drawn a line at going to the police, “*until the results come back*”. She wasn’t in the mood to be pricked with needles, or pee in a cup, but she felt it was the only means of placating her husband, until she could think of something else or figure out a way to make him believe the truth.

Greg was ready to run out the door then and there, but she had insisted on taking a shower first and, knowing that it was going to be a long, uncomfortable day, took every second the hot water would give her.

Chapter 12. It was a Mash...

1.

Robbie and Haakon found themselves facing another missing stairwell when they reached the next floor, so they proceeded through the third-floor door, hoping there would be another hidden stairwell. They stepped into a hallway so identical to the floor below that, for a moment, Robbie worried they somehow had ended up in a loop.

“No,” Haakon said when Robbie voiced his concern, “The nonsense writing on the doors and walls are different.” When Robbie asked if he was sure, the skeleton just grunted, so Robbie decided to take his word for it and started towards the center of the floor, looking to repeat the process from the floor below. He went to fish out Amber’s stuffed cat when he was struck by something that gave him pause, at the same time Haakon told him to wait.

On the second floor Robbie had noticed the presence of a few dozen creatures, scattered through the sixty-four rooms, but here, he realized, the number of creatures had more than doubled, filling each and every room they passed.

From down one of the adjacent halls, they heard a door being opened, then another, and another. One by one doors were thrown open or shattered, but only from the offices that were out of sight.

“I guess our host has a flair for dramatic tension,” Haakon remarked.

Robbie tried to prepare himself for whatever might emerge, but he found himself wondering why he was there in the first place. *‘Why did I agree to take this job so quickly?’* Yes, a child was in trouble, and yes it was hard to say no when he thought he could help, but when he decided to retire and step out of the supernatural world, he had come to accept that he couldn’t save everyone. There would always be a missing person or lost family heirloom that could solve a long-forgotten mystery, clear someone’s name, or reunite a family. He had been taken in by so many sob stories he’d lost count. Sure, the huge payout was enticing, *very* enticing if he was being honest with himself, but he had turned down larger offers. *‘I suppose it’s kind of a moot point at the moment.’*

“Is something wrong Mr. Parker?”

“You mean besides the obvious?”

“Yes.”

“No, just reminding myself why I retired in the first place.”

The sound of approaching footsteps coming from the rooms nearby, momentarily covered the sound of glass shattering, which continued to cry out from the adjacent halls, and sent a fresh sense of urgency through Robbie. Unconsciously he began shifting the rune inscribed amulet from under his t-shirt and reached into his pocket, searching for another firestone. The smooth round stone slipped from his hand and began to roll towards one of the offices closest to them when it hit the floor. He dove for the stone as nearby doors swung or broke

open, including the one in front of him, revealing a room full of long-limbed creatures that came scurrying towards him.

2.

The moment they stepped out into the hallway, Haakon sprang into action, weapons ready, slipping in front of The Artificer as the first of the pit bull sized spiders, with human limbs, went leaping at him. With Sársauki he severed its morose, arm-legs before driving it into the ground with Refsing. Its bulbous body *popped*, spraying thick goo and ichor. Another spider crawled out and scurried up the wall so it could come diving down at him, a venomous glint coating its large fangs. With a graceful spin Haakon slipped out of the spiders reach while pouring his aura into Refsing, the runes along the blade beginning to glow with an ethereal green light. Already the bellow of a war cry was rising from deep within him as he brought Refsing slamming into the creatures side, the multiplied force sending it rocketing into the other spiders trying to crawl over each other to get out into the hallway. For a second there was a gap in the wave of arachnids, but others quickly filled their place. With the doors open, the magic that acts as Haakon's sight gave him a look at the room beyond and he realized that every inch of the large square room was covered in giant spiders.

“Move!”

Haakon didn't hesitate, flitting out the way as a jet of flames rushed to fill his place. He turned to find The Artificer standing there holding a metal amulet, whose runes were glowing like the ones on Sársauki and Refsing. The spiders closest were hit with a concussive force that flung them back and set them alight nearly instantly. Inside the spider infested room, those nearest the door were seared by the sheer heat of the fire, as the beam of concentrated flame punched a hole into the center of the mass of bodies, setting everything in its path ablaze. Thick black smoke bellowed from the room, bringing with it the acrid and nauseating smell of melting and bubbling flesh. The stench was fierce enough that The Artificer lost

his concentration, causing the flames to sputter out as he fought to keep his meager breakfast inside him.

Thankful that he did not have a magical sense of smell, Haakon stepped forward and began pulling The Artificer along by the forearm and carefully weaved around all the creatures emerging into the hall. “Focus on finding the stairs. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Right.” The Artificer pulled out the cat as they ran but before they could get to the center of the intersecting halls, a large and grotesque figure came crawling into view from the hallway on their right.

Over the centuries Haakon had laid his eyes on many creatures that no longer roamed the earth, but he had no idea as to what the abomination before him might be. All he knew was that it would have made his skin crawl, if he still had any. The creature was so massive it took up half of the hall and was too big to crawl along unassisted. Dozens of arm-like appendages grew from its calloused, saggy skin, all along its long, slug-like body, that helped to pull it along. Atop the end closest to them was a strange, humanoid looking body, making the creature look like some kind of massive, horribly deformed centaur.

“What the actual fuck is that thing?”

Without an answer to give, Haakon dashed forward and brought the full might of both weapons down on the creature's bulbous body. It hardly flinched as both blades tore through gelatinous flesh, and the concussive force of Refsing was absorbed by the monster's massive form.

The creature turned its eyeless face to the undead warrior and let out a gurgled wail.

“Please, tell me the stairs aren’t this way.”

“I don’t think so,” The Artificer said, though he sounded unsure, “I need a few seconds to concentrate.”

Haakon didn’t need to physically turn his head to get a look at what was going on around them, and to *see* that there were now creatures coming out of

every room. He recognized what some of the creatures were and, like those in the staircase room, he recognized what some of them might have been or were supposed to be, but the rest appeared to be a galley of limbs and flesh thrown together to make chimeric creatures that shouldn't exist.

“Well work quickly. They're not giving us anymore time.”

Haakon charged in to take another strike with Refsing, pouring his aura into the enchanted blade. The flesh of the slugtaur writhed and rippled against the force of his strike, like the surface of a lake in the rain, but was otherwise unfazed. A dozen new arms, long and muscular, tore free from the creature's flesh, and went snaking towards Haakon, who barely managed to change his momentum and throw himself to the side. He hit the ground and rolled before springing to his feet and found himself facing the direction they'd entered from, and the horde of monsters that were coming at them. He counted close to four dozen creatures in just that stretch of the hall, some only a few meters away, and he tried to calculate how quickly the closest ones would get to The Artificer.

'No good. They're too close.'

As he was, he wasn't quick enough to get to both the half-burnt spider and the hairless, hunched-back werewolf that were preparing to dive at The Artificer, who was desperately looking up and down the halls and potentially unaware of the two creatures that looked to make him their next meal. Haakon knew there was only one thing he could do, and he didn't have time to consider it.

As a skeleton, Haakon no longer had a body to pump adrenaline through his veins and could no longer partake in the herbal remedies and rituals that had made him such a formidable warrior in life; an unyielding force of nature known as a *berserker*. Before any battle he would shed his clothes, donning only a bear-skin cloak, and his twin axes, and ingest a trance inducing concoction that would turn him into a conduit of death. Somewhere in the thousand years since he died, Haakon had discovered *trance-states* and had learned a few, including one that put himself into a berserker-like trance known as *Hadad*, that he had refined into two separate trance-states. Neither were ones he liked to use anymore, but more so, the ability to put himself in these trance-states was something that he had not wanted

to use yet. An ace in the hole for when they reached the final floor, and the inevitable conflict that would follow. He was worried what it might reveal to his opponent before it was time, but it seemed as though he had little other options. *‘As long as I stick with Asha-Hadad it should be fine.’*

When he was alive and in his prime, he’d been told by many that watching him on the battlefield was like watching a monster come to life. He was too quick, too strong to be human. Now, no longer having to deal with the limitations of a traditional body, he struck like lightning, flattening the half-burnt spider with Refsing and sending Sársauki flying with such force it cut through the werewolf and close to a dozen others, like a saw blade, before burying itself into the wall at the end of the hallway. The moment Sársauki left his hand, Haakon was turning and hurling Refsing, the light of his glowing axe leaving a bright afterimage as it arced through the air. It slammed into the nightmare slug, rocking the creature, knocking it off balance. It was only saved from toppling over by its many arms, several of which broke under its weight and now dangled uselessly.

No time to stop, Haakon managed to avoid several outstretched limbs and gnashing teeth, as he doubled back and retrieved Sársauki from the wall, which he then used to dispatch the creatures closest to him. A troll, who may have been part lizard, roared and swung a massive wooden club, studded with metal spikes, right for Haakon’s chest, but he slid under the killing blow and popped up to dispatch two sword wielding monks with lion faces. Still moving, Haakon made it in time to sever several arms and unusual appendages that were reaching out for, and had gotten dangerously close to, The Artificer. He then cut his way through the growing crowd, back to the slugtaur, and grabbed the handle of Refsing and yanked down, leaving a six-foot gash in the creature’s side, which oozed a thick pus that started to sizzle when it touched the tiled floor. Too deep in his trance to be sickened or bothered by such things, Haakon began hacking away limbs and deep strips of flesh, until he and the floor around them were caked with gore.

More spiders, lion faced monks, and fleshless men in cloaks joined the fray, but Haakon didn’t mind. Elated in the bloodlust that was fueling his trance, he danced around his foes, painting himself and his surroundings, in differing shades of red, black, and green, as he cut down one after the next. There were no real

thoughts going through his mind anymore, his body was reacting on instinct, heightened by a thousand because of the trance. All he was really aware of was a warm, pleasant feeling at the center of his being, that seemed to grow with each horrific creature he dispatched. A rock scaled crocodile, as long as a bus and as wide as a sedan, struck from behind, but Haakon stepped aside, severing its head with a few mighty swings before spinning around and caving in the skull of a scurrying, horse-sized, plague-stricken rat.

In that moment he almost felt alive again. Death may not have taken away his ability to feel things, but it had greatly stunted it. A large part of him wanted to feel this way forever, to keep fighting until someone finally granted him the mercy of true death.

3.

Even with all the chaos, Robbie was able to get an idea as to where the stairs lay, though it did him little good since the halls were littered with constructs. With Haakon bouncing around like a bladed pinball on speed, Robbie tried to remain in place and let him deal with all the horrors coming at them, but there were just too many.

At first, he held his ground, shooting bouts of flame in Haakon's wake, but when a man with dark, deformed wings, came charging at him with a spear, while Haakon was busy hacking away at the slugtaur, Robbie knew he had no choice but to move and to hope that the warriors bloody dance was less brash than it appeared. Robbie tried dousing the spear wielding construct in flames as he dove out of the way, but the creatures wrapped its deformed wings in front of itself, which appeared unbothered by the magical fire.

Robbie scurried away from a leaping spider and nearly into the arms of a heavily decaying zombie. He ducked the zombies outstretched arms and bathed it with fire while he fished a windstone out of his pocket. Still moving, he switched the flow of his aura from the firestone to the windstone and surrounded himself

with a cocoon of raging wind, that kept the approaching creatures off balance, allowing him to duck and dive the constructs while Haakon leapt about, turning the fogged glass office fronts into a mosaic of gore. This turned out to only be a temporary fix though. There were just too many of them.

Finding himself surrounded, Robbie pulled out another artifact, one that was far more modern than most of the others he owned. The four-hundred-year-old pocket watch was hardly recognizable compared to the sleek watches of later centuries, and the bulky hunk of metal no longer told time, but that was okay. The magic inside worked just fine. He raised the pocket watch above his head but hesitated, worried that the magic might affect Haakon. If that happened, he knew he was signing his own death certificate, but any second now they were going to overwhelm him either way. Seeing no other option, Robbie hoped what the witch told him was true and let the cocoon of wind dissipate so he could activate the magic inside the watch. *Click.* The watch opened and a concussive wave of magic rippled out in all directions, causing those who came in contact with it to lose consciousness.

A circle of unconscious creatures came skidding to a halt all around him, giving him a moment to breathe. A quick look around showed him that Haakon was still on the attack, but they were far from in the clear. *'I need to find the stairs, and fast.'*

With the magic in the pocket watch spent, Robbie put it back in the leather pouch and pulled out the stuffed animal. He knew which stretch of hallway the stairs should be in but that still left fifteen rooms to eliminate.

4.

A growing feeling of agitation started to replace the wall of bliss that Haakon's Asha-Hadad trance had wrapped him in, when he started to feel the tug of his conscious mind trying to get through the wall. Agitation quickly became anger as the part of him that wanted to stay in the berserker-like trance resisted

active consciousness. Only through centuries of practice and discipline was his conscious mind able to claw its way back to the surface, and clear away the ambrosia laden fog that the trance left over him.

When he came to, the first thing he noticed was the rather large mound of corpses that were piled up around him, even the massive centaur-slug hadn't survived his onslaught, the humanoid growth having been severed from the rest of the body. Yet others were still advancing from all sides.

Realizing that someone was calling his name, Haakon focused his vision and spotted The Artificer halfway down one of the hallways, his amulet held out in front of him, trying to sear a pair of spear wielding men, whose wings were too deformed for flight but seemed to have some kind of resistance to his enchanted fire. Many bodies littered the space between them. Most were clearly Haakon's doing, cut up or smashed to pieces, but several were severely charred, and at least a couple dozen had no obvious injuries, but were either dead or unconscious.

Haakon hurled Refsing at the closest winged humanoid, who saw the attack coming and stepped out of the way at the last moment, leaving his body exposed. Robbie didn't hesitate and turned the construct into a screaming torch. The second winged man let out an angry cry and moved in to try and skewer The Artificer with his spear, but Haakon was quicker. He skirted around The Artificer and caught the killing blow meant for him with Sársauki, the spears blade sliding off the enchanted metal without so much as a scratch. Before the winged man could get his footing, Haakon sliced through the haft of the spear and batted away what remained, before burying an axe deep into the creature's chest.

"Thanks," The Artificer said, breathing heavily. He had several cuts along his arms and, for a moment, Haakon worried that some might have been from him, but none looked deep, and they had mostly stopped bleeding already. "Quickly, through here."

Haakon hastily retrieved Refsing from the end of the hall, maneuvering around a handful of zombies, and doubled back, hacking away at what might have been a snake with many legs, or just a giant insect, that dropped from the ceiling at him, before launching himself through the door that The Artificer held open.

5.

Robbie watched Haakon race back down the hall toward him and began to rummage through his pockets and pulled out a coil of silk string nearly five feet long. The moment the undead warrior stepped past him Robbie slipped inside and closed the door behind them and immediately began to wrap the string around the handle. He wasn't sure how well the artifact would work since the door, and the wall around it, were glass, so as soon as he tightened the knot, he backed away quickly and prepared himself for what remained of the horde of monsters to come crashing through the wall. It only took a couple of seconds before something large slammed up against the door. Both the door and the wall shook from the impact, but the glass held together.

"What have you bound the door with?" Haakon asked from somewhere behind Robbie.

"Enchanted string. It acts as both a seal and a ward for anything it's tied around. I wasn't too sure it would work here, but I think we're good." Robbie took a deep breath and slowly counted to five, while whatever was on the other side of the wall pounded away at the glass. When he got to five, and the wall was still intact, he let out a relieved sigh. "Yeah, we should be good."

"That's quite the remarkable artifact you have there."

"If you think that's cool, you should see my lock that unlocks locks. It's an S-class artifact on the *Moarlin Scale*."

"The what?"

"Never mind," Robbie said with a slight chuckle.

The pair made their way across the empty room but before they reached the door, the whole world started to shake, and the room was filled with the sound of groaning metal and shifting rocks. Both men were thrown to the floor hard but

quickly scrambled to their feet and prepared their defenses, convinced that the rest of the building was about to come crashing down upon them. Several agonizing moments passed by as the near deafening sounds continued but nothing came crashing through the ceiling.

“What’s happening?” Haakon shouted.

“I don’t know. Let’s check the stairwell. Maybe they weren’t planning on us getting this far and are just now removing the stairs to the higher floors.”

They ran to the door and tried to open it but no matter how hard they pushed or pulled the door remained closed.

Chapter 13. Interrupted Tea

It was not long after Haakon and The Artificer stepped into the hidden building that Lenoir began to grow restless while she pondered their return. After a while the witch decided to take an unseen stroll through the city to try and clear her mind, staying close enough to the building that she could sense any changes, knowing that she would feel the domain start to break apart once the master is dead or, if she was right, if the master was placed into a deep, magical sleep. While the fresh air did little to relieve the gnawing anxiety, moving was at least helping her get her thoughts in order. She still trusted Haakon to do his part, even with the odds stacked against him, but she was more than a little worried about The Artificer’s ability to get them to the child. His display had not inspired confidence, and she felt there was a very real chance that they would remain trapped inside. Added to her concern was all the magic she had felt seeping from the building. She had been warned that it had increased significantly since she left to find someone who could get inside, but she hadn’t expected it to be so severe.

‘To think such a complex domain was possible in this day and age seems ludicrous. Yet, there it is, right before my eyes. It seems more and more that I was

right about its master,’ she had thought, while waiting to see if The Artificer was going to be able to remove the barrier.

The witch had never been one to take uncalculated risks, but everything she had planned for had gone wrong to some degree, and with each passing moment, she was feeling more and more like she had bitten off more than she could chew. She was playing a dangerous game and, as it was, she was already trying to pull herself out of one hole, a pitfall that already left her at a huge disadvantage. Everything was riding on Haakon being able to get Amber away from there quickly once they escaped, and Lenoir had to be ready when he did.

Lenoir walked for some time before she came across a small café that she liked the look of, and removed the veil making her invisible, before stepping inside. She was delighted by the robust, little café but she took her drink outside to the patio, and slipped back under a veil, to watch the world pass by while she sipped her tea. She missed the time when she could sit about and not be openly gawked at, but she’d stubbornly refused to update her wardrobe over the last century and a half, caring little for most modern décor, though she enjoyed the dark and angry clothing of some of the more rebellious youth over the last few decades, but only at a distance.

Lost in her thoughts, the witch chose to ignore the unseen presence skulking nearby until it was only a few feet away. It wasn’t until it came to stand behind her that she realized it wasn’t who she’d been expecting, and silently cursed her carelessness. Internally she tensed, but on the outside, she remained calm and poised. “You know, it’s rude to just stand there staring. At least have the decency to introduce yourself.” The chair across from her appeared to move on its own accord as the invisible newcomer took a seat. Although she couldn’t see them, Lenoir had a good sense of what the stranger was by their presence.

“The name’s Qrown,” the demon drawled loudly, causing a passing woman to look about in alarm, “Maldrik wants to speak with you, witch.”

Lenoir hid her surprise as annoyance and lifted her parasol and twirled it in the air, casting a bubble of silence. “Oh? Tell me, has the merchant lord reduced all of the Filli into nothing more than lackeys to run his errands?”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

“Be that as it may, surely he knows how to use a phone.”

The demon laughed, “He wants to speak to you in person.”

Lenoir immediately began peering up and down the mostly empty streets, eyes searching wildly for any signs of the hulking demon and was thankful Qrown couldn't see her beneath the veil. Aloud she scoffed, “My point still stands. Besides, I'm a bit busy to travel to Dudaan at the moment. As he very well knows.”

She thought what she said must have delighted the demon because she felt like she heard him smile wide when he said, “Yes. Good thing he's here. In this wretched human city.”

Lenoir's grip on her parasol tightened but she did not let her surprise and fear slip into her words. “Why would he come all the way here himself?”

“A lot of people are waiting for someone to emerge with the girl, *as you very well know*. Turns out he's a bit of a micromanager, and he wants to make sure that *he's* the one who ends up with her.”

“So, he came in person and released the hounds to try and chase everyone away.”

“Something like that.”

“Why does he want to speak with me?”

“I don't know. My orders were to bring you to him, that's all.”

“And if I refuse?”

This time there was no doubt that the unseen demon was smiling. “Well, I wouldn't advise that, but... I can't say that I would complain. I thought I would get to have some fun when I got here but most of the watchers took off when we arrived.”

The witch began combing through all the spells she might be able to use to get away from the demon but before she could settle on one, a second presence made themselves known, watching from across the road. Unlike the demon who sat across from her, this new presence reeked of magic. *'Dammit.'*

"I suppose I have the time to see what Maldrik wants," Lenoir stood, stealing herself for what was to come, "Lead the way."

Chapter 14. Above the Earth but Underground

1.

The roaring cacophony of noise was making it hard for Robbie to think straight and even harder to communicate. He could barely hear Haakon shouting while he rummaged through the enchanted bag, hoping in vain to find something to lessen the sound.

"What now?" Haakon yelled.

"I don't know!"

"Maybe they're moving the stairs somewhere else! I say we try our chances with the horde and look elsewhere!"

Robbie looked over at the door and frowned. There were dozens of constructs out there still, and most, if not all of them, were gathered outside that room, trying to get in. *'The moment I untie that string they're going to come crashing through. Still...'* He took out the stuffed animal and checked the artifact to see if where it was pulling towards changed, *'Whatever's going on up there is causing too much interference.'*

"Talk to me, Artificer! What are you thinking?"

“I’m thinking we’re screwed! Even if you’re right, there’s no way to remove the seal without getting swarmed!”

“Damn!” Haakon paused, considering possible plans of action. “Do you think *I* could remove the seal then? Even if they come piling on me, I’ll –,” What the warrior would do was lost as he trailed off. Just as suddenly as it began, the world stopped shaking, and the pair was plunged into a painful silence that left Robbie’s ears ringing.

Robbie let out a relieved sigh, and said a silent thanks, before checking the artifact tied around the stuffed animal’s neck again. To his relief he felt the faint tug pulling in one direction. Without a word he walked over to the door that should lead to the next floor. Between the two of them they had tried to bust the door in, cut it down, and blow it open with magic. Now, the door opened with ease and gave view to the familiar concrete stairwell.

2.

Robbie had the amulet, with the firestone still embedded in it, at the ready, expecting to open the metal door to the fourth floor and find another pristine office space littered with deformed creatures ready to attack the moment they stepped out of the stairwell. Instead, they appeared to have stepped out of an office building and into a rough, narrow cave, their only source of light coming from burning torches set along the walls every twenty feet or so. Robbie knew they had to be within the building still, even with magic it was not possible to teleport them across physical space, but they were now standing in a damp and dark tunnel, carved into a mountain or somewhere underground. He looked to Haakon to see if his companion was surprised at the change of scenery and found the warrior staring into the cave completely straight faced.

‘Oh, right. Skeleton.’

“Is there a problem Mr. Parker?”

“What? No. Never mind.”

“Very well. So, is this an illusion then or are we really in a cave?”

It was a minute before Robbie answered, trying to get a feel for any magic that would indicate it was an illusion but, like the missing stairs and the oversized floor below, this tunnel seemed to really exist. “It’s real alright. As crazy as that sounds.” The pair started down the narrow tunnel, Robbie in the lead, searching for any sign of traps.

“Hmm. So, it’s as she feared. A domain... in this day and age.” Haakon spoke in a tone so low Robbie wasn’t sure if the skeleton realized he’d spoken out loud but in the narrow cave Robbie heard him clearly.

“What was that?”

“What? Oh, nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

“No, no, don’t give me that bullshit. You mentioned a domain. Is that what this is?” He had heard the term before, and the thought had occurred to him, but from everything he’d read, such a feat was scarcely possible in this day and age. Still, it did go a ways to explain their peculiar circumstances. When Haakon didn’t answer right away Robbie added, “Did you know we were stepping into a domain?”

“I’m surprised you’re familiar with the term. Though I suppose I shouldn’t be. What do you know about domains?”

“Not a lot. Just that it’s a space cut off from the rest of the world with magic, giving the creator control of whatever lies inside.”

“That’s pretty much right. The more powerful the creator the more control they have over the space within the domain.”

It was obvious to Robbie that Haakon was trying to avoid his question, but he had no intention of letting it go. “So, did you know?”

At first the skeleton just grunted, but after a few seconds replied, “This is a much more complex domain than we anticipated. The fact that someone cut off this

place so completely from the rest of the world is alarming. But yes, I had some idea that this is what we were stepping into.” Caught off by Haakon’s honesty, Robbie just stared into the empty eyes of his companion, who met his gaze unabashed. A heavy silence sat between them as the pair stared at each other, anger seeping from the cracks of Robbie’s composure like steam from a pot, until at last Haakon began to pull at his beard and said, “You know I don’t blink right?”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Shut up,” Robbie growled, irritated, but he turned and continued down the path until it grew wide enough for two paths to branch off in different directions. He wasn’t surprised he’d been deceived but hearing Haakon be so flippant about it filled Robbie with a sense of indignation that made him want to lash out in frustration. *‘Calm down,’* he told himself, taking a few slow, deep breaths, trying to refocus his thoughts, *‘There will be time later to be mad. I can take it out on him and the witch then. Right now, I need to focus on getting us through this and making it out alive... if that’s even possible.’* Pushing aside a sense of panic that was starting to sweep through him, he asked, “Anything else I need to know that you’ve failed to mention?”

“Yes. But for now, you should know both of these paths split again a little ways down. The one to our left splits like this one, maybe fifty meters ahead, the one to our right comes to a head after maybe sixty meters, only the paths branching off from that one both make a sharp turn to either direction.”

“I... how...”

With a low chuckle that echoed through the cave, Haakon explained to Robbie about how he perceived the world, comparing it to sonar and echo location. “Still, my sight is hindered by walls and obstacles just like anyone else. Down on the floors below I could only see into the rooms when the doors were open, and even then, I know there are things that I missed. The closer something is, the clearer picture I get but if something’s far, or there’s too much to take in, it becomes harder to process everything. Even with all the doors to the various rooms

open I didn't notice the stairwell door, and I might not have until everything was dead and still."

"How far can you see in here?"

"In a place like this I can see maybe fifty meters ahead, though only about thirty meters clearly. I can see around the corners a little, but only a few meters."

"Good. We don't know what tricks the domain's master has waiting for us, so I'll expect you to be on top of anything that tries to sneak up on us. I don't know about you, but I don't particularly want to get lost in this place. I'm going to have to really concentrate to keep us on the correct path."

"Do not worry. Pour your focus into finding the right way. You can trust me; nothing will come near you."

'Can I though?' Robbie wondered as he got to work searching for the right path forward.

3.

Haakon silently watched as The Artificer pulled two rune stones out of his pocket and placed them flat against the wall, in between the two paths, after getting nowhere with just the artifact tied around the stuffed animal. He recognized the runes, *Ansuz* and *Nauthiz*, and knew that, combined together, they would enhance magic meant to guide or help one survive. All at once Haakon's vision of the tunnels grew clearer and more detailed, the distance he could see growing by several meters. For several minutes The Artificer stood like that, occasionally looking between the two paths, muttering inaudibly as he did so, and checking various artifacts he pulled from his enchanted bag, including a bundle of broken tile that left The Artificer cursing, "the fallacies of magic", when it didn't do what he wanted it to do. Haakon was starting to wonder if there was too much magic at play for The Artificer to figure out which was the right path, when he boldly, perhaps too boldly, declared the path to their left.

They took this path and the two of them quickly made their way to the next junction where the diverging paths made sharp turns down adjacent tunnels. Again, The Artificer held the stuffed cat in one hand and place the runes against the wall with the other, and looked back and forth between the two tunnels.

“Be honest, how confident do you feel about finding our way out with just the cat to guide us?” Haakon asked bluntly.

“It’s the artifact around the cats neck,” The Artificer sighed, “and I’d say like 80% sure.” For a long moment The Artificer stared down the path to their left, then the path to their right, face pinched as if he was trying to see something beyond the light of the torches. “Maybe 60%.”

They took the path to their right this time and followed it for over one-hundred meters before they came to another junction. This junction, like the first one, had two tunnels that only veered slightly away from each other.

With the process repeated, even more quickly this time, the pair took the left-hand path again, which led them down a stretch of tunnel that curved downwards for nearly a hundred meters before suddenly rising to a steep incline that they followed for another hundred meters, before coming upon the next junction. Three tunnels stared at them in the dim torch light, each one daring them to enter. Haakon thought the addition of a third tunnel would slow them down, but it seemed that The Artificer was finding his stride, and they soon moved down the next tunnel.

Watching The Artificer work, and with no obvious danger about, Haakon’s mind wandered, and he wondered what his mistress would think if she could see The Artificer now. He knew she had her doubts based on what she’d seen, and he certainly had his doubts as well, but seeing The Artificer hit his groove made Haakon feel like they made the right choice. *‘It’s hard to believe he’s navigating these tunnels with such a simple artifact.’* “I must say Mr. Parker, your mastery of Rae-Hal is impressive.” It was an understatement, Haakon felt. “Most don’t truly appreciate just how precise the input needs to be for any given artifact, let alone using more than one at once.”

“I’ve been practicing since I was a child,” The Artificer said dismissively.

“Be that as it may, it’s an impressive feat worthy of praise.” When The Artificer just shrugged and placed the runes against the wall, Haakon decided to let it go, despite his curiosity as to how his companion was able to pull it off.

The journey was made in relative silence for a while after that, the echoes of their footfalls the only thing keeping them company. A half hour passed by as they slowly made their way through the cave, stopping at every junction for The Artificer to figure out the right path, until the silence was abruptly broken by a deafening crash that shook the tunnel like an earthquake. The Artificer hit the ground hard, but Haakon remained standing, springing into action before his companion finished falling.

Swift and sure, a thousand years of practice guiding his actions, Haakon lashed out with Refsing, pouring his aura into the enchanted weapon. He deftly smashed and swatted away any rocks that were aiming to crush them, and gave them a wide berth from the rest of the rubble.

Whatever caused the cave to shake lasted for only a few seconds, but bits of debris continued to rain down on them for several seconds after, leaving both the path forward, and the way they came from, obscured. Once everything settled Haakon focused his vision outwards, checking the tunnel behind them and the two ahead to see what had happened, but there was too much dust in the air for him to get a clear picture. He was worried they might have been buried in, but from what he *could* see, he didn’t think the cave had actually collapsed.

“Are you alright?” Haakon asked, wiping dust and tiny bits of rock from his beard.

The answer the warrior got was a series of hacking coughs as The Artificer hastily sifted through his enchanted leather bag until he pulled out what looked like a sheet of loose cloth. Haakon watched as The Artificer poured aura into the cloth, which first went rigid, then began to reshape, until it no longer looked like cloth but instead a blank, canvas mask. Several dark, arching lines, minuscule writing,

and geometric patterns etched into the mask when he put it on, which clung to his face without a strap. He took a number of wheezing breaths, before he stood and finally answered Haakon's question.

"Yeah, but I'm really going to need to get my lungs checked after this."

4.

It was almost immediately obvious that something had changed. After Haakon cleared some of the larger debris, Robbie stood, rune stones at hand and placed flat against the wall and became aware of magic that hadn't been there before. There was a heavy concentration of magic ahead on the path to their left, a trap, he felt sure, though he couldn't tell what it was, but the path to their right had *something* waiting for them, a large number of somethings. He looked down at the stuffed animal, worried how this would affect the artifact. Sure enough, it took twice as long for Robbie to decide which tunnel to take.

"Careful, there's definitely some sort of trap ahead," Robbie warned after finally choosing one of the tunnels.

As they walked Robbie pulled three new artifacts out of his bag, a glass mirror in a gold and silver case, embroidered with a looping Celtic knot, a foot tall wooden cylinder, and a rusted, bronze-age knife. Both the mirror and the cylinder were clearly old but still looked pristine and cared for. The knife, on the other hand, looked every bit its three-thousand plus years. Robbie held the knife and the wood cylinder in one hand, and held out the mirror in the other, so that the metal case was facing him, and let his aura flow into it until he felt the magic become active.

The path they were on curved up and around at a wide bend. As the path began to curve back, the mirror began emanating a blue light that pulsed, slowly at first, but grew quicker with each step they took, until the strobing light turned the cave into a nightclub.

“Alright, stay where you are,” Robbie warned, “I’m not sure what we’re dealing with yet, but we’ll set it off if we go any further.” He took a few steps back and asked Haakon to hold the mirror, which stopped pulsing the moment Robbie ceased contact with it. There was too much magic in the air for him to see the trap himself, but now that he knew where it was, he was able to feel it out, and when he closed his eyes, he could almost see the wisps of magic that rose from the ground. For a minute The Artificer tried to make sense of what he was feeling, until he realized a similar patch of magic was dripping down from the cavern ceiling, like ethereal stalactites. ‘*Really?*’ Piecing together what the trap was, Robbie couldn’t help but chuckle.

“What is it?”

Instead of answering his question directly, Robbie asked, “You play a lot of videogames?”

“Afraid not.”

“You watch a lot of movies?”

“I’ve been known to frequent the cinema over the century.”

“Ever see Raiders of the Lost Ark?”

The skeleton ran his hand through his beard for a moment before he too started to chuckle. “Ah, I see.”

“You got it. I bet it’s something meant to roll after us, if it doesn’t flatten us when it drops down.”

“Well, whatever it is, it looks like I finally get to see the work that made you famous.”

“Yeah, don’t hold your breath. Uh. Sorry. Anyways, it’s not very exciting to watch.”

Though the magic was newer and stronger than he was used to, the spell’s *pattern* was simple, something he had seen dozens of times before. For the first time since the witch entered The Coda, Robbie felt confident in what he needed to

do. He sat down and placed a hunk of black tourmaline, the size of his fist, just short of where the trap would become active. With the tourmaline carefully set, he placed four rune stones on the ground in front of him, then took the wood cylinder, which was carved to look like it was woven together, with four holes to let air pass through, and set it in the center of the rune stones. Last, he took the bronze knife and closed his eyes, pouring aura into the artifact while he conjured an image of a swirling golden sphere in his mind. The magic stored in the ancient knife started to seep out towards the trap, growing in strength as it passed over the rune stones. When the knife's magic came into contact with the trap, the image of a new silver sphere conjured in his mind and grew in size, representing the strength of the magic, dwarfing the gold sphere like an elephant standing next to a baby. The actual magic at play was like a dark smoke, which was billowing out from the knife, that was trying to overtake the colorful light of the trap, but that wasn't always the case, so he'd learned to envision the orbs to help guide what he needed to do, regardless of the magic he was trying to take down. Last, he pictured a series of dials, adjusting them depending on how much aura was flowing into the artifact, and how much magic was being used and where, which then made changes to the gold sphere.

He had to be careful as he made adjustments, as anything too drastic could cause the magic in the artifacts to sputter out, or worse, set off the trap. In order to dispel the magic, he had to adjust the magic in the knife with the magic in the ornate cylinder to match the traps exactly. With any kind of trap, or other magic he had to dispel, he first had to find the general frequency of the magics energy, and carefully fine tune it from there. Because this magic was as strong as it was, the range of the frequency was vast, and since the process required him to maintain control of the magic, and the steady supply of energy to all the artifacts involved, Robbie was being pushed to his limits, despite appearing like he was just sitting there, holding out a knife to the darkness beyond.

Slowly the gold sphere grew as he dialed in on the spell's wavelength, growing from a baby next to an elephant, to a full-grown adult, while the brown gold turned into a sleek metallic gold with hints of wispy silver. As he worked, Robbie started to sweat, and a headache began to form, throbbing and pounding

against his skull and the back of his eyes. Partly from the exertion of will, but mostly the pain came because the trap's magic was trying to resist, which felt like a giant hand was squeezing his head. Some magic fought back harder than others, but he felt sure this was more pushback than he had ever gotten from a simple trap. Worse, he knew that if not for the black tourmaline, which softened the magic coming back at him from the trap, he would have already tapped out.

When the two spheres in his mind's eye finally matched in size and color, both the bronze knife and the wooden cylinder started to glow. Relief washed over him, replacing the intense pressure that was starting to fade. His work wasn't done, but now that both the traps and the knife's magic were in sync, the trap's magic no longer fought back. With one hand on the knife and the other on the cylinder, he watched the two spheres start to meld together. Once the two spheres became one, Robbie raised the knife higher and slashed the air, feeling a wave of magic spring forth and strike the trap. In his mind's eye he saw the sphere darken to a stormy grey before it burst, the trap's magic dispelled.

Still glowing, but no longer from magic, Robbie let the red-hot knife clatter to the ground and wiped the sweat from around the sides of the mask before he stood and turned to look at Haakon. "Told you. Not very exciting to watch."

5.

"This looks relatively new for an artifact," Haakon remarked when he gave the mirror back to The Artificer.

"It is," The Artificer replied, breathing heavily, "Besides a sixteenth century pocket watch, it's the *newest* one I brought, as far as when it was created. If you're talking to a collector or appraiser, they probably wouldn't consider it an artifact at all, but, like your axes, it functions just the same as any artifact. I got a few "non-artifact" artifacts, all of them made after the twelfth or thirteenth century."

It was obvious that the task of taking down the trap had been taxing, so Haakon suggested they take a minute to rest, but The Artificer insisted he was fine, and that they carry on to the next junction.

Like at the last junction, The Artificer struggled to pick the right way forward. Haakon could feel the creatures down one of the two paths, some even appeared on the cusps of his vision. From what he could tell they were the same kind of creatures they fought on the floors below. *'I wonder if they are the same creatures.'* A strong part of him hoped that this was the path they would take next, but when at last The Artificer made a choice, he pointed towards the other one. Like before, The Artificer led with the mirror held out, coming to a stop when the light coming from it became rapid to the point of hypnotic.

Here they found a litter of small holes peppering the walls, halfway down the path. Nothing was in them from what he could tell, but he felt sure there would be if the trap activated.

Haakon stood by and absently cleaned the gore from Sársauki while he watched The Artificer get to work. He was trying to remain ambivalent, but it was getting hard not to let the worry he felt show. He had thought he had known what to expect from this endeavor, but the domain's creator was displaying a level of control beyond anything they had anticipated. *'If we ever make it out of these cursed tunnels and to the girl, I'm going to have to strike quick, and use the artifact Madame Lenoir gave me to get things under control.'*

The ancient bronze knife needed at least a few minutes still before it could be used again, so while they waited, Robbie pulled out four more rune stones, copies of the ones he was already using, and an oxhorn war horn. The last trap had taken more out of him than he cared to admit, so he hoped the extra boost from the additional runes, with the addition of the horn, would make it easier, even if using all those artifacts was going to be greatly taxing.

Seeing the sleek horn, and hearing its deep call, sent a wave of nostalgia through Haakon, greater than any he'd experienced in several centuries. The first time The Artificer blew the horn, Haakon was momentarily brought back to the battlefields of yore, and he felt the pure rush of battle from when he was alive, bringing a nonexistent tear to the corners of his eyes.

Robbie still pictured the spheres as he worked, but now, he had to time blasts from the horn with his tuning, in order to weaken the magic. The entire process took half the time but still left him red in the face and drenched with sweat.

When the trap was disarmed, Haakon insisted they rest again, and this time Robbie obliged. "Don't push yourself too hard. If you die, I could be stuck in here for a long time."

While they rested, the tunnel started to shake, not as violently as it had either time before, and both of them managed to stay on their feet. Still, the pair was wary as they approached the next set of branching paths. Once again, they took the path that a trap had been set up. Like the tunnel of the first trap, this one curved out and around at a steady incline, with a trap meant to crush them should they set it off. Once the magic was dispelled, they took a couple more minutes for Robbie to rest before they continued.

They only managed to take a dozen steps, before there was a loud, *click*, and the floor beneath them sank a few inches into the ground. Before the sounds of sliding rock filled the tunnel, Robbie had a moment to curse his obvious mistake. He turned and ran, shouting for Haakon to do the same, but the skeleton ignored this warning, instead staring curiously as the ceiling slid back, and a massive stone boulder slid out of the opening and started to roll towards them.

The moment the massive hunk of rock hit the ground Haakon also took off at a sprint. As he started to overtake The Artificer, he realized the boulder was going to crush his companion before he could make it out of the tunnel. Running ahead, he unstrapped Refsing and began pouring his will into it. The runes on the blade

came alive, bathing the tunnel in a brilliant celestial light. He came to an abrupt stop and pivoted on his heels, and hurled Refsing at the boulder as The Artificer passed by. A thunderous roar shook the cave and tiny pieces of the boulder scattered in every direction.

A hunk of rock, too small to do any real damage, hit The Artificer square in the back and sent him toppling over. After several seconds Haakon started to laugh when he noticed the man lying there, hands over his head as if that would protect him from the boulder. He started laughing even harder as he watched his companion slowly stand, and stare apprehensively down the tunnel.

“It’s really not that funny,” The Artificer complained after a minute.

“It is a little,” Haakon said, still laughing.

Almost two hours later, they had made it through nine more tunnels, two of which were dead ends that they had to double back through. Four had traps that The Artificer first had to disable, before they jumped over a paneled switch in the ground, but the other three had been filled with creatures, and Haakon gladly ran ahead to clear them out. When the tenth tunnel they chose was another one that was trap laden, some of the creatures in the adjacent tunnel became bored or were otherwise given orders to attack, because they left their tunnel and came after them while The Artificer was busy disabling the trap. Not wanting to disturb him and not wanting to let the creatures get too close, Haakon slunk away to cut off their advance.

Still carrying the mirror artifact, Haakon unstrapped Sársauki as four of the lion-faced monks came into view. He tried to put the mirror into his pocket, but it was too big, and he didn’t dare set it down to accidentally be stepped on. “I do enjoy a challenge.” He laughed as he darted forward and cut off the arm of the nearest monk before it could finish drawing his sword. The other monks reacted much quicker, one stepped out of the range of Haakon’s next attack while the others came at him from either side, attacking at the same time, forcing Haakon to back away. The two monks tried to follow up their attacks, but he moved around

the one and batted away the other. Too slow to recover, Haakon made quick work of both monks and made for the remaining uninjured one, keeping low and cleaving said monk clean at the knees. It fell and roared with pain, adding to the cries of the one-armed monk. The pained chorus was abruptly cut short as Haakon put both of them out of their misery, but it was immediately replaced by the rush of scurrying footsteps as dozens of spiders came hurrying at him. Inside Haakon grinned as he strapped Sársauki to his side and unstrapped Refsing.

6.

The Artificer removed the mask for a moment, in order to glare at the skeleton when he handed him the mirror artifact, which was almost entirely caked in blood. “You realize that if this doesn’t work now we’re screwed?”

“If that is the case, I will go through the tunnels first and set off the traps.”

The Artificer rubbed at his tired eyes and shook his head and turned without another word. To both of their relief the artifact continued to work, although the light was greatly muted from the blood, and Haakon made sure to set it down next to Robbie before he slipped away to take care of the next wave of monsters that were shambling after them.

Forty minutes and three more tunnels later, The Artificer made an announcement that surprised Haakon, who was really starting to believe they were being kept in some kind of loop.

“This is the last tunnel.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s hard to explain. Part of it is how quickly the tracking coin is reacting, but it also feels different from the other tunnels.”

“Are you sure?” It was clear from his reaction that he wasn’t, at least not entirely, but Haakon couldn’t help but feel a ray of hope.

Chapter 15. A Rock and A Hard Place

1.

The final tunnel was too narrow to bear torches, so after just a minute what little light they got from behind them was gone and they were plunged into total darkness.

“I don’t suppose you have something in that bag of yours to create light?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Robbie answered, already rooting through his bag, a pandering indignation in his voice. “There we go.” Robbie flicked on the industrial sized flashlight, whose concentrated beam of light sliced through the engulfing dark. He turned to look at Haakon, who somehow managed to stare back even more blank faced than usual, which made Robbie grin wide at the skeleton’s disappointment. “What? I use regular tools as well.”

They continued on and on, longer than either expected, until at last a dim light appeared in the distance, that steadily grew brighter until their path widened and opened onto a large and round, high ceiling cavern. Dozens of torches lined the cavern walls, bathing the room in a warm orange haze.

In the center of the cavern was a massive boulder, rough and jagged, and large enough to tower over them. The boulder was shades of earthy browns and reds, and was imbedded with two deep, perfectly symmetrical, half circle cuts on either side. Two words were written across the surface with a dark oily paint that cascaded color where the torch light reflected off it. While he did not know what they said, Robbie recognized the writing as Japanese *kanji*. Something about the scene that lay before him left Robbie feeling unnerved. As soon as he stepped into

the cavern and laid eyes on the peculiar boulder, Robbie was hit with a strong sense of recognition, like he had when he saw some of the creatures on the previous floors. It took him a few seconds to figure out why it looked familiar, and when he did, he was left feeling even more confused, and a little unsure of himself.

“Haakon, wait!” The skeleton man had kept walking and was nearly close enough to the boulder to reach out and touch it. Without looking, Haakon reversed his approach just before a low grumble bellowed from the boulder. A second later the sound of shifting rocks filled the room, amplified as it echoed off the cavern walls, and the boulder stood up on two large but stubby legs, and started to unfold, stretching its massive arms, and revealing a round, flat face on a large, wide neck. When it finished stretching the creature fixed the pair with its cold, yellow eyes, and let out a laugh that sounded like two rocks being slammed together.

Robbie watched with a confused mix of horror and amazement as the creature turned and reached into a wide divot in the wall and pulled out a rigid, serrated steel blade, just as Robbie thought he would. “How is this possible?”

“You know this creature?”

“In a sense. Though I don’t know how it’s here.”

“It’s likely just a construct, like the others. The domain’s master must have seen this creature before too.”

“I know. That’s what’s confusing me. Same with those lion-faced monks, and some of the others. I wondered why they looked familiar, but I couldn’t place it until now.”

The massive rocky creature, who Robbie believed was called either *Gōremu* or *Gōrema*, raised the hunk of serrated metal over its head, and let out a challenging cry, before taking two ground shaking steps forward and sweeping his weapon down at them with surprising speed. Both Haakon and Robbie scattered, and Robbie was forced to dive forward and roll, as the blade came dangerously close to cleaving him in two. The metal weapon instead found the cavern walls, cutting out a chunk of stone, and raining sparks down onto Robbie. Cursing, Robbie hopped back up on his feet, while in the same motion pulling the amulet

from his pocket and sent a jet of fire at the creature's face. The flames found their mark, but the creature appeared completely unaffected. Haakon tried to take advantage of the creature's distraction and brought his gemstone axe crashing down onto its back, but all it did was cause the creature to stagger forward.

"Any idea how to defeat this thing?" Haakon asked as he moved to the side, narrowly avoiding Gōremu's weapon as it brought the blade arcing down from up high, leaving a large divot in the stone floor.

"Maybe, but I don't know if it will have the same weaknesses, and even if it does, I don't know how much it will help."

"Try me!"

In the game *Avalon's Fall*, players can find an optional boss in a cavern near the starting area that will only open after you cross the midway point in the story. The boss in question, Gōremu, had grown infamous online for being a particularly hard fight, in a game that already prided itself on being challenging. The trick to defeating the boss was to pick up and complete an optional quest, before the cavern opens, in order to receive an amulet that greatly weakens Gōremu once the fight begins. Failing to complete this quest meant a long and drawn-out fight, where the player is forced to constantly dodge while spamming de-buffs and taking advantage of the creature's minimal weakness to water magic.

"You know water magic?"

"Not at all."

"Can you cast de-buffs?"

"Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"I guess not."

As they spoke the pair was forced to duck and dodge out of the way of Gōremu's nearly continual onslaught. The creature kept on top of them while swinging the massive weapon side to side until it struck the wall, and staggered back a few steps, then turned on its heel and brought the weapon down in a high,

arcing swing, that shook the cave when it landed and would have dealt damage if they were in the game. It then singled out one of them and launched itself forward with enough momentum to embed the blade in the wall. For a few seconds, the creature struggled to pull its blade out, which in the game was when players were supposed to slip in and attack. Robbie had never gotten to that fight in the game, having gotten stuck on a boss prior to the encounter, but he had eventually watched a playthrough to see the rest of it, and he recognized Gōremu's pattern of attacks.

“Unless we interrupt it, it's going to keep attacking in the same pattern until we've done a certain amount of damage to it.”

“Then what happens?”

“Then, well, umm. Then it's going to get a whole lot worse, I think.” Like many of the bosses in Avalon's Fall, Gōremu had a second stage once you got its health bar to the halfway point, at which time all its stats get boosted, particularly its speed, and it grabs a second weapon from a crevasse within the cavern walls. Robbie hastily explained this to Haakon, and both men reached the same conclusion at the same time.

They were going to have to make a run for the exit.

With a quick look around the cavern, Robbie spotted the familiar gray metal door that should lead to the stairs. It nearly blended into the walls and Robbie knew the only reason he spotted it so quickly was because it was the only flat surface in the cave, besides the floors. Robbie had waited for Gōremu's attack cycle to finish, with its weapon embedded into the wall, before shouting, “This way!” and ran for the door. He was hoping to use the three to four second pause to clear the room and make a clean escape, but as soon as the two of them started running toward the door, the creature roared and leapt across the cavern, forcing them to scatter in different directions.

Before Robbie even had a chance to turn and see how close Gōremu was, the sound of sliding rocks caught his attention, and he watched in horror as the exit was swallowed up by the cavern wall.

“Don't just stand there! Move!”

Robbie heard Haakon's cry of alarm, but, distracted, reacted too slowly to get out of the way of the massive fist hurtling toward him.

2.

Haakon raced to where The Artificer lay, sure the man was dead, his insides turned to soup from the impact of the blow. To both his surprise and relief the man was alive and breathing, albeit alive and gasping was a little more accurate. The air had been violently knocked from his lungs once more, and the artifact mask lay in pieces, but already he was starting to stir. An inexplicit haze hung around him, filling the air with a heated charge. In that moment, despite the magic keeping out non-humans, Haakon no longer felt sure The Artificer was human. *'I don't care how long he's been practicing Rae'Hal. What he just did should be impossible.'*

The aura manipulation art had originally been developed by the Sidhe, who were said to have full control of every aspect of their being. With this technique many of the more powerful denizens of Saljarheim could manifest their aura to use as a shield or weapon, but humanities ability to learn Rae'Hal was only as a means to perceive aura's, and to manipulate the flow of their life energy. Yet, Haakon had just felt The Artificer's aura bloom, and swore he felt it wrap him in a cocoon as he hit the wall. He too could manifest his aura beyond himself for defense, but it had not been possible until after his death, and with centuries of practice. Curious as he was, Haakon filed it all away and put it to the side for now. They were far from out of danger.

"You are a lot more resilient than I would have thought Mr. Parker," Haakon remarked, as he cautiously watched the large stone creature cross the cavern to retrieve its weapon. He held out a bony hand for The Artificer, who took it and stood, still fighting to get his breathing under control.

Haakon felt sure others would find him weird if he were to admit that there were days when he missed breathing, after all, it was something that one rarely thought about, except for when it was hard to do, but it was something he found

himself longing for more and more as the years went by. The unconscious constant to the living was something he now looked back on as a luxury. He missed the sensation of the crisp, cool morning air filling his lungs when he would step out of his stuffy hut during the early days of spring and the late days of autumn. Today was not one of those days.

The stone creature came charging at them, weapon swinging dangerously back and forth. Haakon was forced to drop Sársauki and half pull, half carry the dazed man out of the way.

“I-I’m good,” The Artificer managed to puff out once they were out of range of the creature’s next attack.

To Haakon the man seemed to be off balance still as he tried to remove another artifact from his leather bag, but he was forced to trust his companion’s judgment as the creature leapt at them and the pair were once again forced to move in opposite directions. True to his word, The Artificer managed to stay in one piece as the creature turned its next barrage of attacks in his direction. Haakon took his chance to retrieve Sársauki before lunging at the living rock. His attack did little damage, but it succeeded in pulling its attention off The Artificer. Instead of avoiding Gōremu’s next attack, Haakon poured his aura into both blades and tried to deflect it, but the moment the blades made contact he knew it was a futile effort and was launched across the cavern.

The Artificer had been trying to get something out of his leather bag while the creature’s attention had been on Haakon, but the exchange was too quick and the creature turned and lashed out with the back of its closed fist, forcing The Artificer to dive out of the way, and caused him to drop the enchanted bag. Gōremu reached out to pick The Artificer up off the ground, but Haakon came rushing in and batted away the creature’s massive arm and followed it up with a series of attacks that did little more than irritate the rock monster.

As far as he could tell, none of the blows from either axe had done much damage, if any. Refsing made it stagger if he put enough strength behind it, but little more, and Sársauki simply glanced off of its body in an explosion of sparks. The flames from The Artificer’s amulet were equally useless against the creature,

and Haakon had no idea if his companion had anything heavier hitting. Usually, Haakon liked being the heavy hitter, but he didn't think slipping into his Asha-Hadad state would make a difference, nor would either of the others, and he was hoping not to display any more of what he could do just yet. The way he saw it, it was better to let the enemy think he only has the one trick up his sleeve and struggle his way through this, so that he could surprise them at the end, but this creature was going to pose too much of a problem if they kept going at it this way. *'This is bad. The Artificer is sure to run out of stamina soon, and I don't like my chances of getting to the girl without him. Assuming the only way we can move forward is to defeat this creature, I'm really only left with one option.'*

"How long do you think you can keep this thing distracted? I have an idea, but it will take me a minute to prepare."

"Then I'll give you a minute," The Artificer replied, trying to sound more confident than he felt. He took out three rune stones and gripped them tightly in one hand, then pulled another firestone from his pocket and rapidly poured aura into it, before hurling it at the charging creature's face. The stone exploded with a concussive roar and a cloud of fire that forced The Artificer to back away. The flames still did nothing to the creature, but the force of the explosion caused it to rear back and roar with anger. Haakon took the chance to slip out of sight while The Artificer quickly scooped up the enchanted bag and got ready to draw Gōremu's ire.

3.

The aqua blue waterstone could not create water like how the firestone could create fire, but it could pull the moisture from the air and allowed Robbie to manipulate it. In the game, Gōremu took the most damage from the game's various water-based spells, but Robbie quickly realized this trait either had not carried over, or else the baseball size balls of water weren't magically charged enough, because the creature continued at him unabated. He thought that if he could gather

more water at once it might do something, but there wasn't enough moisture in the air, and Gōremu wasn't giving him much time to react. Only with the careful use of runes stones was he able to avoid being cut in two, or smashed into paste, and keep the constructs attention.

A fragment of a memory broke through Robbie's concentration, nearly costing him his head, of a day he hadn't thought of in many years. It was from another time that someone told him they needed a minute while in the throes of battle, although that situation hadn't been as dire, and Marco had been trying to set an explosive so they couldn't be followed. At the time Robbie had also had a waterstone at hand and it gave him an idea of what to do now.

Changing tactics, Robbie shot off a few spouts of water at Gōremu's legs, then froze all the water dripping from its body. The creature stumbled forward, a layer of ice covering most of its body, but it managed to keep upright, using its massive blade as leverage.

"Oh c'mon!" Robbie tried to freeze Gōremu in place, but all he managed to do was slow it down, the air was too dry from all the torches. *'Damn. I really hope you got this Haakon, because the only other thing I got is just as dangerous for the two of us.'*

4.

With the creature's focus on The Artificer, Haakon began pouring power into his blades, the runes going from their usual hue to a smokey green, humming audibly with the stored magics. He wanted to pour enough aura into the blades to finish Gōremu off with just a few hits, a tall order, but one he thought was possible. The problem was that the cavern was only so big, so while The Artificer did his best to keep the creature's attention on himself, Gōremu's frantic attacks made it impossible for Haakon to stay in one spot, dividing his attention and slowing the process down. He hated sitting back and waiting and had to force himself to stay his hand when several swings from the creature's blade came dangerously close to

taking The Artificer's head or splitting him down the middle. To his credit his companion was fast, unusually fast, and agile, always managing to get out of the way at the last moment.

'Gods. He's using the runes on himself like a Joten.'

For nearly thirty seconds Haakon cautiously stayed out of reach and anxiously watched as The Artificer narrowly avoided death with nearly every swing of Gōremu's blade.

When The Artificer tried to freeze the construct Haakon's twin axes were not yet fully charged, but he was unable to wait any longer. Blades crackling with stored energy, he let them transform with hard-light and dashed forward, letting out a bloodthirsty battle cry that succeeded in getting the half-frozen creature's attention. He leapt over a swipe of Gōremu's massive blade and brought Sársauki down to sever one of the creature's arms. The stored magic in the axe had enveloped the blade with tangible green light that grew until the blade was big enough to cleave the creature's arm with one swift motion. Gōremu roared with pain and tried to back away, but Haakon moved quickly and swung a charged up Refsing, whose hard light coating took the shape of a Viking war hammer, the two-handed maul, and hit the creature with enough force to cause cracks to splinter all along its stony skin, and sent it careening into the cavern wall with enough impact to shatter stone and shake the entire cavern around them.

Small bits of rubble began to fall down from the ceiling, not enough to warrant action, but enough to give Haakon a moment's pause, worried he'd overdone it. If this room caved in, he may be stuck in this domain for a long time. It was an experience he did not wish to repeat.

If it had been a living creature, and not a construct, Haakon thought that he would have felt bad as he watched the stoney creature's pathetic attempts to stand, but as it was, he moved towards it without remorse. Still channeling power into the weapons, Haakon brought Gōremu's pained cry to an end with two swift motions that gouged a large X into the creature's core.

Keeping in mind what The Artificer said about Gōremu getting stronger after taking enough damage, Haakon brought a charged up Refsing down hard upon its remains, over and over, until it was little more than a pile of rubble, and he felt sure it wasn't going to get back up.

“Maybe it doesn't get a second stage since you hit it with the overkill,” The Artificer suggested as he approached from across the cavern.

“Hmm.” While he knew his companion meant it as a jest, his words struck a nonexistent nerve. What he'd done *was* overkill. He had given into his bloodlust and had hardly hesitated to give those watching a glimpse at his true strength. *‘Damn it. Had that really been the only option? Perhaps. I need to stay focused before I give anything else away.’*

The rumble of sliding rock pulled Haakon from his thoughts, and he watched as a section of the back wall slid away to unveil the familiar metal door.

Silent relief ran through the two of them, and they crossed the room without a word, and stepped into the stairwell. Only instead of the next set of stairs, they came upon a sliding metal door where the stairs should have been. It opened with a mechanical, *ding*, as they approached, filling the small, quiet space with a soft piano chorus and dim fluorescent light, washing away what little relief they had just gained.

“Nope!” The Artificer said emphatically, placing one hand on his hip and running the other through his singed and disheveled hair, “There is no way in hell I'm getting in a magical elevator.”

As if in response to his words, stone slid into place over the entrance.

Haakon chuckled, “Looks like you are.”

Chapter 16. The Past Unburied

1.

Maria resisted the urge to pull out her phone to check the time, not wanting to know that only a minute or two had passed since she last checked. Hospitals, and doctors' offices of any kind, were always hard on her extra sense. The longer they spent in the waiting room, the more she was filled with a sense of dread, and gnawing anxiety, which was being compounded by Greg's impatient pacing, and constant irritated glances at the woman behind the check-in desk. It had been clear she didn't believe a word of Greg's manic oversharing; it radiated from her almost as strongly as the paranoia radiating off him. Maria was sure it hadn't helped that she couldn't bring herself to meet the woman's searching eyes when she had looked over Greg's shoulder, mid-ramble, the disbelief clear on her face.

More than once, Maria tried to get her husband to sit down without drawing even more attention from the others in the waiting room, but her whispered pleas either went unheard or ignored.

"Greg, please!" Maria whispered harshly and reached out and clasped both hands around Greg's wrist and pulled lightly, forcing him to turn his attention to her. "Sit down. I'm sure we're next."

"That's not the point" Greg pulled his arm out of Maria's grasp, "I doubt any of these people are having a real emergency. What if whatever they drugged you with is fading from your system as we sit here waiting?" He turned to glare at the woman at the front desk, but she was actively avoiding looking in their direction.

"I'm sure -," Maria paused, a frown pulling at her lips. Looking into her husband's beat, tired eyes she couldn't help but wonder how much sleep he'd gotten lately. She reached out and took his hand again, giving it a gentle squeeze until he looked at her. "You look exhausted. Please, take a seat. You're not going to do anyone any good if you run yourself into the ground."

The callous look he gave her made her want to look away, but she met his eyes as he glared at her, staying calm, but firm, until his features started to soften. "Yeah, I suppose you're right."

Greg sat down, and started to rub at his bruised, tired eyes, when a nurse stepped into the waiting room and called for them to come back.

Internally Maria groaned as she and Greg stood, annoyed, but unsurprised by the nurses timing.

They were taken back to a small exam room, and the nurse quickly skimmed through Maria's paperwork, eyes growing wide when she got to the reason why they were there. She snuck a glance over the top of the clipboard before quickly looking back at the paper. Maria felt mortified by whatever must be written there, but to her credit, and much to Maria's relief, the nurse gave no other indication of her surprise, or her thoughts on why the couple was there. Maria was sure that Greg would have jumped down the poor woman's throat if she had said anything regarding their visit.

With a number of tiny vials filled, Greg and Maria left and had their third silent car ride in less than eight hours. As she sat there, drowning in a mix of Greg's mania and her own tired and confused emotions, Maria tried desperately to think of something, anything, to say. Something to break the deafening silence, then, hopefully, find a way to bridge the gap she felt between them, but she continued to come up short, so the silence remained.

Once they were home, Maria asked Greg if he was hungry, still searching for a way to keep the distance from growing, but he only stared at her from across the living room, bearing into her with a heated, hateful gaze.

"Did you hear me?" Maria asked timidly.

For several seconds Greg just continued to stare, while all that he was feeling was festering into a toxic stew in his mind, giving Maria a sense of revulsion that filled the room like poisonous gas. "Who was he?"

"The man I met in New York? I told you; I only ever learned his name."

"No. Not him. Amber's *real* father."

Internally Maria recoiled at Greg's words like they'd been a punch to the gut. "What? Where is this coming from?"

“Answer the question! You told me you couldn’t have kids, but you ended up pregnant right around the time you stayed with your sister. Then, ten years later, the whore baby you tricked me into raising starts doing all sorts of -.”

Without thinking, Maria marched across the room and slapped Greg across the face, leaving a bright red mark in its wake. “Say whatever you want about me, but you will not speak about Amber that way.” Before she even finished speaking, she was already beginning to regret what she’d just done. What she felt coming from him was an anger so pure, it made her want to run. She took a few steps back, trying to get out of reach, but he moved faster than she expected, and clamped one hand around her wrist, while the other harshly cupped the side of her face. Before he could speak, or do anything else, Maria shoved him as hard as she could with her free hand. He stumbled backwards and hit the ground, nearly pulling Maria down with him, but she managed to get her wrist free. “Damn it Greg you need to calm down! Look, I’m sorry I slapped you, that wasn’t okay, but what you said was also out of line. So why don’t we both just try to *relax*.”

Hesitantly, Maria held out a hand to help Greg up, who took it, but continued to glare at her as he stood. The moment they made contact something deep inside Maria’s mind stirred. A sensation she had not felt in almost a decade sent a warm ripple through her body, before culminating into her palm, and seeping into Greg. The burning anger inside her husband was quickly smothered, and the hateful look was replaced with a blank stare. At once she knew what she’d done, and for a moment, all she could do was stand there, horrified.

“Greg, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean... I didn’t realize...”

“I’m going to lay down,” Greg said passively, “we can talk about your infidelity later.” Without another word Greg went upstairs, leaving Maria in a mess of tears.

‘How? Why now?’

Amber had still been a baby when she had last used her other “*gift*”. Tired of Greg’s constant complaints and Amber’s constant crying, it started as a one-off instance, a moment of weakness when she felt she’d hit her breaking point, but it

soon became a regular occurrence whenever anything became less than peaceful. It had only stopped when Greg was nearly fired, his job convinced he was on drugs, and he admitted to her that he didn't feel like himself lately and was worried there was something wrong with him. He never put together what was happening, not that he would have ever believed the truth, though there was a point where he questioned if she was drugging him, and it was a stark reminder of what had happened long ago.

This ability had already left her alienated from the rest of her family. She was barely a teenager when Maria realized she could do more than just feel people's emotions. In her eyes she was just making everyone happy whenever they were sad, or angry, or scared, or felt anything that darkened the air around them, but they didn't see it that way. Now the only person in her immediate family who still talked to her was her oldest sister Gabby, who took Maria in when their parents tried to abandon her. She was the only one who didn't see Maria as a freak or a monster, but simply as a child with a special gift, who didn't know better and had made a mistake. She knew better now, as she had known better when she had done it when Amber was still a baby.

For a while Maria just stood there, angry at all her actions, both now and long ago, that led her to this moment.

2.

Colorado, 2014

At her sister Gabby's suggestion, Maria had come and stayed with her for a week, while she and Greg figured out what they wanted. Things had been rough between the two of them in the months before Maria got pregnant with Amber. They were fighting often, and the most recent fight had been bad enough that

Maria had thought it was over for them. Even without her sixth sense she knew he was thinking about leaving her, and that was before their latest fight. He was ready to settle down, and that scared her. She loved him, and enjoyed being with him, but she wasn't sure if she saw herself spending the rest of her life with him. They had been dancing around the subject for months already when Greg dropped a bombshell into the mix. Until then she thought she was coming around to the idea of marriage, and he must have gotten that feeling from her, because one night, after things started looking up in their relationship, he sat her down and told her that kids were a must. The fact that he wanted kids wasn't a surprise. They'd been dating for almost two years at that point, and, while they'd never discussed it in any serious terms, Greg had said on a couple occasions that he saw himself having kids someday, and had dropped more than a few not-so-subtle hints that he thought that she would be a good mother, but he had never gone so far as to say it was a deal breaker. The problem was, as far as Maria was aware, she couldn't have kids. A cyst, and a poorly handled surgery when she was a teenager had damaged her uterus, and she had been told by more than one doctor that she wasn't likely to ever have children of her own. Even after all that time it was hard for her to talk about, and it was a subject she had never been able to broach with him. When she finally told him, he took it as a betrayal of trust that she waited so long.

After two days of watching romantic comedies, and eating junk food on her sister's couch, Gabby talked Maria into going out to the bar to try and take her mind off of her relationship problems. She had reluctantly agreed, after her sister promised that the bar was small, and there wouldn't be many people there, not letting Maria use her extra sense as an excuse. Things were pretty quiet for the first couple of hours, and Maria had to admit that it felt nice to get out and relax. Looking back on it now, Maria wondered, if the night had ended there, would she still be where she ended up? Would she and Greg have stayed together? She wasn't so sure. But the night had not ended there, for her that night had only just begun when a strange man walked into the bar, blasting Maria with a sense of wild and powerful emotions, different than anything she had ever felt. At the time, she told herself it was just because of the drinks, but deep down she knew better. For almost

a decade since, Maria had convinced herself that what happened after that had only been a dream. Gabby had no memory of the strange man when Maria asked her about him the next day, and the dreamy surreal nature of her memories made it easy to lie to herself.

Things between her and Greg remained rocky when she returned home, a part of her had been surprised to find him still in the apartment the day she got back. For days he found different ways to ask her about what she had done while she was away, trying to dance around the question he really wanted to ask, until finally he couldn't take it anymore and came out and asked, plain as day, "*Did you sleep with anybody while you were at your sister's?*" She told him she hadn't, trying to convince herself as much as him, but she knew he didn't believe her, despite what he said. Things between them were at their end, but both of them were too stubborn to be the one to call it quits, and before one of them could finally pull the trigger, Maria found out she was pregnant.

A decade later, their relationship was far from perfect. There were times that she felt that she didn't like him much, but she always loved him, and she never doubted that he loved her, or their daughter. She never once regretted getting married until that moment, standing in her living room, unsure what else to do while tears continued to flow. Now she regretted it more than anything; not because of him, but because of what she had done, what she'd only recently come to accept that she had done, on the night she met the man with the foreign, ethereal emotions. Because of her denial she had trapped Greg, and Amber, in a lie. A lie that she didn't know how to address but knew she must.

3.

Greg lay in bed staring at the ceiling, while tears traced a path down his cheeks and wet the pillow. He hadn't thought he would fall asleep, even though he felt completely exhausted in a way he never realized was possible, but he felt the

inherent need to try to relax. So, he lay in bed for hours, body relaxing while his mind continued its relentless shamble, unable to shut off his brain, and no longer able to ignore the things in his life that he had pushed aside and gotten good at ignoring. He'd done much the same every night since Amber was taken, and with each day, each hour, he felt like his sanity was slipping away from him, until he started to wonder if he really had gone crazy, and if everything strange over the last few months was just made up in his mind. It was almost a comforting thought, but even with his wits and emotions torn thin, he couldn't deny what he'd seen and felt. He had felt the grass on the carpet, had seen the sudden color changes in her hair and clothes. He had nearly thrown out his back trying to drag the neighbors swing set back to their yard and spent almost an hour trying to explain away what happened and convince his neighbor he hadn't been trying to steal it.

'What the hell am I going to do when we get Amber back?' He tried not to acknowledge the answer that came from a quiet voice in the back of his mind, though not as quiet as it once was.

'Why do you care? She's not really your daughter.'

'I don't know that.'

'You do though. You've always known. You should just walk away.'

Greg let out a low, angry groan and smacked the side of his head, trying to dislodge the thoughts, but they just kept coming. Similar thoughts to these had been occurring ever since the strange events started happening around Amber. Since she'd been taken, the thoughts had ramped up, growing more veracious.

'From the moment you laid eyes on her you knew. You knew something was wrong with her, even if you didn't know what. Whoever Maria slept with did this to her.'

'No.'

'You're a cuck. A cuck who raised someone else's freak daughter for over ten years!'

'No.'

'She's a freak. A monster. Maria fucked a monster, and made you raise her.'

'No.'

'Leave. Leave while you still can. There might still be that opening at the Dallas office. You can start over and pretend these last ten years never happened.'

'No!' Greg nearly shouted the word as he sat up suddenly, but he managed to bite it off. *'She is MY daughter.'* Greg's head was in his hands as he desperately tried to silence the intrusive thoughts that were beginning to blend in with his real ones. Paired with the lack of sleep, the parasitic thoughts had left him on an emotional scale that continued to teeter back and forth. *'Amber... Maria... I love you more than the world but... I don't know, I just can't -'*

His maddening contemplations were interrupted when his phone began to vibrate loudly on the nightstand.

4.

The creaking of the wood stairs pulled Maria from her penitent thoughts, and she tried to wipe away any signs she'd been crying before Greg stepped into the living room but only managed to smear tears across her face.

"Are you okay?" Greg asked, with surprising concern.

Maria shrugged and gave him a tired smile, "Not really."

"Yeah, me neither," He returned her tired smile, then motioned at his phone, "Det. Randolph called. He wants us to come down to the station to answer a few questions."

"You mean he wants *me* to answer a few questions."

"Yeah, I suppose so. Sorry. When I spoke to him yesterday, he told me to let him know if you came home, so I messaged him this morning."

“No, it’s okay. This has to happen at some point.” The moment Greg was out of sight Maria closed her eyes and started to shutter. She had no idea what she was going to tell the detective. *‘All I can do is hope he comes to the same conclusions as Greg.’*

Chapter 17. Going Up

1.

Neither Robbie nor Haakon made a move towards the elevator. The dull glow coming from the inside looked ominous in Robbie’s eye’s, and the idea of getting into an elevator being magically controlled made his stomach want to drop from his body and all the way to the ground floor, much like what he assumed the elevator would do.

“There’s no way that doesn’t plummet downward and kill us.”

“Likely,” Haakon agreed, “but I don’t see much other option. Unless you have something in that bag of yours that will let us bypass this elevator, I believe we must move forward.”

Robbie wanted to argue but he knew the skeletal warrior was right. Still, he spent several minutes wracking his brain for some other alternative, even though he knew from the start it was a futile effort. He figured that since the domain didn’t exist within a normal physical space they couldn’t just bust through the floor, but it didn’t stop him from having Haakon try, and when that failed a dozen different ways, Robbie let out a low, drawn-out groan as he finally accepted their fate. “You know, I’ve traveled all over the world, ever since I was a kid. I’ve climbed mountains, dived in underwater caverns, been in places riddled with deadly traps of every manner. I’ve survived being shot at more than a few times, and I once survived being chased by a creature that was the size of a house, with teeth as long

as my arms, that wanted nothing more than to smash and rip me to pieces. All that is to say, I'm going to be incredibly pissed if I go out in an elevator crash."

Before stepping into the elevator Robbie reached into the enchanted bag and removed a large, jagged stone and gripped it tightly. When the doors closed behind them Robbie started pouring aura into the stone and braced himself for the sudden vertigo that would accompany the elevator dropping, but a few seconds later the motor came to life, and the elevator started to climb. The two of them looked at one another, each feeling a mix of surprise and relief. As the elevator climbed, the pair readied themselves for whatever might be waiting for them when the doors opened. Robbie readied the amulet, Haakon his twin axes. Tension radiated off the pair as they waited for the doors to open.

And waited...

And waited...

2.

Time seemed to slow to a glacial pace while they sat there, stuck in a moving elevator that wasn't really moving, even though the gears were turning. Robbie realized it after a couple of minutes, when he pulled out the stuffed cat, and focused in on the magnet-like tug of the artifact, and noticed that they were not actually getting closer, no matter what their senses were telling them. The fight with Gōremu fresh in his mind, Robbie started feeling like he was stuck on a loading screen.

Whatever was going on, they were trapped there and forced to accept their fate.

Perhaps due to his many years of undeath, Haakon was much calmer about the situation than Robbie, sitting stoically in the corner while Robbie kept getting up to pace the few feet of space. At times Robbie found Haakon's calm patients frustrating. He wanted his companion to express some measure of anger or concern

over their situation and would catch himself giving Haakon irritated glances when they first settled into the elevator. As an hour ticked by, and they continued on their endless ride, Robbie once again took a seat in the corner opposite Haakon, feeling he'd had enough time to really think over the past day, and all that had happened.

“So, since we might die in here – *I* might die in here, any chance you want to tell me what's really going on?”

“A bit soon for you to assume we're going to die in here, isn't it?”

“Not really. Sure, it's odd that each floor has had a way out, like someone's actually giving us a chance, so it's possible they might let us continue, but at the same time, whoever's behind this has us trapped *now*. With as much power as they've displayed, they likely can keep this going for a long time. At least until they're ready to move on. Which if it's more than a few days from now I'm pretty screwed.”

“True, but keep in mind, they likely could have kept us down on the first floor. Like you said, there has been a path forward so far.”

“But why? Why have they been letting us progress? And who are *they* anyway? You see, all these questions have been bouncing around in my head ever since we got here, and now I've finally had the chance to piece them together. And you know what I've come up with? You're bullshitting me. I think you know more about what's going on here than either you, or the witch, told me.”

“I'm not sure I'd go so far as to say we duped you, but yes, we know more than what we told you. My mistress was worried you wouldn't take the job if you had all the details.”

“Is that why she put a charm on me when I tried to slip away after we left the bar?”

Haakon's hesitation was enough to answer his question, still, the warrior gave a surprisingly candid answer. “Partially, and because of your reaction she wasn't sure how much the charm took effect, so she was still careful about outright lying to you. She also used the Rae'Hal technique, to keep her aura regulated. My

mistress may not be a particularly powerful witch, but she's smart, and cunning, and is admittedly more capable than she lets on. When you tried to leave after exiting the bar she panicked, and tried to place a charm of influence on you, then played off the sensation as merely an accidental discharge of magic."

'So, everything she did was an act, ' Robbie thought, then said, "That's why she tried again, but with a different charm at the hotel."

"That's right. The first charm was a subtle one. Essentially, it's meant to keep you relaxed, and keep you from thinking too hard, but it never fully took effect, and you caught on before she could finish the charm at the hotel. It threw her for quite the spin, but in the end, she managed to rope you in anyways."

Hearing his suspicions confirmed made Robbie flush red with anger. He attempted to push it aside, but it quickly boiled over before he could put a lid on it. "How dare you! How fucking -,"

"I did not do anything. Nor did I have any say in such matters. Like I said, she panicked when you tried to leave, and with your known propensity for reading auras, she was worried she wouldn't be able to lie to you if something came up that she didn't want you to know," He paused, but when Robbie didn't immediately say anything, he added, "For what it's worth, I was rather upset with her for using it on you."

A strong part of Robbie didn't care that Haakon wasn't the one who had placed the charm on him. The thought of someone trying to control him had him ready to explode, and since Haakon worked for Lenoir, and she wasn't around for him to express his indignation too, he thought the skeleton would be a fine conduit for his wrath. The only thing holding his tongue was a small voice in the back of his head begging him to calm down, but not for the skeleton's sake, or even his own. What made him calm down was a gut-wrenching feeling, one that brought a single word bubbling up to the surface of his mind. *'Elsheriha.'* The thought made his skin writhe, and he had to fight to ignore it. With more than a little effort, Robbie managed to keep his tone controlled while he continued to question Haakon. "I don't get it, why did the witch feel like she needed to lie?"

“There were a couple of reasons. Your reputation for one. You are known to be something of a bleeding heart, particularly when it comes to kids, and my mistress was worried you’d go rogue, or worse, you would try to get others involved. For what I hope are apparent reasons, Madame Lenoir wants to keep young Amber away from the rest of the supernatural world, at least until she’s older and can fend for herself.”

“And that’s easier to do if you only have to tell one person, instead of a whole team of people,” Robbie finished.

“That’s right. Mostly, however, she was worried you wouldn’t take the job if you knew the scale of the players involved.”

A thought occurred that made him want to slam his head in frustration. “Was there even a charm keeping out nonhumans?”

“Actually, yes. Although, admittedly, even if there wasn’t, I doubt Madame Lenoir would have joined us, she’s not one to get her hands dirty if she can help it.”

Gritting his teeth, Robbie took several deep breaths, trying to clear his thoughts, and calm his nerves. It worked, kind of, enough that he felt he could talk without immediately exploding, and he asked the warrior what he meant, and to fill him in on what was really going on.

“Most of what my mistress told you is true,” Haakon began, “For some time now she has kept an ear out for word of any newborn halflings, or those coming into their power, but to no avail. That was until recently, when a rumor began spreading about strong magic being felt in a small Colorado town. Naturally we came straight here after hearing about it, but, as it turns out, we weren’t the only ones looking for her. Several others were on the prowl, all on the behalf of powerful individuals, but a low born demon named Maldrik found her first and hired someone to kidnap her.”

“Low born or not, he must be pretty powerful to do all this,” Robbie said, gesturing at the space around them, “Before today I didn’t think anything like this was actually possible.”

“The domain is not Maldrik’s doing. As a four-horn, he is not particularly powerful when it comes to magic, but he has come to a level of influence over the past few years, rising the ranks to become one of Dudaan’s five merchant lords. It seemed like overnight he went from just a shopkeeper and grifter, to someone with serious political power.”

“Alright, fine, *he* didn’t create this domain, but *someone* had to do it. Someone who’s crazy powerful, I might add.”

“Rumor has it, Maldrik stumbled on a particularly rare treasure a couple years back, and while no one seems to know what exactly that treasure was, it’s largely believed that there were at least a few artifacts of great power and value.”

“That’s fine and all, but the amount of magic required to create a domain could never be stored in an artifact.”

“You’re right, but the power to control someone’s actions can be.”

Robbie blinked slowly, surprised by the shiver that ran down his spine, and took a slow deep breath before responding. “Yeah, it certainly is.” Robbie was silent for several moments as a number of memories rattled around in his mind, each one vying for his attention. When he spoke, he was only partially aware of what he was saying, and only partially listening to Haakon’s response. “If he has someone on his payroll this powerful, what could he want with Amber?”

“Hmm. That likely lies in her legacy. You see, the child’s true father is a sidhe, as you might have guessed. Well, as loathsome as the sidhe are, they’re known to be oddly paternal at times. At least to their offspring that show potential. Maldrik could be planning on using the girl as blackmail.”

Robbie continued to half-heartedly question Haakon for a handful of minutes, but as he sat there, the day’s activities rushed to catch up with him. He felt like every muscle in his body was aching, and as his thoughts grew sluggish, his eyelids became an unbearable weight that came crashing down, crushing conscious thought beneath them.

3.

As he did so many nights, Robbie found himself walking down a familiar tunnel that arced deep below the earth, but this time his usual companions were not with him, leaving him with a foreboding mix of relief and worry. His missing companions weren't the only thing that felt off. It was like something was in the air that shouldn't be there, but he couldn't place it until he emerged from the tunnel onto a familiar location, only it wasn't the one he was expecting. Instead of an open cavern that housed a long-forgotten building, made of marble and granite, whose four corner towers and domed center made it look like both a castle and a temple, he entered a large, circular, candle-lit room. Bookshelves of different shapes and sizes lined the walls, filled with all manner of books, from the occult to philosophy, biology, and strange literature, most of which were hundreds of years old. Half melted candles sat atop many of the bookshelves, draping them in a cocoon of wax. The only spot along the wall that didn't have a bookshelf was opposite the entrance, where a small stone dais sat, that housed a three-foot tall, misshapen figure of someone praying. The statue always unnerved Robbie because its only eye, which was made from different material than the rest of the statue, seemed to follow you as you moved about the room. There was a rectangular oak table, with a padded wooden chair placed at one end, and stacks of paper and writing utensils carefully placed in the center. The only other furniture in the room was a large, cushioned reading chair that sat on the other side of the room from the table. Just being there made him feel sick, but when he turned to leave, he found his way blocked by over a dozen giants draped in large, dark cloaks that obscured their features.

Robbie backed away, confused and frightened by the strange arrivals, some nearly twice his size. He tried to shout a warning to those that were slowly filling the room and realized something when his voice came out in a high-pitched whine. These people weren't giants. He had regressed into a child. As he looked about the people who were starting to encircle him, he also realized that the room had changed. Besides the large bookshelves everything had been removed from the

room and, what's more, he found himself standing in the center of a large ritual circle that had been painted on the floor, in what he thought was blood.

In that moment it was as though he'd mentally regressed to a child as well, because Robbie found himself screaming and begging, tears cascading down his cheeks, but his cries fell on deaf ears.

Once he was fully encircled, everyone began to chant in low, rhythmic voices. One person stepped forward, away from the others, and approached Robbie carrying a clay-red ceramic bowl, a series of runes inlaid along the rim. Though they dawned the same robes and their features were as obscured as the others, Robbie knew who it was that approached him.

He tried desperately to catch the man's eye beneath his hood, but it was no good. "Please don't do this! Please dad!"

4.

All Robbie knew was someone was gripping his shoulder, as light filled and blurred his vision. He lashed out wildly, but whoever was there moved away too quickly. Before his vision finished clearing, Robbie pulled out the firestone laden amulet and prepared to unleash a stream of fire.

"Whoa! Whoa there friend. It is only I, your friendly neighborhood Skeleton-man."

"I – what?" As his vision cleared, and his brain began to wipe the fog of the dream from his mind, Robbie spotted Haakon standing a few feet away, hands held high like he was being robbed.

"I doubt igniting that thing will end well for either of us in this small box."

"Right." Slowly he lowered the amulet as the details of his situation returned and he remembered where he was. "Sorry about that."

“It’s quite alright. I don’t have the handsome vestige I once did. Seeing this face when you first wake up must be alarming.”

“Yeah, a little bit. More importantly, did you try to make a Spider-Man joke a second ago? And earlier didn’t you say you go to the movies?”

“Sure, I saw my first motion picture in the 1930’s, and I’ve been reading Spider-man since the golden age of comics. One of my biggest regrets of the last century was not purchasing a copy of the original run of *Amazing Fantasy #15* when I had the chance.” Robbie couldn’t help but look at Haakon’s missing eye holes. The warrior had explained how he was able to see, but based on that description, Robbie wasn’t sure how that worked with an image on a flat surface. Before he could ask about it, Haakon said, “Still won’t blink.”

For a long moment Robbie just sat there, and considered how much oxygen would be left if he went ahead and used the firestone.

5.

After giving him a moment to collect his bearings, Haakon explained to Robbie that he decided to wake him because it was clear he was under duress, and Haakon was worried Robbie might have been under an enchantment.

“Nope, just a regular ol’ bad dream. If you could call it that,” Robbie said bitterly, “It was somewhere between a memory and a nightmare.”

“What happened?” Haakon asked, an air of genuine curiosity in his voice.

“Yeah, no,” Robbie scoffed, “Sorry but I don’t care how long we’re stuck here, you’re not going to get me to talk about my dreams or stroll down memory lane.”

“I see. Well, I’ll respect your privacy, though certainly you have tales that don’t bring back such haunting memories. After all, you are rather well traveled.

As one who's been to many places, some that most don't know exist, you could surely regale several wondrous stories.”

“Yeah, that's not really the point.” Robbie would have been content to let it go there and return to peaceful silence, but he got the feeling his companion was unlikely to let the silence last. Instead, he turned it on Haakon, who he felt would be more than content to fill the time with his own tales. “What about you? You've lived what, twenty? Fifty? A hundred times longer than I have? Surely, you've had greater adventures than anything I've ever done.”

“You might not be wrong there,” Haakon chuckled, running a hand through his beard, “but at the same time it can be hard to know where to start. After all, I've likely forgotten more battles and adventures than I remember, and telling one always seems to remind me of three others.”

Watching Haakon comb through his beard, while he considered what story he wanted to regale, made Robbie realize he did have *one* burning question that he'd wanted to know since he first laid eyes on the walking, talking skeleton. “Well then, answer me this, because it's been bothering me for a while. How the hell do you have a beard?”

“Ah yes,” Haakon started, a slight tone of embarrassment underlining his answer, “like Sársauki and Refsing, they were a gift from Mistress Lenoir.”

“Sure, but why?”

“Well, I have served my mistress for some time now. On a few occasions she has sought to reward me with an open-ended request, as thanks for my service. The first time I asked for weapons. Specifically, ones that were similar to those which I had wielded in life. Outside of my skills as a warrior, there were few things that I cherished. My twin axes, *Sársæsuki* and *Ræfsingir*, were by far at the top of that list. They were gifted to me by the war chieftain, *Ervik the Executioner*, when I was young, and I bore them most of my natural life, and *Ræfsingir* for a while beyond. When I was given this chance the second time, it was a much harder choice. The few things I missed from life were not things that could ever be granted to me with this body, with the exception of one. As a Viking berserker I cared little for clothes

or jewels, and I certainly didn't care about what my body looked like. I was big, mean, and covered in scars, and all I wanted to do was to fight, drink, or fuck. Except, I have to admit I was always rather vain about my face, particularly my beard," The warrior laughed and shook his head, recalling times when he had brutalized his enemy for the transgression of damaging his golden mane, "So, I requested a beard that rivaled what I had in life."

"Uh, sure. Look, maybe this is a dumb question, but why not ask for a new body instead? It may be a little morose, but couldn't she transfer you to someone who was recently deceased?"

"If only. Unfortunately, such a feat is beyond my mistress's ability. The magic in the curse that keeps me bound to this plane is old, and highly complicated. I imagine a fae or demon lord could probably do it, possibly even a witch born in Saljarheim, but if you asked my mistress, she would say something like, the magic is too engraved into my essence for anyone to alter it safely, but if we're being honest; I suspect a part of her is still worried I'd leave," There was a sudden shift in the warriors tone, that caught Robbie off-guard when he muttered, "Not that I could leave anymore anyways." It didn't surprise Robbie to hear the warrior was under the witch's control, but he couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness. Even though he was still angry with Haakon, he knew what it was like for someone else to have control over your will. "Ah, I said that aloud, didn't I? Fret not for me my friend. My mistress is a fair master. She gave me purpose once again when my existence had become meaningless, when I was desperately hoping to fade away from the world, even though I knew it was futile."

Robbie looked away, surprised that his thoughts were so obvious to his companion. "If you don't mind me asking, what are you?"

The warrior did not answer right away, and was so still, and silent, Robbie started to wonder if the question had been too personal, something that weighed heavy on the nearly ancient being. Annoyed at himself, Robbie was about to apologize when Haakon finally spoke up.

"To answer your question shortly, I really don't know. I suppose you could consider me somewhere between a draugr and a living phantom, if you must put a

label on it. Ultimately whatever I am, my existence is tied to the circumstances of my death.”

Chapter 18. A Trek Through Snow and Time

In the last year of my natural life, I was banished to the frozen waste lands of Grænland, for reasons I shall keep to myself. It is still a low point in my long-begotten existence, one that I would come to spend many centuries trying to repent for. All that is to say, I spent enough time wandering the frozen hellscapes of this world that I did not notice when I left our world and stepped into the creatures domain. In fact, it wasn't until long after my death that I came to learn where I had been, or what it even meant. All I noticed at the time was that the nights had grown longer, and the animals and creatures I was used to seeing were replaced with much larger and stranger looking creatures, all of which seemed determined to kill me.

I had lost Sársæruki during a battle several months before my banishment, and while I still had Ræfsingir, I had begun using a large battle ax I called Svik'Hefnd. Like Sársæruki and Ræfsingir, Svik'Hefnd had been gifted to me. Only, instead of being a gift for my accomplishments, the battleaxe was a gift from an enemy jarl, one of many gifts offered to me and my clansmen to appease us, hoping their tributes would be enough to keep us from sacking their village. It did that time, if memory serves me correctly, but it didn't always.

The day I died I stumbled upon what I thought had been my quarry, an úlfur troll, whose territory spanned much of the frozen wasteland. With nothing else to do, and madness setting in from years of ingesting the berserker concoction, I had taken to hunting the biggest and most dangerous creatures throughout the land. It didn't matter to me if they were of our world or Saljarheim. The creature I'd set out to hunt had attacked a village I've long since forgotten the name of, but they were the northernmost settlement on the island. I don't believe I had any hopes or aspirations of a reward for killing the creature. It was simply something to do. A target to hunt, and to take my bloodlust out on. At the time the villagers had been

too shocked, too grief stricken, to notice I was branded, marking me as an útlagi, someone they would normally shun, or run out of the village. An older man and his son told me about the attack, and the large, fur matted, grey skinned creature that had nearly razed the village in the dead of night, killing six people and wounding almost a dozen more. Úlfur trolls may not be as big or as strong as regular trolls, but they are smarter, and highly aggressive, not to mention cruel. Before it left, it took burning logs from the pyre in the center of the village and threw them into several homes, which went up in a blaze, quickly spreading from one hut to another, until most of the village had burned down.

It took nearly a week of tracking through the wasteland, but I finally stumbled upon the creature I believed I was hunting, in a cave embedded in a mountain of ice. By then I was too far gone to realize that the tracks I was following had gotten bigger and were far too large for what I was supposed to be hunting. All I knew, or cared about, was that I had a target, and one that was sure to be a worthy fight.

Sure enough, it did not disappoint.

I still had some wherewithal on that final day and entered the cave as cautiously and quietly as a half-crazed brute could. It was as dark as night beneath the ice; my only source of light coming from a small stone effigy I hung on my waist, that probably shone little more than the light from a phone. Fortunately, the cave wasn't very deep, and I quickly came upon the troll's lair. Either by magic, or by happenstance, a large hollow space existed near the center of the ice sheet, where the troll had made its home. There laid a massive, lumpy mound, that was sprawled out toward the back of the open space, that I might have mistaken for a misshapen boulder had I not known better. It was clear that the troll was asleep, and had I my wits, and not some distorted sense of pride, I would have split the creature's skull while it slept and been done with it, but I was both foolish and lost to the madness. So, instead, I woke it by shouting and throwing hunks of ice at it until it stirred, before I bellowed my crazed challenge. I'm not sure if the creature understood me or not, but it didn't matter. It roared and brandished a massive, studded club, lashing out so quickly the fight was nearly done then and there, had I not barely managed to step out of the way.

I've never fought a troll that big, or that strong before, or since. It was easily three times my height and size, and yet it was incredibly nimble and agile. Even then it still did not dawn on me that something was wrong, or that I might have come across the cave of a different troll than what I'd first set off to hunt. I was too thrilled by the battle to care about anything else.

I had hoped that the more confined space would land in my favor, preventing it from properly lashing out, but it became quickly apparent that the beast had trained to fight in that cave specifically, as it seemed perfectly aware of how far away the walls and ceiling were at all times. You see, unlike our current host, who has filled this domain with constructs, the one who imprisoned me then had filled their domain with creatures and places pulled in from the Saljarheim borderlands.

Realizing I had no chance of defeating it when I could barely see, I lured the creature outside, careful not to be flattened by its deadly club while I retreated.

Once we were outside, and I had more light to see, and more room to move about, the fight truly began. I had participated in many one-on-one bouts in my life, and would often prolong the fight, taking enjoyment in both the rush of the duel, and the suffering of my opponent, but this time was different. I didn't need to try and keep the fight going, and my opponent wasn't the only one to suffer. For what felt like hours, the two of us went back and forth, both of us aware that any mistake could possibly be our last. The troll was too strong, its club too big, for me to catch or deflect any of its attacks, so I was forced to stay on the move, and slip in to attack whenever the opportunity arose. Most of the time I went for the legs or arms, the troll was too big to always go for its vitals, but I took my chances when I could. At one point I stepped back just in time to avoid being smashed into the ground, and made a mad dash along the club, and leapt, hoping to take the creature's head, but its meaty neck was too much for me to cut through in one go, and I nearly lost Svik'Hefnd for the effort.

Slowly, I cleaved away hunks of flesh, but I wasn't always fast enough and paid for each mistake.

Before all was over the troll had shattered most of the bones in my left arm as well as a number of ribs. I was bleeding from more cuts than I could possibly count, and my whole body was becoming a massive bruise. In turn, I managed to

take an eye, the creature's right arm just below the elbow, and at least two fingers on its left hand. It was bleeding from all manner of cuts as well, its grey skin coated in a drying layer of leaf green blood. The iron in both weapons kept it from healing quickly, and in the end, I finally won after burying Ræfsingir into the creature's skull, while it was hunched over, trying to stand on legs that had been stripped to the bone in several places. It was, without a doubt, the most thrilling and invigorating fight of my natural life, and even now, it is still one of my greatest. We may have fought differently, and come from completely different worlds, but in our own way we were evenly matched.

Of course, I was dying as well, but I was elated in my victory, and by that point I was ready to embrace death and join my ancestors in the halls of Valhalla, but, despite my mortal death, my soul remained bound to my body. As one might imagine, it was quite a disconcerting situation. At the time, I thought the Nørnir must have cursed me. While I doubt any could deny my final battle had been glorious and well fought, I'd been told tales of berserkers like me ending up in the frozen pits of Hel, either because they went crazy and killed their family, or because they killed too many followers of certain gods and had been cursed by fate itself.

For years I wandered the land, convinced I was in the afterlife, doing much the same in death as I had done when I was alive, still unaware of where I really was or why I was there. No matter how many times I was beaten and stabbed, I always got back up, even after my undead body was flattened to paste by a creature so large, I doubt it even noticed it stepped on something. My body was mangled but still intact, and after some time I managed to wrangle some control over the magic that bound me, and I was able to rearrange my body and start moving again. Although, by that point what remained of my flesh had since rotted away.

I continued to wonder about the land, only now as a skeleton, never knowing I was really stuck in a domain until the day it collapsed, and I was thrown back out into the real world. Not that it did much to change my situation, I was still bound to this plane of existence, unable to do anything besides wonder, and pray for true death. Had the collapse of the domain not happened in the summer, bringing a notable change from the frozen hellscape, it might have taken me some time to realize what happened, as I was still deep in the wastelands, far beyond where

anyone dared to settle. For a while I stayed in the wasteland, not dreaming of going near people. In this form I no longer needed food or any other provisions, but it didn't keep me from wanting, and as time went on, I got curious, and perhaps a bit lonely, and eventually snuck into a village and stole clothes, including a large travelers cloak and a scarf, so I could travel the roads at night.

Still believing I'd been cursed by the Nørnir, and hoping to change my fate, I put my talents to use and began taking out bandits and vagrants in a misguided attempt to make the roads safer, which I hoped was the first step toward a path of redemption. Over time, I was able to find a merchant unafraid to keep unusual company, and, using the money procured from all the bandits I'd been hunting, I was able to purchase a mask made of silver, that was shaped and painted to look like a human face. It was something that the wealthy would sometimes wear if they had horrible burns or were otherwise disfigured from disease or battle. Because of the mask, and my ragged clothes, many thought I was a leper, or thus inflicted with some horrid ailment, but otherwise I got by fine, even finding myself as a sword for hire on many occasions.

Whether by fate or purely by chance, I met a man over two centuries after my death, who told me of a way I might find out what had happened to me. It was something that I had resigned myself to never knowing, but just like that, I was given a new purpose. I would find whoever had cursed me and take my revenge, even if it meant going against fate itself. Well, I'll spare you the finer details, as it would be almost another century before I caught the elusive soothsayer, and I finally learned what had actually happened to me. It turned out my fate had not been brought on by the Nørnir, or even a god, but by a sidhe witch, who once posed as a high priest, living in a lavish temple that I had razed to the ground a few years before my death. Had it been almost any other creature, I'm sure I would have been struck down, or tortured for such an act, then and there, but the sidhe can be as patient as they are cruel. He knew well that the dream of any Viking warrior was to one day feast in the halls of Valhalla, and he made preparations to assure that it would never happen for me.

I eventually tracked down the witch Sadikur and confronted him, but not before gathering a small party of warriors, who both bravely and foolishly followed me to their horrid death.

Even amongst the sidhe, Sadikur is particularly cruel, and though he eventually granted them the mercy of true death, it did not come quickly. Day's past before the last of them went, both their bodies and minds were twisted and broken. And I... I was forced to watch it all, while the witch laughed, and reminded me that their fate was my doing. He was right, of course. I knew that confronting him almost certainly meant death for those who had followed me, but at the time I did not care, I was too consumed by my lust for revenge. When the last of their screams finished echoing down the halls Sadikur simply left, leaving me behind to once again wonder the world. Those screams still follow me, and for many years there was little else I thought about, though I would eventually get the courage to face him once again, alone that time, and every other time afterwards.

In between bouts with the damned witch, I would find myself wandering, usually for decades at a time. Sometime during the early 19th century, I came upon an underground waterfall virtually inaccessible to anyone without magic, but with this "body" I can squeeze through many spaces most could not. The waterfall was in an enormous cavern, deep below the earth, fed by a vast lake up on the surface. The whole room had been created and enchanted long ago, to protect a book placed in the center on a silver pedestal, but the magic had decayed over the millennia, interrupted by the flow of water that likely had not been there when the room was first enchanted. What was left was a bit of moderately disorienting magic that, when I didn't try to resist, left me in an almost dreamlike state. So, I chose to stay there, coming the closest I could to no longer existing. While my awareness didn't slip entirely, I would go long lengths of time where I was virtually unaware of anything at all.

From what I've gathered, I spent a few decades slipping through existence, buried deep underground, until one day the fading magic was completely dispelled, and full consciousness was abruptly thrust back upon me. Just like that, I went from a decades long sleep, to being face to face with four people.

Chapter 19. Fireless Fireside Chat

1.

“Although I suppose the phrase, ‘face to face’ may be a little off the mark as I technically didn’t have a face anymore, and only one of the four were aware of my presence,” Haakon added with a slight chuckle.

“The one who saw you was Lenoir, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right. How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Robbie said, but he thought, *‘You’re not the first old man to try to tell me their life story when I only asked one question. Damn, do I miss Gary? No, screw him. Me being here is partially his fault.’*

“Yes, well, even as a kid she was crafty, and had a few tricks up her sleeve, including something the two of you have in common. From a young age she practiced Rae’hal, though she did so in secret, unbeknownst to her master. You may already know this, but many of her ilk look down on things like artifacts and Rae’hal, since they have an advanced connection to the Prime Mana, but even as a child Madame Lenoir understood her limitations as a witch. Because she was looking for traps, she noticed my presence immediately but said nothing to the others. They all looked a bit ragged, but it was clear the two men that trailed behind them were slaves, you could see it in how they carried themselves, and their clothes were even more tattered than the woman and her apprentice. Like Lenoir, she was a halfling witch of low standing, but unlike Lenoir, she thought herself above any kind of magic that wasn’t arcana, though still sought existential means of gaining power.”

“Let me guess, they came looking for the tome, which was actually a grimoire.”

“Two for two Mr. Parker. Have you ever come across one?”

“Yeah, but only once. They’re rarer than most artifacts. I tracked one down for some weird fraternal order. I think they called themselves The Keepers, or maybe it was The Collectors, I don’t remember. That was when I had someone who dealt with clients for me. They paid a small fortune for it, and it still wasn’t worth it. It was guarded and protected by just about anything you could imagine. I lost count of how many times I almost died. I never felt more like I was in a damn Indiana Jones movie.”

Haakon laughed and ignored the gesture Robbie gave him, before he continued his story. “Well, as you know then, a grimoire can yield immense power to someone like a witch, but what most are not aware of is that it is not something that happens instantly; it is, in essence, a technical manuscript on how the magic it imparts works and functions. In order to gain the knowledge and power from a grimoire, you must understand it on a fundamental level. So, what happened was rather curious. You see, Lenoir’s mentor, the witch Abigail, used magic to freeze all the water, which had risen to just beneath where the tome lay. She immediately began to flip through it, occasionally stopping and reading passages, while the others were made to watch the path she had created to get into the cave. When she got to the end of the book, a strange air set about her, and she began unleashing magic wildly; the entire cave became a light show of destructive energy, and large rocks began to fall as the magic struck the walls and the ceiling. Madame Lenoir was struck by a wayward spout of magic and was thrown against the far wall, which probably saved her life, as one of the slaves standing right next to her was completely flattened by a massive rock a couple seconds later. The other slave managed to get to Abigail, through the barrage of falling debris, and got behind the rampaging witch and bashed her skull in with a heavy stone, just before a flurry of magic severed his arms and half his face. He collapsed after that, dead before he hit the ground.”

“Sounds like the grimoire was cursed. One last layer of protection that hadn’t fully faded.”

“My thoughts exactly. Now, while I had been more than angry that my rest had been disturbed, I took pity on the child as she lay there unconscious. As the cave continued to collapse around her, I made the choice to try and save her and got up for the first time, since shortly after my arrival. Even once we reached the surface and stepped out into the frigid, January afternoon, I kept moving, not sure where to go, but determined to get somewhere safe. The first thing we finally came across was a small private cemetery. It was clear that whoever maintained it was well off, and we took shelter in a marble mausoleum from a storm that had been chasing us since we emerged from underground. Well, I would later find out -,” Haakon paused and began self-consciously scratching at his boney head, “My apologies, I’ve seemed to have gone off on quite the tangent.”

Robbie laughed, internally he had rolled his eyes many times while the warrior told his story, but now that he'd stopped, Robbie found he was honestly curious. "No, it's fine. You might as well finish."

"Are you sure?"

Robbie nodded but felt that his response was a little undermined by the laugh he let out as he did so. Something in the tone of Haakon's voice had left Robbie picturing the skeleton trying to raise one eyebrow to emphasize the question. "Yes, really. Sorry it's just... it's just been a long day."

"Ah yes, and to that I would raise a glass, if only I had a beer, and a glass to drink from...and a mouth to taste it with... and a stomach to hold it." The two of them shared in the laugh this time, a tired, exhausted cackle that burned Robbie's dry throat. Even though he didn't think it was actually that funny, he thought it felt good to laugh, which seemed to feed itself until they both ended in a tired chuckle.

When the laughter faded and Robbie was left with only a slight sting in his cheeks, he turned to Haakon and asked, "Really, what happened after that?" Lips or no lips Robbie thought he could feel the smile the old warrior was trying to give him.

"Well, if you insist," Haakon said, jovially, "Hmm. Where was I?" Robbie had no doubts that the old warrior knew exactly where he'd left off, it was all part of the show. "Ah yes, it turns out the cemetery we'd come upon was owned by a rather wealthy family and was kept on the property but far enough away that it could not be seen from the main home, but like I said, we did not know that at the time. All I knew was I had someone who needed to rest, and at the center of the mausoleum was a large stone pew, with a thin satin bed placed on top, where the recently dead would be laid for the family to come visit. I waited there with Madame Lenoir all through the night, and into the morning, until she woke, and I was sure she was going to make it. We spoke for a while; it was clear she was still in shock over what happened, but I was keen to move on before I took further pity on the girl. I told her I would find a doctor and send him to her, but when I tried to say goodbye, she got angry and barred the doors with her magic. Out of both desperation and fear, she then cast a spell that left me unable to move, until I promised not to leave, and that I would instead escort her to the town that was a few days away on foot. At the time she just didn't want to be alone, and that was something I could understand, so I agreed to accompany her. Well, the town we went to was rather big, and more than a little overwhelming for someone so young,

so I agreed to help her find an Inn, and to stay nearby for a couple of days. Since neither of us had any money, I helped her earn some through, arguably, reputable means, to pay for our lodging. After about a week it became clear that no one there was going to take her in, so I took her to a proper city, hoping she could find a new mentor, and when that failed, I accompanied her to the next one after that. No matter where we went, we couldn't find anyone who would take her in because of what she was, and no one who would train her because she was lacking in raw power, failing to recognize her drive and willingness to put in the work for the talent that it is. Well, as it goes, somewhere along the way it no longer became a question as to whether or not I'd stay."

A thought came to mind that Robbie considered not voicing but depending on Haakon's response it meant he had lied earlier, and he was still wary of his companions honesty. As he spoke, Robbie let his extra sight take hold and watched carefully as the warrior's aura bloomed before him, filling the small space with an array of colors only he could see. "Sorry to bring this up, but I thought you were bound to her will." A ripple ran through Haakon's aura, tainting it dark for a moment before returning to normal.

"That wouldn't come until much later," Haakon said slowly.

"I see." The ripple in his aura had come and gone so quickly it made Robbie wonder if the warrior was actively suppressing it, aware that Robbie might be watching. "Feel free not to answer, but I have to ask, if given the chance, would you leave?"

2.

Just as Robbie had suspected, Haakon had no problem filling the time with stories of both his life and his undeath, and while getting revenge on the witch Sadikur was a large driving factor for many centuries, the warrior had taken many detours along the way, like when he stayed on a stranger's farm for over a month, fending off wolves.

"I had been traveling through the English countryside at the time, during the late 15th century, and happened upon the farm while trying to find refuge from a winter storm. The heavy snowfall made it nearly impossible for me to get a distinct picture of my surroundings, and I only found the farm because of the noise. The

farmers home was being besieged by dozens of wolves, all foaming at the mouth, and trying to get inside. While all I had was a cheap sword and a small hand ax, I wasn't worried about driving the beasts off, but they were surprisingly fierce. Had I a body still, I almost surely would have died. I certainly would have been missing a few chunks at least, the heavy travelers cloak I wore was ripped apart badly enough, particularly around my legs, that I struggled not to reveal my true vestige beneath. I must have killed thirteen or fourteen of them, and wounded a half dozen more, before the rest finally fled. Grateful, the farmer gave me new clothes and let me stay in the house, even though I insisted the barn was fine, and he told me about a curse that had been placed upon his family by a demon, who had tried to trick the farmer into letting it marry his daughter. Admittedly I doubted his claims at first, people back then always wanted to attribute anything bad to a demon's curse, but I agreed to stay until the next night to see if the wolves returned. Sure enough, every night for almost a month wolves and other vermin attacked, utterly ignoring the cattle, hell bent on getting inside the home to where the farmer and his family were. As soon as it got warmer, and the roads started to clear, I set out to hunt the source of the apparent curse. I found the petty creature a half day's ride away, in a den it had hovelled out of a large tree. It wasn't a demon as you or I know them, but it was a malicious shapeshifter, who had just enough magic to put a spell on the critters it came across, that made them go after the farmer and his family. I swiftly put an end to it, and continued on, after assuring the farmer the "curse" had been lifted."

Where one tale would end another would begin, from raids along the coast of England, to dueling a warlord atop a mountain ledge, which gave him a "*respectable dislike of extreme heights*", to working in an iron mine filled with toxic gas, as payment for weapons and armor to use against the witch Sadikur.

Every few stories Haakon would take a break from his tale and try to coax one out of Robbie, who largely remained resistant, but the nagging skeleton managed to get a few quick stories out of his companion.

The first tale he told Haakon was about a time he was searching for an artifact at an old stone building near the base of a mountain in Brazil. The item he was looking for was an elvish sword made from *álfur* metal, and was supposed to be locked inside the building, which could be spotted at a distance for miles

around. “The thing was, once I got within twenty feet of it, I could no longer find the building for the life of me. I can’t tell you how many times I walked towards that place only to find myself a hundred yards away, walking in the wrong direction, and confused about how I got there. I probably spent sixteen hours trying to walk up to that building before I decided it was impossible with what I’d brought with me. The client was furious when I returned empty handed. Even threatened to sue me for his money.”

“Did you not offer to try again once you gathered what you needed?”

“Of course I did,” Robbie laughed, “I told the client what happened and that I would need to do some research. He didn’t like the time frame I gave him and found someone else who would do it faster. Unfortunately, a lot of the people who have money to collect artifacts, and other such remnants, also suck. That time I did get the last laugh though. The people hired in place of me never managed to make it in either, and I turned down the job when it was offered to me again.”

After Haakon talked about his horribly failed attempt to walk across the bottom of the ocean, Robbie told him about a job that took him to Belgium, searching for the missing piece to a treasured family heirloom. Tracking down and acquiring the ornate slab wasn’t particularly interesting, but he had met a goblin living in the woods outside of a small town who asked Robbie to buy him cigarettes, because the woman who owned the nearby gas station wouldn’t sell to him without ID. The goblin had been so grateful when Robbie came back with the carton of smokes, he had shared a bit of his “prized possession”. A bottle of rum brewed with a Saljarheim *spice* that made the amber drink more potent than moonshine. “Most of the night is a blur, as you might imagine, and most of the money from that job went into replacing a fair number of windows and tires. And before you ask, no, I did not break any windows or slash any tires... probably. Like I said some things are blurry, but I’m sure it was almost entirely *Drald*. Not that I could say that to the police. The only person who might have believed me was the lady who ran the gas station, and she definitely got the worst of it. Once I paid for everything I was sternly asked to never return.”

That story led to Haakon recounting a peculiar encounter he had with a goblin who tried to sell him and Lenoir a car outside of Las Vegas in the late 80’s,

but had pivoted partway through and tried to convince the witch to let him take her to dinner. “It was certainly one of the stranger encounters I’ve had with a Saljarheim denizen,” Haakon finished, shaking his head at the memory of the desperate goblin, and his blue button up and red bowtie, “but perhaps that is just how goblins are. I really thought Madame Lenoir was going to bash his head in with her staff, but she showed surprising restraint that day.”

“That must have been awkward,” Robbie said, sympathetically, “I’ve never been hit on by a goblin, but I was propositioned by a heavily intoxicated *Pint Fairy* once.” Much to Haakon’s dismay, The Artificer refused to elaborate further, no matter how much he prodded.

For a little over three hours Haakon managed to keep the confined space from growing quiet as the elevator pretended to climb. He was in the middle of telling Robbie how he had nearly been eaten by, what he described as, “*a rare magical creature*”, that Robbie suspected was just an unnaturally large frog, when the elevator came to a sudden stop. Robbie tried to get the jagged stone out of his pocket as they shook violently from the abrupt loss of momentum, but by the time he managed to get it out, the elevator stopped shaking, and the metal door slid open with an electronic, *ding*.

Chapter 20. Delivered: A Person. A Message.

1.

Lenoir was brought to an old church down at the edge of town, away from prying eyes. By the looks of the parking lot, which nature was on its way to reclaiming, and the cracked and faded paint, it had been many years since it had seen its last congregation, but she was surprised to find no magic had been set in place to keep people away, just a rudimentary barrier that would keep people from

getting inside without someone opening the door for them. She wasn't sure if it was from ignorance or stupidity, but the lax security gave her hope that this was just a business call.

Inside, the pews, the altar, and any iconography had all been removed, leaving a hollow, husk of a building, but the witch had little doubt that its current occupants had a perverse laugh when they'd first arrived. Three demons meandered about, waiting for her. All three of them, and the one who accompanied her, wore similar dirty, black clothes, reminiscent of those worn by catholic monks. The one closest to the entrance had red skin, short but stout, with two long, bull-like horns, another an abhorrently lanky, but muscular, female one-horn, with pale skin and monstrous eyes. The third demon waiting for her was a ten-foot tall, broad shouldered three-horn, with grey, calloused skin, who carried a long staff made from warped wood, whose twisted end made Lenoir think of a ghoul screaming in pain. Two of his horns grew from the top of his head and ran back along his skull, while the third protruded from its temple and came down to frame his face. Like all three and six-horn demons, this one had a third eye in the center of its forehead, the hydren-eye. Lenoir took a quick glance back and finally got a look at the demon who escorted her, a bronzed-skinned two-horn, with cracked, ivory looking horns, and a bevy of scars across its face,

"I thought I was here to see Maldrik?" Lenoir remarked, directing her question at the foreboding three-horn.

The three-horn raised a gnarled hand and gestured to a door that presumably led to a small office for the reverend or preacher. "Lord Maldrik is a very busy man, and is taking care of a business matter, at the moment. Don't worry, he will be with us soon."

"I see," Lenoir stood in the center of the empty room, carefully assessing the presumed strength of the demons, while doing her best to look unbothered, "Am I to assume you're Belmore than?"

"That's right. I am Belmore, High Priest and leader of Filli Mirukam." A thin smile held tight on the demon's face as he stared at her, leaving Lenoir with a sense of foreboding, greater than what she'd already felt when she'd entered the

rundown church. It wasn't just Belmore, Lenoir got the sense all four demons were leering at her, a pack of hyenas that were going to attack but first were going to play with their food. Whatever hope she had that this was just a business call was gone. She was afraid, and began subtly drawing in magic.

"You know, it's rude to stand there looking all giddy and not say anything. Like a bunch of kids with a secret they're trying not to tell. Is that what you are, children? Is the name *Children of Mirukam* a representation of your maturity?" Anger flared through three of the demons, who looked ready to pounce, no longer grinning. This was good, as far as the witch was concerned, she could deal with anger, it kept people off balance and made it easy to guess their actions, but Belmore was unphased and continued to smile while he stared down at her.

"Sorry, we're just all a little excited," he croaked, "you see, Lord Maldrik has finally decided to test an artifact in his possession. It's a very interesting bit of magic, which I personally can't wait to see the results of."

"What kind of artifact?"

Both Qrown and the other two-horn started laughing, but Belmore raised a long-fingered hand to silence them. "The *al'Tabeth* is truly a wondrous thing. The effigy's unique magic has the ability to free you from all those... pesky inhibitions, and moral dredges. At least that's its intended purpose. You can never know for sure how well magic this old is going to work, but I feel confident it will do its job."

The fear coursing through the witch was too much to hide anymore, and she began blatantly looking about, trying to think of any possible way to escape, while preparing a spell to defend herself.

"Don't even think about it," Qrown said and placed the point of something sharp in-between her shoulder blades before she could make her move, "Things will go better for you if you just cooperate."

"Somehow I doubt that," Lenoir spat. She glanced back and saw he held a spear, though where he'd got it from, she had no idea.

“He’s right, witch,” came a deep voice from the small office, whose door was now open, “things can always be worse. Right now, I have need for you to maintain your faculties, but I can always find a replacement if you prove to be too unruly.” The large demon stepped out of the office, carrying a stone effigy of a faceless man, crouched on his knees, arms held wide in an expression of halation.

2.

Loa’Eman stared at the old church Lenoir and Qrown entered, wishing she could follow after and see the witch’s reaction to the al’Tabeth. It was a bittersweet feeling however, for she knew that one day she could be on the receiving end of it. A large part of her resented Belmore for convincing Maldrik to finally use it, just another entry on a growing list of grievances she had with her once admired leader. The Suron Lileaql was bad enough, forcing you to follow any direct order, but the magic was old, and a fallacy in the ancient spell left some wiggle room to interpret orders in her own way. That would change if Maldrik forced the al’Tabeth on them. It was why she was biding her time until Maldrik got complicit, obeying his orders without any obvious push back.

When the others had arrived in the human town, Loa’Eman had thought she would finally be free of her watcher duty but, still being punished, she was forced to watch the old church now, and make sure no one approached. While she was angry, she was nevertheless happy the abandoned building was located on a mostly unused road and was the only building for at least a couple hundred meters in either direction. It meant humanity’s scent wasn’t quite as strong there, and the only humans she had to see or hear were those driving by.

For a while all the demon did was stand there, watching, trying to picture the look on the witch’s face when she found out what they were going to do, or the look on Maldrik’s when she buried her claws into his throat, and glare at the occasional passing car, unseen under her veil.

After a short time, Loa'Eman solitude was interrupted when she became aware of someone approaching from down the road. Whoever they were had some serious power and was heading in their direction at a casual pace. She knocked on the door three times in quick succession, letting them know someone was approaching, but left it at that.

When the newcomer came into view, Loa'Eman wasn't sure what to make of them. They looked human to the naked eye, though she knew they weren't. Pale as a ghost and slightly overweight, the newcomer was covered in a gleam of sweat that she could see from a distance. They wore a pristine suit and tie, with a flat brim bowler hat, all white, except for their brown loafers, and walked with a cane, also white. The demon thought she'd never seen such a ridiculous, or suspicious disguise before, but it was a secondary thought. Even with her hydrean-eye she couldn't see underneath the assumed glamour, and that concerned her greatly.

The stranger came to a stop halfway through the parking lot, and took off his hat, holding it out in a failed approximation of the human gesture. "Good afternoon, ma'am. Quite a lovely day, wouldn't you say?" The stranger talked in a disjointed, choppy manner, and spoke with an inconsistent accent that kept changing over the span of just a few words. Loa'Eman couldn't decide if this was supposed to be a joke or if the creature beneath had never spoken a human language before, but either way it unnerved her.

"I find the air here foul, no matter the weather," She replied. She wanted to tell the stranger to get lost, but now that he was close, she realized she'd made a terrible mistake. The moment she felt him coming she should have gone inside and told the others to get ready, but she hadn't anticipated he would be this powerful, nor had she considered he might be suppressing his presence while he approached. What she had first felt was enough to be intimidating, and she had figured he was bearing it all to try and scare her, but now that he had her in his sight, he no longer felt the need to hide it and let his crushing presence be truly felt. It was great enough that she thought even Maldrik and *Talos* could likely feel it, despite their paltry connection to the Primua Magicae.

The stranger smiled and gave a wiry laugh. "Spoken like a true demon."

“Might I ask what you are, stranger?”

“Nah, that’s not important right now,” it said, but smiled even wider, “what is important is that I have some *information* I think you’ll be interested in.”

“You want me to pass a message for you?”

“Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no. This message is for *you*. It’s something I think *you* in particular would want to know.”

The stranger’s words made Loa’Eman pause. *‘For me?’* “Who are you?”

“That is not important either. As far as you’re concerned I’m just a watcher. Like you. Albeit one with more of a vested interest in the outcome of what’s transpiring.”

“You’re after the halfling as well.”

The stranger raised his hands defensively but never stopped grinning. “Come now, you’ve got it all wrong. I have no want, nor interest, in the girl personally, but this turn of events has stirred up a handful of old coots like me, and a threefold wager has been made on the child’s fate.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“Nothing at all. Not directly anyways. As part of the agreement, none of us involved in the wager can directly interfere with the course of events. I just thought you might want to be privy to a tidbit of information, regarding the child’s father.”

Loa’Eman’s first thought was that she couldn’t care less who the halfling’s father was. She had no interest in the fae or their offspring, even the child they were after was of little interest to her. As far as she was concerned, if the child died, or someone else got their hands on her, all the better, but something in the strangers words gave her pause and after a moment a possibility of who it could be came to mind. The sudden realization was tantamount to the stranger having strolled up to her and striking her with his cane. She sneered, revealing a mouth full of pointed teeth. “No.”

“Oh yes, little demon. Oh yes.” The stranger purred with delight, an inhuman, guttural noise that seeped beneath the skin, making nearby squirrels, birds, and even insects, scatter.

Chapter 21. Facing Fears

1.

A bitter cold funneled into the elevator when the doors opened, carried in on a breeze laced with snow. Haakon thought he was probably the only one in the world that liked the bitter cold. Even though Lenoir and a few others told him it was impossible, he swore he could feel it when the temperature hit extreme lows. The air pouring in was cold enough to prickle his nonexistent skin, and one look at his companion told him it was going to be a problem.

“Why don’t you stay here for now and try to stay warm. I’ll take a look around and see what we’re getting into.” The Artificer only half-heartedly argued, before Haakon stepped from the elevator and into the harsh winter landscape.

The wind picked up just a couple meters from the elevator, plastering his beard and tattered clothes to his bones. Light as he was, he still sank several inches with each step, but he managed to move swiftly, unimpeded.

It didn’t take long for Haakon to figure out the *challenge* of this floor, and he quickly made his way back to The Artificer.

2.

“It’s really not that funny.”

“It is a little,” Robbie laughed, “I guess our host was listening in on us and found out about your fear.”

“It is perfectly normal to not like heights.”

“I feel like this is a little more than *dislike*. Plus, you’re not exactly a *normal* person. I’ve watched you cut down things that are going to give me nightmares if we make it out of here.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t cut or smash heights.”

“I guess that’s fair, but you’re a...,” Robbie waved his hand gesturing towards Haakon’s body, “magical skeleton. I mean, would it even kill you if you fell?”

“That’s not the point,” Haakon growled. He stood, planted firmly in the elevator. “Are you even sure this is the right way? Perhaps we try to take this down to a different floor and look for another way up.”

“I’m sure that there’s no way in hell I’m riding in this thing again. Besides, you know it’s not going to work like that.”

“Then what do you propose? You got climbing equipment in that magical satchel of yours?” Haakon had discovered they were on the side of a mountain, and that the door to the next floor was a straight shot ahead, on another mountain side, across a wide gap at least three hundred yards across, and a drop that was even greater than the distance between the mountains.

“Nope. Somehow, I didn’t think I would need it in an office building.” Robbie had removed his only remaining firestone from the amulet and created a small flame to keep him warm inside the elevator. Now he stepped outside and increased the flow of aura to the enchanted stone, until it produced a flame that was three feet high and concentrated into a swirling sphere. “How about *you* wait here, and I’ll see if I can figure something out.”

Robbie did his best to ignore the freezing snow, soaking his shoes and pants as he made his way across the mountain side. Sure enough, the warrior hadn't exaggerated, as Robbie soon found himself staring into a vast chasm. They were high enough in the sky that he couldn't see the bottom. Heights never bothered him in any serious manner, but looking down there made his stomach turn. *'Okay, this might be a problem.'* An immediate idea came to mind, one that he might have tried when he was younger, but he didn't trust his ability to pull it off now, so he started searching for another option.

He began looking beyond the chasm and the opposing mountainside, and saw there were others, and realized they were in the middle of an entire mountain range. It was utterly breathtaking, and utterly fake, or so he was willing to bet. *'Some of this has to be an illusion. Domain or not, there has to be a finite space, especially if they're keeping the floors separated. Like my bag, it's out of phase with the physical world, but it still has limits. The tunnels were impressive and went on for a while, but they were also packed closely together, next to, and on top of, each other, and many of the wrong tunnels were connected by small paths that led to the same place. The question is, how much of this is an illusion?'* He tried spreading blasts of snow using a windstone, hoping there was really an invisible floor, but if it was there, he wasn't going to find it that way. Not sure what else to do, he tried extending his extra sense, even though he felt there was too much magic in the air. *'Wait a minute, what is that?'* He tried to focus on the strange sensation, but he couldn't make heads or tails of what he was feeling, so he made a guess as to what it might be. *'After all, why not? Everything else seems to have run on a perverse game logic.'*

Robbie removed an artifact from his bag and put his theory to the test.

3.

Haakon hesitantly followed The Artificer from the elevator, who claimed to have found the way forward, after returning wet, and blue lipped, almost twenty

minutes after he left. Concerned, Haakon had insisted his companion take some time to warm up and dry off first, but deep down he knew it was really to put off whatever was coming. When it came time to get moving, he found himself looking for any excuse possible, even telling The Artificer to go on ahead without him, that he would wait for his return.

“Except it’s up to you to take down whoever’s running this show, remember? Listen, I know this isn’t easy for you, but unless you think you can psych yourself up, we need to get going, otherwise it’s just going to get worse.”

The Artificer walked to the edge of the mountain, which was notably cleared of snow, and turned to face his companion, who remained a few meters back.

“Alright Artificer, explain yourself. How do we move forward?” All his companion had said so far was that the warrior wasn’t going to like what they had to do.

“It’s a good news, bad news, situation. Good news is, there’s an illusion at play, and there’s actually a path that leads to the other side. The bad news is, only some of it is an illusion. The chasm is very real, even if it isn’t as deep as it looks.”

Hearing this did little to alleviate Haakon’s fears, who took a few steps back, feeling he was too close to the ledge. “Good. If it’s an illusion then you can dispel it, right?” Even before he finished speaking, he was despondent to see the look on The Artificer’s face.

“In theory I could dispel the illusion around the path, but they’re tricky, especially one this powerful. It’s a static magic that’s constantly in flux. I would freeze to death before I finished.”

Haakon’s nonexistent heart sank. That was the opposite of what he wanted to hear. His mind began to race as he tried to think of a way around this dilemma, but nothing came to mind, the only thing he could think of was *that day*; looking up at the sadistic grin of his opponent, while he desperately hung onto rocks jutting out

of the cliff face and tried not to look down. It was one of the only times he could remember feeling truly scared when he was still alive, and it was still clear in his mind's eye, almost a millennia later. A mental scar that had carried over after death.

Trying to buy time, Haakon said, "Go on ahead. If you are over there it will give me something to focus on."

"It's not that simple; our way forward isn't a straight shot. Fortunately, I have this," What looked like a stack of broken tiles started to glow and rose into the air, forming an arrow, "It's magic is meant to find the safest way to your destination, so it'll keep us on the path. Just don't look down."

"That's not really an option," Haakon complained.

"Right. Do you have any means of turning your sight off? I could guide you across."

"I'm afraid that's not an option either."

"I could carry you?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Well then you need to figure something out fast, because I'm quite literally freezing over here."

The Artificer offered a few more suggestions but none of them were viable. Ultimately, Haakon knew what he needed to do, but it didn't make it easier. He knew that his fear was irrational but just knowing that never helped. It was like something at his core wouldn't accept it. He was scared. He wanted to go home. The thought struck him like a brick, and he felt himself smile, despite his lack of lips. *'I suppose there's more humanity left in me than I thought.'* The thought was surprisingly comforting to Haakon, and a bit of warmth spread through him, lessening some of the cold fear that had frosted over his mind and left him in a panic. He managed to detach a small part of his mind from the fear, though he was no closer to taking a step past the ledge. *'You are a warrior. You have fought demons and fae lords. This will not break you.'* He did not fear death, a strong part

of him longed for its embrace, but not like this. He was a warrior who fought in countless battles over the centuries, and he wanted a warrior's death so that he might finally feast in the halls of Valhalla.

Standing at the edge of the mountain, feeling the wind whipping up around him, what strength the words of affirmation gave him were quickly lost, and the part of his mind that was in a panic grew louder, like a river current picking up speed.

"I think I might have an idea," The Artificer called over the roar of the wind.

"I'm listening."

Instead of voicing a plan, The Artificer stepped forward without a word and walked off the ledge.

4.

Surprised, and weighed down by fear, Haakon hesitated to lunge forward, and grab hold of The Artificer. When he did, he already knew it was too late. Except when he got there, he found his companion looking up at him from a few meters down, standing in the open air, nothing beneath his feet. Seeing him standing there gave Haakon a feeling of vertigo as he anxiously waited for gravity to catch up to The Artificer and send him plummeting to the unseen depths below, like a certain cartoon coyote. Before he could register where he was, Robbie reached up and grabbed Haakon by the arm and pulled him down.

Less than a second passed from the time Haakon was pulled over the ledge to the time he landed on the path, but he felt like he'd plummeted to the depths below, his nonexistent stomach a mess of apprehension. When the feeling passed after several agonizing seconds, he looked up at The Artificer, who stood there, flame in one hand, the Pathfinder orbiting the other. Haakon expected his companion to make some jest at his expense, but if he found any further

amusement in Haakon's fear, it did not show. Instead, he looked down at Haakon with stern concern.

"You ready?"

"No, but what choice do I have?" Haakon cursed but tunneled in on Robbie the best he could. What remained of the world became blurry, but he could still see it. *'This is not the end of your story. You still have work to do.'* He repeated this in his mind until it became a mantra, and he was able to take the first step. Again, he felt like he was falling, even though the world was solid beneath his feet.

He managed to take one more step, and then another. Then another. Each one was an effort of will. *'You can do this. You HAVE to do this!'* It was hard to ignore the endless depths beneath his feet, but he kept going, one step at a time, his mind screaming every step of the way.

5.

Robbie did not feel the assured confidence he tried to display. The Pathfinder might show them the way, but the path itself was narrow, one misstep meant plummeting into the chasm. Turns were sharp and sudden, and zig-zagged across the open sky. The path was slick with unseen snow and ice, forcing them to slow even further, leaving them more vulnerable to the raging winds. The flames from the firestone did little out there, his whole body was shaking, his movements growing stiff. The ice got so bad that after a couple of minutes he barely dared to lift his feet. The temperature kept plummeting, and each moment was more agonizing than the last. Adding to the turmoil was Haakon, he was too focused on Robbie, and too wrapped up in his fear, that he nearly stepped over the edge more than once.

"Whoa!" Robbie shouted, moving quicker than was safe, and grabbed the skeleton, who was fighting to balance on one leg. For a brief moment Robbie considered picking up his companion and carrying him, pride be damned, but he

wasn't sure he could keep his balance while carrying the warrior. "Stay close dammit, or we're both screwed!"

Not even halfway there and they were being forced to inch along, moving at a snail's pace. The further they went the more the wind picked up, trying to knock them into the depths below, and pelted them with snow and ice, making it impossible to see The Pathfinder without the ball of fire, which was steadily shrinking. Every second felt like it was getting harder for Robbie to breathe, until his vision blurred, and his thoughts became sluggish. *'I'm going to die out here.'*

Not long after the thought began floating through his mind, Robbie's legs started to wobble, and he lost his balance. Both the flames and the Pathfinder sputtered out, and fell to the floor, but Robbie stumbled forward and went face first over the ledge.

6.

Haakon thought that each step would be his last, sure that at any moment his mind would shut down, and he would go catatonic. When The Artificer stumbled forward, he almost hadn't noticed, but something buried deep inside registered what was about to happen, and, as he did so often, Haakon acted on instinct, without hesitation. Apprehension forgotten, he fell flat to the ground, already reaching out, and grabbed The Artificer by the ankle. Had the path not been slippery he would have caught his companion and pulled him up before he had time to remember where he was, instead, Haakon went stiff, staring into the abyss. Panic almost took the last of his rational thoughts, but a tiny voice called out from the darkness. It was a voice that was different from the one he normally heard in his head but was one that he was just as familiar with. A voice that once, and for so long, had been his own. The voice of the murderous, insatiable, *unstoppable*, Viking berserker.

"Get up you coward! Rise! Rise now, or else Valhalla's doors will never be open to you."

The sentiment was all well and good, Haakon thought, but the fear was even louder. Fear. *‘What is it I fear? Am I afraid of heights? No. I fear not making it to Valhalla, by dying outside of battle.’*

“That’s right, and what you fear most will be your fate if you don’t stand. Do you not remember what happened that day? We may have had our first taste of cowardice, begging for our life while we hung there, but as that bastard leered down at us, taunting our fate, we got angry. We got angry and decided that we would not be denied our rightful destiny. We pulled ourselves up, fighting for every inch, and hurled him down the mountain, watching as his body broke and splattered the whole way down. Stand Haakon, The Dreaded Butcher.”

Haakon grabbed onto the strength the words brought him, like a man trying to climb up on a life raft. It wasn’t easy, but with a mighty shout, both aloud and in his mind, Haakon gripped the edge of the invisible path and lifted The Artificer to safety. Trying to keep the momentum going, still screaming inside, Haakon scooped up the artifacts The Artificer dropped, then The Artificer himself, who was out cold. For a brief moment, Haakon tried to fumble with the Pathfinder, but it was no good. It would take too long to figure out how to use it properly. He checked how far they were from their destination, and guessed it was about ten to fifteen meters away, but he had no way to know where the path turned.

‘If I inch along really slowly, I might be able to get us there, but The Artificer doesn’t have that long.’

Already the fear was nipping away at the edges of his mental fortitude. There was no time to think. He knew that at any moment he was going to return to his panic-stricken self.

He thought that if he was able to slip into the Asha-Hadad trance, which he had come to think of as his *semi-berserker* trance, he would be able to gain enough fortitude to make the leap, but slipping into the Asha-Hadad trance was done through a meditative-like practice, and he was too on edge to put himself in that mental state. He had two other options, though the one he doubted would dull his fear enough. So instead, he began mulling over and focusing on centuries of pent-up anger over his begotten fate. He thought about the witch Sadikur and the

men he'd tortured for days, just to spite him. He thought about all the years he spent wandering this world, alone, not daring to make new connections. He thought about how the one person he trusted and cared about the most betrayed him and did the one thing she'd promised she'd never do, and took away his freedom. He thought about what had led her to do that. It didn't take long for his anger to push through the fear, and he was able to slip into the *Rei-Hadad* trance, or, as he'd come to think of it, his *full*-berserker trance.

All this hatred and rage washed through him until it came out in a primal roar, and he started seeing red.

Haakon backed up a few meters and ran, steadfast, across the slippery path and launched himself, and The Artificer, across the remainder of the chasm. They soared through the air, against a wind that tried to keep them away, and landed on the edge with barely an inch to spare, but Haakon didn't even notice; rage was fueling his actions. He had hardly enough wherewithal to keep hold of his companion as he marched to the next floor, where he hoped to find plenty of creatures to satiate his bloodlust; Amber, and the domain's master forgotten.

Chapter 22. Unexpected Visitor

1.

The main hub for the Bedford Police Department was down the road from where Maria and Greg had gone to get blood drawn, and just like then, the pair found themselves in a waiting room for far longer than they expected. For Maria, the police station was always a bed of tension and chaos, an experience almost as draining as being at the hospital, but it felt like the normal levels of tension had been cranked up and mixed in with an air of confusion, which fed her growing sense of dread and anxiety. What stole her focus, however, was Greg. When they realized they were going to have to wait, Maria had expected Greg to start pacing

and muttering wildly, like he'd done earlier, but he remained surprisingly calm. At first, she thought he was just showing restraint because of where they were, but the longer they sat there the more she became worried over his lack of interest, and she realized that some of his emotions were still being muted. As far as she could remember she had never accidentally used her ability before, but she couldn't deny that she had altered her husband's mental state, she had felt it happen.

When they'd been there for around half an hour, Greg finally began showing signs that he was coming out of whatever mental repose Maria had accidentally forced him into. She'd felt the irritation quickly working its way through him, and moments later he began tapping his feet impatiently, then looking about and making irritated noises shortly after that. It came as something of a relief, at least for a few minutes, but when Det. Randolph brought them back fifteen minutes later, she could feel Greg's discontent ready to burst at the seams. A deep concern swelled up inside her as an image of him being put in handcuffs came into sharp focus in her mind, and she worried there was a very real chance of it coming to pass.

The stocky, grey-haired detective walked them through the bull pen, where the officer's desks sat, most of which were currently occupied by officers filling out paperwork, making phone calls, or taking statements, and brought them into a small room that only housed a square desk, and a number of chairs stacked in the corner. The detective set out chairs for the three of them and apologized for the wait, saying there had been an uptake in calls, due to sightings of "*strange and unsettling figures*" seen throughout the town.

Maria felt her heart skip. In her mind she saw a man so sickly skinny his skin was nearly transparent, with blue flames for eyes. "What kind of strange figures?"

"It's nothing you need to concern yourself with," Det. Randolph said dismissively, "Either just some pranksters trying to scare people, or some college kids trying to film a movie without permits."

“Oh.” She wanted to ask about the monster that she saw that night but, try as she might, she couldn’t think of a way to ask that didn’t leave her sounding suspicious, so she let it go.

The detective wasted no time on pleasantries, or obtuse questions, and asked Maria where she went yesterday, and why she’d suddenly left. Thing started off fine, she explained to him that she’d gone to New York with a woman who claimed to know where to find her daughter, and when he asked her to elaborate, she began with when she found out about a potential new client that would only meet with her, but it wasn’t long before Greg started to take over the conversation. First by interjecting with what he thought had happened, then answering questions directed toward Maria, until finally Detective Randolph had to threaten to remove him from the room if he didn’t remain quiet. Once he promised to keep silent, the detective had Maria start her story from the beginning. As she recalled the events, she could feel her husband’s growing agitation while he desperately fought to not interrupt with his own thoughts and theories.

When she concluded her story with her leaving the hotel in New York, Detective Randolph made her go over everything again from the beginning, only this time he stopped her every few seconds to give more details on things she said, his notes doubling from her first telling. Maria knew she would have to answer questions about her story. She even figured she would have to go over it a few times, but the longer they sat there the more prominent the doubt coming from the detective became, betraying his neutral expression and professional demeanor.

“Is there a problem Mr. Wilson?” Detective Randolph asked, cutting off Maria’s third telling as she got to the part where she and Lenoir had left the restaurant. Towards the end of her second telling Greg had begun muttering to himself, inaudibly at first, but it wasn’t long before Maria started picking out words. Now Greg’s muttering was no longer quiet enough that only she heard it, and words like “*unbelievable*” and “*incompetence*” were being thrown around.

“I don’t know detective. How long are you going to sit here asking the same questions?” Greg snapped.

“As many times as I must, until I feel sure I understand what happened,” the detective replied calmly.

“What’s to understand? Some organ trafficker targeted my wife, probably after hearing about our daughter being missing, and figured she’d be an easy target since she’s vulnerable. We’re just waiting to hear what they drugged her with.”

“And you feel sure this is what happened?”

“Of course. Even if it wasn’t for her organ’s, this woman wanted something from my wife, and it wasn’t money. I have no doubt.”

“Mmhmm. And what about you, Mrs. Wilson? Do you feel the same as your husband?”

“Of course she-,”

“Mr. Wilson, I’m speaking to your wife now. Mrs. Wilson do you believe this is true?”

“Yes,” Maria said, looking down at the square table.

“Yes, you think you were drugged and kidnapped?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” The room was silent for over a minute as the detective looked over his notes. “Give me a moment, please.” He stood and went out into the hall.

“I can’t believe this,” Greg muttered, “I used to think he was one of the good ones, but now I see he’s just as incompetent as the rest. No wonder he hasn’t found Amber. We’re going to have to hire a private detective. As soon as we leave here, I’m going to -,”

“Greg! Please, just stop. All you’re doing is making things worse.”

“All I’m trying to do is get things moving along, but he’s stuck at the beginning.”

Maria ignored the rest of what he said and looked at the large panel of reflective glass and wondered if anyone was back there. In the shows there were always three or four people watching the detective interrogate the suspect or witness, but the BPD wasn't a particularly large outfit, and she didn't think they had that many detectives to spare. *'There's probably only one person back there, if any, and if so, he went to go get them, in case one of us freaks out when they tell me I'm under arrest.'*

When Det. Randolph returned a minute later, accompanied by an older, tanned-faced officer, Maria's heart smacked her ribcage, and her stomach dove to the floor. This new officer said nothing, he just gave Maria a curt nod before turning a harsh gaze onto Greg.

"Mr. Wilson, this is Officer Sanders; he's going to take you back to the lobby so you can cool off, while I speak with your wife a little more."

Maria watched despondently as her husband's whole body tensed and grew red with anger and embarrassment. To her relief he kept quiet and followed, but she was worried about what was going to happen if he was left to fester for too long.

"Please don't be too hard on him," Maria began the moment the door closed behind them, "He's not normally that kind of person, he just hasn't slept much since our daughter went missing."

Detective Randolph gave no indication that he heard what she said and instead sat down and began silently combing through his notes again. He read through them all, twice, before having her start over again, but this time he had her start with the night that Amber went missing. The unexpected change caught her off guard and left her stumbling over the beginning of her tale, which left her flustered and made her stumble more and more. By the time she explained that Lenoir didn't want any money for the tickets or the hotel, the plain disbelief had slipped through the detective's professionally blank demeanor. He now looked at her pointedly, a look that told her he already knew what he was going to say and was just waiting for her to finish. The thought that she would need a lawyer by the

time they were done began to set in, as alarms started ringing in the back of her mind.

“I’m going to be straight forward with you Mrs. Wilson, I’m having a real hard time believing what you’re telling me. Do you know why that is?” Not trusting her voice not to betray her nerves, Maria just shook her head, eyes on the square table. “It’s because you sound like you’re trying to convince *yourself* with every word,” Detective Randolph paused for a moment, letting his words sink in, “And not just this fanciful flight to New York. Listening to you recount what happened the night your daughter went missing has been making me wonder if maybe you know more. Cause it sounds like you’re also trying to convince yourself of what went down that night too.”

“No!” Maria nearly shouted, her heart pounding, “I-I told you, everything was dark, but I think-,”

“You think you saw a sickly-looking man jump out of the second-floor window with your daughter and land without hurting either of them, then took off running,” Maria tried to interject but the detective held up a hand, silencing her and kept going, “I know. It was dark, and adrenaline and memory and blah blah blah. And maybe you’re telling the truth. Hell, I’d *really* like to believe that, but frankly, I don’t. Not with everything that’s been presented.”

“Look I told you what I *thought* I saw that night, and what I *think* that Ms. Lenoir *might* have intended, but I don’t *know*.”

“Mmhmm. Tell me, before the night your daughter went missing, how had things been between you and your husband?” he asked, ignoring her plea.

“What?”

“I know the two of you are under a lot of stress right now, but is he often irritable, or controlling in your everyday lives?”

“What? No. I told you he just hasn’t slept.”

“I see. So, you’ve never felt worried for you or your daughter's safety?”

“No. He’s a great husband and father; he just needs to rest.”

“Okay. Putting any feelings of danger aside, has your husband ever shown any signs of mania before this week? Has he ever disappeared for an extended period of time or threatened to leave with your daughter?”

“No, never.”

With each question the panic Maria felt was growing, making it harder to think straight. She started to wonder if telling Detective Randolph the truth might be better. Sure, he would think she was crazy if she admitted to what she had come to believe. He might even think she was unfit to be a parent and reach out to child protective services, but she was sure that the detective was on the verge of accusing either her, or her husband, of something criminal, and thought that perhaps it was better that he thought she was crazy than possibly a murderer or somehow involved with her daughters disappearance. As it was, he was technically right, she was lying, and when the bloodwork came back negative, there were going to be a lot more questions, questions that she didn’t have answers to. *‘Perhaps it’s better to get the truth out now before he thinks I made it up later.’* “Look, detective, this is going to sound crazy but -,”

Before she could say anymore there was a knock at the door, and Detective Randolph called for whoever was out there to open it. A sour-faced officer poked his head in and gestured for the detective to step out into the hall. The detective did so begrudgingly, his irritation filling the room like a gas that would explode with a single spark. She could hear angry whispers coming from the hall, but she could not make out anything that was being said. A minute later he stepped back into the room with an unreadable expression on his face, and a sense of confusion hanging around him. “You’ll have to excuse me for a few minutes, something’s come up that needs my immediate attention.”

Detective James Randolph had been part of the Bedford Police Department, and a member of the community, for almost twenty years. In that time, he had worked on a large number of missing person cases, the vast majority of which were teenagers who had gotten into a fight with their parents, and most of the rest were spouses on a bender or shacked up with someone behind their partner's back. There had been some exceptions. Nick Wilder's mom had taken him in the middle of the night, after losing custody to her ex-husband. It had been a joint venture with three other police departments to track them down and return the boy safely. Rachael Bennett was taken by her uncle in the middle of the afternoon just last year. He took her to a cabin in the woods because he was convinced that they were hours away from a world ending apocalypse. They later found out he'd stopped taking his medicine and had suffered a psychotic break. When they found Rachael, she was frightened but otherwise unharmed. The same could not be said about Dominique Free, Tyrone Hill, or Monica Marriott. Three names he would never forget, three faces he saw sometimes when he tried to sleep, because he failed to find them in time.

From the first time he spoke to Greg and Maria Wilson, Det. Randolph was left with a sinking feeling that he might be adding another name to that list. Something didn't feel right about their story. It seemed clear to the detective that at least one of them wasn't sharing all the details and he suspected it was Ms. Wilson. In the days since Amber Wilson disappeared from her home that feeling had increased, as did his determination to find the missing girl. Despite this, he had yet to find a single clue that might lead to the girl's whereabouts. He had a crew comb through phone and internet records, while he talked to neighbors and coworkers, and canvassed every conceivable part of town, but all he had to go on was the mothers frantic tale. A tale which had grown more timid and less believable every time he heard her tell it. He felt sure she knew something about the kidnapper that she wasn't saying. It was why he had been insistent on getting both of the Wilson's phone and computer records and had been a little surprised when he met no resistance.

Maria's sudden trip to New York had set off all sorts of red flags, and he felt *almost* sure she had staged the entire thing; some sort of elaborate plan to get her

and her daughter away from her husband, who seemed more unstable each time the detective saw him. A large part of him truly didn't believe she was coming back, but her return had done little to lessen his suspicions.

Now that he had her voluntarily in an interrogation room, he planned on keeping her there answering questions until she slipped up or realized what was happening and asked for a lawyer. He had felt sure Mrs. Wilson was about to crack and tell him what he wanted to know, so when a knock on the door interrupted whatever she was about to say, the detective barely managed to stop himself from swearing before he shouted for whoever was there to enter. When Det. Dillard stuck his pinched face in and gestured for him to step into the hall without so much as a word, he had to push back the urge to ignore him.

"What do you want Mick? She was just about to tell me something that could lead to the missing girl. I know it."

Det. Randolph had known the other officer for a little over five years, ever since he transferred to the BPD from Denver. In that time, he was sure he had only ever witnessed two emotions from Det. Dillard, his usual straight-faced, no-nonsense demeanor, and anger. The kind of anger that was rumored to have landed him with a mandatory therapist back in Denver. Now it appeared he was witnessing a third emotion, a sort of awkward befuddlement, that read in both the man's tone and features.

"That's the thing Jim. There's someone here to see you about the case. She says she might have a lead on the kidnapper."

"What? Who?"

"Said her name was Janvier Lenoir I believe. She says she's an associate of the Wilsons. You should see the get-up this lady's wearing."

'Well, I'll be damned,' Det. Randolph thought. After listening to Mrs. Wilson's story, he wasn't sure he believed this Lenoir person was real, yet she was apparently here, having waltzed in and claiming to know where Amber is. *'If this is some sort of stunt, they'll all be taking an extended stay over in the county jail cells while I get this sorted out.'* "Alright, where is she?"

“Down the hall. I had Nel bring her to room three while I came and got you. A man in the lobby flew into a rage when he saw her. The father of the missing child from what it sounds like. He started screaming and cussin’, so Seth and Mikey C stepped in while Nel brought her back. I would have had her wait at your desk, but her presence is, uh, distracting.” When he finished speaking Det. Dillard shook his head, a frown tightening his already pinched face. “Somethings not right about her, and it’s not just the crazy getup.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Something in my gut just tells me she’s trouble. When I looked into her eyes, there was something there that put me on edge.”

The two officers exchanged a few more words before Det. Randolph stepped back into the room with Mrs. Wilson, just long enough to tell her something had come up, before he made his way down the hall to room three.

Unlike the interrogation room he had been speaking to Mr. and Mrs. Wilson in, room three was a conference room but it was sometimes used as an interview room when people came forward with information and the BPD wanted them to feel more relaxed. Sitting at the long, wood table, in the center of the room, was a woman in an elegant purple dress, with matching headdress and satin gloves, and a parasol draped across her lap. The detective's first thought was that it reminded him of his daughter's prom dress, but after a couple of seconds he thought it was more like a dress from that show his wife always watched, about caddy British aristocrats in the eighteen-hundreds trying to hook up. It was clear why her presence had been distracting, it was hard not to look at her, but in just those few moments he felt like he knew why she had put Det. Dillard on edge. There was something wild about her, irrelevant to what she was wearing. It hung in the air around her, like a perfume whose scent put you on edge, and it stared out at you from behind those doey eyes. He had spoken with many people who were no longer fully in touch with the world around them, both from drug abuse and severe mental illness. Often these people came off as perfectly normal at first, but he could almost always tell by the look in their eyes, and this woman looked like she was skating on the edge of reality.

“Ms. Lenoir, I presume?”

“That’s right,” she said with a crooked smile and stood, reaching out to take the offered hand, “Are you the lead detective on the Amber Wilson case?”

That’s correct I -,” as Det. Randolph shook the woman’s gloved hand; a strange feeling began to worm its way through his body. It felt warm, pleasant even. A euphoric rush that turned his insides into mush and set off all the pleasure centers in his brain. When the feeling reached his legs, he swayed a little, but he hardly noticed, too entranced by what he was feeling. When she spoke, he heard her words, but they had little meaning to him. By the time his body turned to leave the room in response to the woman’s request, he was already so far gone that he didn’t notice. The only thing he cared about was the entrancing feeling that now consumed his entire existence.

Chapter 23. Madness. Clarity.

1.

By the time Det. Randolph stepped back into the interrogation room, Maria had decided she was going to tell him the truth. Mostly. She would tell him that she didn’t think that she had been drugged, but had just been desperate and distraught, and had foolishly believed this *crazy* woman’s wild claims. She just hoped that the detective would chalk it up to temporary insanity, though she wasn’t willing to believe she’d get that lucky. She had no idea how the detective was going to react, but she decided it was better to come out with it now before her blood work came back. Whatever the consequences, Maria felt sure they would be worse the longer she waited. She just hoped she could convince him that she no longer believed what Lenoir and Robbie had told her.

When she heard the door start to creak open, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, readying herself for what was to come. “Detective I... there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

Maria nearly jumped out of her seat when she heard the familiar voice and opened her eyes in time to watch the pageantly dressed woman slink into the tiny interrogation room, followed closely behind by Det. Randolph.

“What are you doing here?” She felt she should be excited by Lenoir’s sudden arrival, but something about it unnerved her. Still, there was a flash of hope, and she looked at the detective, and into his stern, brown eyes, hoping to find some reassurance, but nothing seemed to be looking back at her. No light shone from those eyes. An alarming sense of bliss was coming from the detective, making her think he’d been drugged, and had her starting to question if maybe Greg had been right. Before she could stop herself, she asked, “What did you do to him?”

“Just a little charm to make him more cooperative,” Lenoir smiled as she approached, a sight that should have made her features shine but instead made them appear gaunt and hollow, underneath the swirl of madness in her eyes. The same madness was rolling off her, like it was leaking from her pores, and filled the room like a miasma.

Maria stood and backed away as far as she could but quickly found herself with her back against the wall. “What do you want? What are you doing here?”

“Well, that should be obvious, I would think,” standing less than two feet away Lenoir reached out and put a gentle hand on Maria’s shoulder, “I want to take you to see your daughter.” A strange but pleasant feeling began to fill Maria’s body, and she was soon consumed by it entirely.

For the first time since shortly after Amber was born, Greg felt the harsh but soothing cigarette smoke fill his lungs. He had been trying to quit even before Maria had gotten pregnant and had cut back significantly by the time Amber was born but had struggled to really kick the habit. That was until the day he happened to overhear Maria's sister complaining that the baby always smelled like cigarettes after he held her. He had felt so disgusted by himself that within three weeks he'd smoked his last one. He really, truly felt he was done with them, despite the occasional craving, but over the last few months he'd been edging closer to his old habit. He had even gone out and bought a pack after disposing of Amber's bedroom carpet, after it inexplicably grew grass nearly a foot high, but threw the pack away later that night, unopened. The morning after the kidnapping he'd stopped at a gas station and bought another, this time he opened the pack and had a cigarette between his lips before he threw it down and crushed it beneath his shoe. He was determined not to fall back on his old crutch, but he had not been able to bring himself to throw away the pack that time. When Maria left with little more than a cryptic text, he had taken the pack out of his car and spent what felt like hours just staring at it, but he'd stayed strong and put the pack back in the car, still unable to get rid of them.

When the officer had threatened to put him in a holding cell for his reaction when the elegantly dressed woman stepped inside, he practically ran to his car and went right for the pack. The moment he lit the first one he tried to throw it away, but found himself lighting up another soon after, and felt like it was the only thing keeping him from walking across the street to where the limo was parked and checking to see who was inside. That and the officer he knew was watching him from the lobby of the police station.

He was angry, tired, embarrassed, but mostly he felt like an asshole. He had for most of the day. While not always the most self-aware person, Greg wasn't so oblivious that he didn't realize he'd been acting like a crazy person, though that knowledge had done little to keep him from continuing to react as such.

'What do you want? Why are you here?' he thought, eyes glued to the vehicle he was sure *she* had arrived in. Maria had described Janvier Lenoir in detail and mentioned that they'd traveled in high-end limousines. He was sure the woman

he saw entering the station was her and the vehicle only proved it, as far as he was concerned. The only thing he couldn't figure out was what on earth she was doing there. He racked his mind but the only thing he could think of was that she was somehow trying to get ahead of, what would hopefully be, an investigation into her and whatever shady dealings she was involved in, but for the life of him he couldn't fathom what her angle was.

'God I'm so tired.' His thoughts soon turned to Amber, as they always did since the night she'd gone missing. *'Amber... wherever you are, please be safe.'*

Using the dying ember of one cigarette to light another, Greg continued to stare across the road, but his thoughts stayed with Amber. Since she was taken, he had remained steadfast in his belief they would see her again and had vehemently pushed aside any thoughts to the contrary. Now, tired beyond the point of exhaustion, he no longer had the strength to fight the gnawing feeling he might not ever see her again.

He took one last drag of his cigarette and wiped away the tears before they could fall, deciding he would go and see if the officer would let him back inside. He wanted to be with his wife, to apologize for how he'd been behaving, but he doubted they'd let him see her until Det. Randolph was finished questioning her. Still, he thought waiting in the lobby would be better than staying out here, less tempting to do something he knew was dumb.

As he started down the short cement walkway toward the front entrance of the BPD building, Det. Randolph came walking out and held the door open for the woman he assumed was Lenoir and - "Maria!"

His wife was just a few steps behind the obscenely purple woman, and both of them walked right past him as if he wasn't there. For a second, he just stood there, surprised that Maria just flatly ignored him. *'Just how pissed is she?'* He had no doubts that she wasn't very happy with him over his behavior, and expected she wasn't going to be too thrilled when she smelled cigarette smoke on him, but to outright ignore him wasn't like her.

“Maria, hold on.” Greg placed a hand on her shoulder and gave her a soft tug, trying to get her to stop and face him. It partially worked; she stopped walking but still faced away from him. “Maria, I’m so sorry. I know I’ve been an ass, and I probably deserve the cold shoulder treatment, but you gotta tell me what’s going on. Where are you going? What’s *she* doing here?” Maria continued to gaze forward silently, but didn’t try to pull away. “Honey, look at me, please.” He gave her another tug on her shoulder and this time she turned to face him. “Oh my god... What happened to you?” Greg stared into his wife’s golden brown eyes and nearly cried. She stared back at him, but there was nothing behind those eyes that said she saw him. She just stared blankly. The spark, the fire, the passion, all the things he normally saw when he looked into her eyes, were gone. “Maria what happened? Are you okay?” He looked back to find Det. Randolph, still standing there, holding the door and watching the whole thing play out. “Detective please, there’s something wrong with my wife. I don’t know what happened but...” Greg’s words trailed off as he met the officers’ stares. It was the same blank, the same void stare his wife was currently giving him. “What the hell did you do to them?” He called after Lenoir, who ignored him and kept on walking. “Hey! What the hell did you do?” Rage flared up inside as he watched her walk away. Ignoring the warning signs that shown like neon lights around the woman, he cleared the short distance between them. “Listen here bitch; you’re going to tell me what you did to my wife.”

Grabbing the woman by the forearm he forced her around to face him, barely hearing the shouts coming from the officer who had been watching from inside. As he spun her around Lenoir brought her parasol up and slammed it into the side of his head, making his ears ring and forcing him to let go of her arm.

“How dare you touch me you cur!” Lenoir spat venomously.

“Hey that’s enough! Both of you! Dammit Jim, why the hell are you just standing there?” The officer came to stand between them, ready to stop either of them if they tried to retaliate further. Greg started to say something but stopped and watched, stunned, as Lenoir reached out and took the officer’s hand, just for a second, and the officer visibly went slack, an alarming, blank expression replacing the serious scowl he’d been giving the two of them.

“Now Maria, come along.”

Maria, who had remained where she was, still looking back, turned and started walking toward Lenoir.

“Wait!” Greg cried as he came to stand in front of her, “Maria please listen to me. I don’t know what she gave you, but you have to snap out of it.” Greg let out a gasp of pain as the slack faced officer walked up behind him and yanked both of his arms back and forced him to his knees.

“That’s enough out of you,” Lenoir barked, “Now, you’re going to stay there and be quiet, and if you do, maybe, just *maybe*, you’ll see your wife again when this is all over.”

“Like hell I am, and you’re not going anywhere with her!” Straining with all his might, Greg fought to get out of the officer’s grip, but he was held firmly in place. A cruel grin spread across Lenoir’s face as she watched him struggle, further fueling his rage. “Fuck you! Maria, dammit, please! Snap out of it! I’m sorry, alright. I’m sorry for acting crazy. I’m sorry for what I said about *OUR* daughter. I love her, and I love you. Please, we can get through this together. Please Maria, don’t go with this woman.” For just a moment Greg stopped struggling as Maria stopped in her tracks and slowly turned to look down at him, a look of confusion replacing the blank stare she had been giving him up until now. “That’s it. Yes, honey, listen to me. I’m sorry, and I promise that -.”

His words were cut off as his throat clamped shut, like something was wrapped tightly around it. At first, Greg thought the officer had started strangling him but both hands were pinning his arms behind his back still. *‘What the hell is happening to me?’* He looked up at Maria, their eyes locked. He saw recognition in them. Recognition and fear. But it only lasted a moment.

Lenoir came up alongside Maria and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, like they were posing for a picture, and looked down at Greg with a cruel, thin-lipped smile that told him everything he needed to know, even if he didn’t understand how.

Tears rolled down his cheeks from a mix of fear and anger, panic and regret. He was growing lightheaded, his vision getting blurry around the edges, and he no longer had the strength to try and free himself from the officer's grip. The whole time he looked up at his wife pleadingly, trying to ignore the grin from the *fiend* standing next to her, but never again did she show any recognition, she just stared as the man she'd loved for over a decade slowly suffocated in front of her.

In his final moments a bit of clarity seeped through the panic, and he prayed, not for himself but for his wife and his daughter. Never a religious man, he begged whoever might be out there to watch over his family and see them safe when all was said and done. *'Amber... Maria... I'm sorry. I wish I could be there for you.'*

Before the last of his vision faded, Greg thought he saw one of the strangest people he'd ever seen; a pale, portly man, sporting a cane, and wearing a pristine suit, all white, except for a pair of brown loafers. The absurd man popped into existence, just long enough to wink and nod, as though he'd heard Greg's prayer.

Chapter 24. A Massacre of Horrors

1.

Robbie felt disoriented when he opened his eyes and saw the night sky above him. His body ached and felt heavy, but it was nothing compared to his head, which throbbed, making his thoughts feel sluggish. Each breath was a rattling wheeze, the sound of his lungs pushing against a great weight crushing his chest. He looked around, moving only his eyes, and saw he was in a small clearing, surrounded by trees. A small fire blazed nearby, providing his shivering body with much needed warmth. Unable to see Haakon from where he lay, Robbie tried to speak but his voice cracked, and all he managed was a low groan. Against the protest of his body, Robbie slowly sat up and looked around. He didn't immediately spot the skeleton, but assumed he'd been the one to light the fire. He

also assumed Haakon had been the one to brutally maul the indistinguishable hunk of meat that was leaning up against a nearby tree.

“Good, you’re awake.”

Robbie turned and found Haakon skulking nearby, standing at the edge of a field of gore that was *almost* comical in its obscene brutality. Had he anything left in his stomach, it would have come violently rushing out, but instead, he started to dry heave and looked away. He tried desperately to purge the image from his mind, but it was already burned into his retinas.

Robbie wanted to shout but all he managed was a weak, “What the hell man?”

“Sorry. I needed to build a fire for you and there are only two clearings in these woods.”

“I suppose the other clearing’s just as bad.”

“No, but it’s too close to the enemy.” There was a harsh edge to the warrior’s words that Robbie never noticed before, so he decided to let it go for now.

“Right. So how long was I out for?”

“A couple of hours I think, but I’m not entirely sure.”

“I see. Looks like you were busy while I was out. Sorry I keep sleeping on the job.”

“No need to apologize. Though it would have been your own fault if you’d died back there. Honestly, the nerve.”

‘*Ouch.*’ “I suppose you’re right. And I suppose I owe you a huge thanks for saving my life, both out over the chasm and from all this here.” Robbie dared to look back at the carnage and immediately regretted it. The gore on the third floor had been hard to look at, but he’d been in the thick of it and they had been onto the next floor by the time the adrenaline started to waver. Seeing this now, feeling like he barely had the strength to sit, was too much to handle.

“Don’t thank me. It’s pure luck that you weren’t killed by one of these things.” Haakon came and sat near the fire but continued to stare at the destruction he wrought.

Now that he was in the light Robbie got a good look at the skeleton’s clothes, which were barely holding together, and his left hand which was no longer there. “Haakon, your hand?”

The skeleton raised his arm and stared at it for a second before shrugging and saying, “Thus is the cost of battle.”

“Uh, okay. You want to tell me what happened?”

“No. No I do not.”

2.

Whatever came before, and whatever his purpose might have been, no longer mattered to Haakon. The moment he stepped through the door and into the woods he disregarded the man he’d been carrying, no longer able to remember who he was or why he was carrying him in the first place.

The creatures of the woods were waiting for him, hidden in the shadows, but the false moon gave off enough light for him to see, and he eagerly rushed forward to greet them. Both weapons grew with hard-light, and Haakon used Sársauki to cut through the tree hiding his nearest foe. The deformed man threw himself to the ground just in time, but Haakon skirted the falling tree and smashed the man’s head in before he could stand. Many of those he spotted nearby appeared to be highly deformed humans, wearing worn-out clothes. Five of them came out of hiding, leveling shotguns and rifles, while four more came charging at him with hammers and crowbars, shouting madly into the night. Haakon ignored those charging at him and focused on those with guns. His defenses were good but if a lucky shot got through and destroyed his spine or shoulder, it would be a problem. He charged the nearest gunner, taking an indirect path that cut back and forth through the trees to

keep them from lining up a shot, but he needn't bother. He was too fast for the deformed humans and soon they were little more than splatter on the trees.

Other creatures soon approached; many were human in appearance, but not all were deformed like those he first came across. Some looked normal, while others were heavily scarred or disfigured. Several wore masks and brandished knives or machetes, while others carried firearms of all sizes and calibers. There was all manner of animals as well. Wolves, bears, alligators, snakes, but they were different than those he'd faced on the floors below. They weren't mutated, just more vicious than the real thing, and with an inherent bone to pick with Haakon. As he cleared the initial wave of constructs that came charging at him, a massive wormlike creature came tearing through the soil and tried to pull him into the dirt with three tentaclelike appendages. They slithered out from the creature's mouth and clamped down on Haakon's legs with smaller mouths of their own, but he smashed the bulbous creature back into the ground like it was an arcade mole. A pack of werewolves overtook a mass of shuffling zombies and tried to turn him into a chew toy, at the same time as a prong-faced alien fired a laser mounted on his shoulder, but missed, and vaporized one of the werewolves. Looking upon those he slaughtered gave him a sense of recognition, buried in the deepest reaches of his mind, but he didn't care what they were, so long as he had something to sink his blades into.

Everywhere he went, everywhere he looked, it was like the woods had come alive to try and take him down. Even some of the trees tried to hold him down by wrapping him with branches and roots, but he never stopped moving for long. One of his axes was always arcing through the air to sever the limbs of, or to smash the skulls of, whatever was near him. Guns were a problem, but no one could get a good shot, he was too quick, and their surroundings worked in his favor. He made them a priority though, and it wasn't long before the cacophony of gunfire became nothing more than a few potshots that never came close.

The constructs continued to file in from deeper in the woods, growing larger, and more fierce the further they came from, as if they'd been carefully placed in order by size and strength, but Haakon continued to turn the sixth floor into a slaughterhouse.

The approach of several large creatures shook the ground nearby. Trees were uprooted and knocked aside, and other constructs were crushed undertow, caught up in the large creature's rush to get to Haakon. Had he any sense of self, Haakon would have marveled at the prehistoric beast that came charging at him, fifteen-thousand pounds of muscle and fury, that hadn't walked the earth in sixty-six million years, but Haakon didn't have any sense of self, only his berserker rage, so he wordlessly charged the T-Rex, and cut the creature from chin to tail. More prehistoric creatures came stomping through the woods, and they all met the same fate. It wasn't just dinosaurs either; massive spiders and insects also bared down on him, and all were slaughtered for their efforts.

Haakon cut his way through trees and creatures alike, until he found himself in a clearing, where he was truly able to unleash his fury. Creatures poured into the field from every direction, so he planted himself in the center and let them come to him. Men ran underfoot of giants, wolves raced lions, winged creatures big and small came swooping in from overhead, all with the desire to tear him to pieces. Haakon let loose a deranged, blood curdling warrior's cry and went to work. He cut the legs off a two-story tall spider and let its bulbous top fall and crush a gaggle of raptors and rabid forest critters. He severed the arm of a lumpy, moss colored giant, then bashed in its right knee so it would cut off a charging T-Rex. Dozens of bats came swooping in, trying to obscure his vision, but he cut through most of them in quick succession, and those that remained formed into a pale-skinned man in a long, swooping cape. This newly formed creature came rushing at him, bearing a mouthful of sharp fangs but Haakon used Refsing to smash it into the dirt. A dark skinned, long headed alien lashed out with its tail and knocked him to the ground, but he popped back up before the creature could pounce, and cut off a section of its elongated head, sending a spray of green blood splattering across a man with a chainsaw. The man dropped the chainsaw and bellowed in pain as the blood sizzled and ate away at his flesh. Haakon changed directions and found himself facing an inordinate amount of clowns, of all shapes and sizes, some human, some not. Most quickly fell before him, but some bore obscure alien weapons that kept him at a distance for a bit, and one kept changing shape and seemed impervious, until it became a giant crablike spider, and Haakon managed to cut it in half. Chains with no origin point snaked along the grass and momentarily slowed him by binding his

arms and legs, but it didn't last long. Manifesting his aura through sheer force of will, he snapped the chains and soon found the sadistic looking creature that conjured them and took its head.

Never before had he heard Sársauki and Refsing ring and callout like they did now. To him it was the most beautiful sound in the world. He never wanted it to stop, but soon fewer and fewer creatures came, until only a handful remained, who seemed more content to stalk and wait, hoping for an opportunity to catch Haakon off-guard. All except for one. One that waded through the carnage still, and kept on a relentless attack, now that it had nothing else to contest with. Haakon had exchanged blows with the creature throughout his slaughter, but he hadn't noticed. Now, hatred mixed in with the rage fueling Haakon's Rei-Hadad trance, though he didn't know why, and was too far gone for thought beyond a surface level. All he knew was that he loathed the ghoulish creature before him; the sickly old man with blue fire for eyes.

3.

The Ghoul was fast, but Haakon was faster. The Ghoul was strong, but Haakon was stronger. The problem was, the demonic old man kept getting back up, no matter how many times Haakon buried an axe into its chest, or *shaved* off its scraggly beard, and its head along with it. It wasn't the only one. Several of the masked and deformed humans kept pulling themselves together, and seemed to appear out of nowhere, but they were of little consequence. The Ghoul was Haakon's only concern.

With no weapon of its own, the man with flames for eyes picked through the bevy of weapons strewn about the clearing as they fought. Knives, swords, guns, even severed limbs. They went at each other furiously until Haakon cut it down, then waited for it to rise, so he could do it all again. How long this cycle repeated he wasn't sure but, after a time, he grew bored with this game and decided he would end it by flattening his opponent against the ground so completely it would

become part of the soil. The Ghoul must have sensed the change in Haakon, because that's when it took to the trees.

For a while, The Ghoul kept out of reach but only just. Haakon was faster but his quarry was more agile and knew the woods well. Enraged, Haakon began cutting down the trees to try and close the gap, cutting a straight path forward, the entire time bellowing like a madman. Still, the sickly old man stayed out of reach until they came upon another wide, circular clearing. At the center of this clearing was a small structure, though Haakon didn't notice. His focus was singular, and he was nearly ready to strike. The Ghoul ran towards the small structure but made a sudden, breakneck turn that snapped its ankles and sent it tumbling out of reach of Haakon's attack, who had too much forward momentum to immediately change directions. He started to slow, enough to turn around and as he did...

4.

... Haakon hit the ground and held out his arms to keep the large, split faced, grey skinned creature from devouring his skull. He was greatly confused as to where he was or what was going on, but centuries of training kicked in and he found the creature's center of gravity and tossed it off him. The creature hit the ground and rolled but bound back at Haakon before the warrior had a chance to get his balance. He slammed into and through a hefty tree that snapped like a thunder crack, and fell towards the nightmarish creature, slowing it down enough for Haakon to get his footing. With no sign of Sársauki or Refsing, Haakon charged the creature with nothing but his fist. At first the construct kept trying to grab him so it could bite down and rip off his skull, until Haakon tore off a section of its segmented head, and the construct decided it was fine to just tear the skeleton in half. Haakon used his speed to stay one step ahead and pounded away at the creature until its skin was as red as it was grey, and he was able to force it to the ground. While the creature struggled to rise, Haakon stood on its back and pulled on both of its arms until muscles and tendons tore from the body in a shower of

blood. The creature squealed and wailed but Haakon made quick work of it, beating it with its own arms until it no longer moved or made a sound.

Too alarmed to revel in his victory, Haakon tried desperately to remember where he was or how he got there. He was surrounded by trees and looked up at a false night sky but that's all he knew for sure. The last thing he remembered clearly was standing hundreds of meters in the air, with nothing beneath him, when The Artificer...

Haakon started running and calling for The Artificer, but he got no response. Hazy memories were starting to surface, and he thought he remembered dumping The Artificer unceremoniously by the entrance but which direction that was, he had no idea. Soon he came across a litany of gore and followed it to what he hoped were the stairs to the previous floor. Picturing the worst, he ran as fast as he could through the sea of death that he knew he'd created, even if he didn't remember creating it.

It didn't take long for him to find the entrance and the *person* waiting there for him.

"Who are you?" Even as the words left his mouth, he realized he already knew the answer. The sickly old man with flames for eyes was a construct of Amber's kidnapper, of that he had no doubt. The Ghoulish construct stood there with an evil looking, open-mouthed grin, beneath its wispy beard; loftily holding Haakon's axes. "How did you get your hands on those?" For a second, he wondered if they were created along with the construct, but then he heard their deadly choir bells. They sounded slow and heavy, engorged by the feast of blood. The Ghoul said nothing, just kept smiling, so Haakon focused on the body laying at the creature's feet. When he first spotted him, Haakon thought his companion was already dead, but he could see now he was still breathing. "What do you want? Do you even want something, or are you just an extension of your master's will?" The flames in The Ghoul's eyes grew a little brighter but it said nothing. "Set down my weapons, walk away, and I'll let you live." The Ghoul gestured to The Artificer. Even without words his meaning was clear. "What do I care? I needed him to get

me to this floor, nothing more.” The flames in The Ghoul’s eyes grew brighter still, as it let out a wheezing laugh.

There was a moment, when the laughter died, that all was still, before The Ghoul decided to call Haakon on his bluff and brought Sársauki down to sever The Artificer’s head. Haakon hurled himself forward with all his might and tried to swat away the axe as he tackled the sickly old man to the ground. The magic embedded in Sársauki cut through Haakon’s defenses and severed his boney hand, but he managed to keep the blade from cleaving through The Artificer’s neck, and wrestled Refsing from The Ghoul before being knocked aside. They both got to their feet, and enchanted metal met enchanted stone, as blades collided, sending sparks flying. No longer in his Rei-Hadad trance, The Ghoul was able to match Haakon’s speed, dodging and deflecting as many attacks as it dished out. Unlike the construct though, Haakon had aura to feed the magic in his axe, and the runes started glowing with power. Soon the Ghoul was no longer able to deflect Refsing without being knocked off balance, so it stuck to dodging and lashing out when it could, but its time was numbered. Haakon carefully wore the creature down until he saw his opening and nearly cut The Ghoul in two, right through the chest.

The man with flames for eyes dropped to the ground, momentarily dead, and Haakon took the chance to scoop up Sársauki, placing Refsing in the jagged remains of its holster, and picked up The Artificer before taking off at a sprint. As he was, it would take him too long to build up the hard-light coating needed to smash The Ghoul into pulp, so he put some distance between them to give him time for his strength to recover. While he ran, he took stock of his companion and realized just how bad of shape The Artificer was in. He was shivering something fierce, yet sweating, and had a fresh trail of blood along his neck, on top of all his other burns and bruises.

‘I guess I wasn’t fast enough after all. Damn it. A hair further and he’d be bleeding out.’

They came upon the clearing with the lone structure and for a moment made a beeline towards it but, no longer in his Rei-Hadad trance, it quickly became apparent that it was a bad idea. He couldn’t feel or sense magic to the extent that

Lenoir or The Artificer could, but he could feel magical power utterly flooded out from the small wood building, and he thought it was greater than anything he could remember feeling, say for the witch Sadikur. He felt sure the domain's master resided there, waiting for them. Not willing to wait and see if they'd make the first move, Haakon took off once more and ran until he found the other clearing. He wanted to stash The Artificer and go hunt down the sickly old man, but there were still a handful of constructs roaming the woods and he didn't want to test The Artificer's luck. Instead, he quickly made sure there were no prying eyes, taking care of the couple that were, and carefully hid The Artificer's body amongst the gore, where he wouldn't easily be found, and prepared to face The Ghoul once more.

5.

Haakon didn't have to wait long for the man with flames for eyes. The Ghoul appeared at the edge of the clearing, sword in one hand and an assault rifle in the other. The moment he laid eyes on him, Haakon started to laugh; he couldn't help it. Something about the construct's choice of weapons made him look ridiculous to the undead warrior, though he wasn't foolish enough to let his guard down. No matter how he looked, Haakon knew the sickly old man was a real threat, and that gun was a real problem out in the open like they were. He'd cleared out most of the gunners in the first few *waves* of constructs, but now it seemed he would have to contend with one of the more powerful models left out on the playing field.

Though he was angry and flustered by his recent actions, Haakon had had enough time to both find his center and gather the energy needed to transform Refsing. He charged, slipping into his Asha-Hadad trance and transformed Refsing into a hard-light war hammer. Bullets soared through the air, looking to turn his bones into dust but he stayed one step ahead of the construct's aim, ducking and weaving, and using the mounds of bodies as cover as he quickly closed the distance. The last usable cover was less than ten meters from his target, half of a

giant alien insect, so Haakon let out a roar and leapt over the massive corpse, Refsing poised to flatten the sickly old man. He soared through the air quickly, but immediately realized he'd miscalculated how long it would take him to clear the distance. The Ghoul had time to take aim and sent a hail of gunfire at the warrior, who was stuck in his descending arc. With no time to put up any real defense, some shots found their mark, reducing a section of his ribcage to rubble, but before a bullet could find his spine and cut him in two, Haakon brought down a fully charged Refsing and buried The Ghoul into the ground in a spray of blood and dirt.

Like Gōremu before it, Haakon went to work making sure the sickly old man with flames for eyes would never rise again, not stopping until a crater lay in his place, so deep Haakon had to climb out.

6.

Much to his later shame, Haakon didn't immediately return to The Artificer's side. Some of the anger and rage that had laced his last transformation was still there, poisoning his mind, causing him to slip into the Rei-Hadad trance. He went hunting for the remaining constructs, one by one. Most were the masked humans who, like The Ghoul, kept getting back up until Haakon reduced them to craters as well. When he finally clawed his way back into control of his body, he found himself in the middle of the woods, with no sense of which way he'd come from.

Mercifully, Haakon found The Artificer right where he'd left him, still shivering and looking worse for the wear. He went to work gathering wood for a fire and clearing a place to lay The Artificer, away from some of the carnage. He borrowed his companion's firestone to light the fire and would have accidentally set the clearing ablaze in the process if everything wasn't so slick with gore. With the fire set, Haakon kept watch and took care of the few remaining constructs that

slowly, but surely, made their way to him, looking to finish what the rest had started.

7.

The only thing Haakon told The Artificer was that he'd been forced to clear the floor, which had been full of constructs, and that he knew where the domain's master resided.

Chapter 25. The Cabin in the Woods

1.

It took several minutes to walk from where they were to the second clearing, where Haakon believed the domain's master was waiting for them. The aftermath of Haakon's bloodbath was all around them as they walked, and Robbie was silently horrified by the brutality in which many were killed. Most of the remains had been butchered beyond recognition but Robbie spotted a few severed heads, and notable weapons that gave him an idea as to what Haakon was up against.

"Apparently our host likes videogames *and* horror movies," Robbie muttered.

"Yes, it was quite the colorful cast."

At the center of the second clearing sat a simple wood cabin that looked shabby and weatherworn. Even before the cabin came into view Robbie felt the immense power billowing out from it, and now that they were closer, he wasn't sure if his body was shaking just because he felt ill.

Ever since Robbie confronted Haakon about being trapped in a domain, a hulking elephant had been traveling along with them, one that either refused to acknowledge, at least aloud, choosing instead to push forward since there was no way back. Both knew that the only kind of person that could create a domain in their world, let alone one this complex, was someone whose raw power was at least on par with a fae or demon lord. Even at his peak Robbie couldn't imagine facing someone that powerful and coming out on top. The very thought was a sick joke, and even with the destruction Haakon had just rained down on the constructs inhabiting this floor, Robbie felt there was still a vast distance between him and an otherworldly creature, distinguished for its power.

"How do you want to approach this, Artificer? At this point, I have half a mind to go knock on the damn door."

"I wouldn't do that. At least not yet." Robbie took the mirror artifact from his leather bag and held it up in front of them. The moment the magic became active the mirror began flashing rapidly. "Thought so. One last trap between us and the final boss. Possibly a barrier too."

"Any idea what the spell around it might be?"

"Not yet." Robbie spent a couple minutes trying to get a feel for the magic at play, but his body felt weak, and his head still throbbed, and all he managed to do was confirm that the magic surrounded the cabin in all directions, and that there was in fact a barrier protecting it. He wasn't even sure where exactly the trap would become active, and the magic was too vast to use the mirror to figure it out.

"I think we're just going to have to test the waters," Haakon said once Robbie explained the situation, "I'll go first, that way hopefully whatever triggers won't get both of us. If it's an ambush I don't care if it's a bunch of constructs, or the domain's creator, if possible, I want you to ignore it and get the child and get her away from here."

Robbie didn't love the idea but nevertheless agreed, unable to think of anything better, and knowing he'd just get in the way with the condition he was in.

So, he watched with bated breath as the skeleton warrior cautiously stepped forward and approached the cabin, Sársauki at the ready.

2.

Haakon felt his senses working overtime as he tried to keep aware of everything around him.

“No matter what happens, do not let your guard down until the very end, even if it seems like we’ve won. Remember, nothing here has been as it seems.” He had said those words to The Artificer just before he’d started walking toward the cabin. A fitting final line, he felt, if things didn’t go in his favor. The idea he and Lenoir had come up with to deal with the unruly powerhouse was simple enough, and should still work, in theory, but now that he was here, and able to feel the power for himself, he wasn’t very confident.

As Haakon continued his approach, he became aware of just how tattered his clothes had become, and a reprimanding, *tsk*, ran through his head, encapsulating his disappointment in himself for how quickly he’d let them get ruined. *‘I mean honestly, you could have at least tried to minimize the damage,’* he thought, chastising all the actions he’d taken since they’d begun their so-called “*rescue mission*”.

“Haakon!”

‘Really, it’s been mistake after mistake since I got here. I get one taste of blood and I devolve into a barbarian.’

“Haakon!”

‘I’ve become too relaxed. Too undisciplined. I’ll need to start spending more of my free time practicing my self-control.’

“HAAKON!”

“Wha -.” Haakon’s thoughts felt heavy, and it took him a moment to realize he was no longer walking through the clearing but instead stood stock still, in front of the stairs to the previous floor. Robbie stood behind him, his concern clear in his features. “What happened? How did I end up over here?”

“You walked over here. You got maybe two thirds of the way to the cabin then you just kind of wandered off and made a beeline back here. I kept calling for you, but you were completely unresponsive.”

“I see,” Haakon said slowly, “A simple but effective charm. Our host really was listening to our conversation.” He paused and pulled at the ends of his beard, “So that’s what happened when I was fighting that ghoul.”

“What was that?”

“Never mind. This was a smart play on their behalf. It’s a shame you never went back for that álfur metal.”

Robbie fixed Haakon with a sideways grin that was meant to be cocky, but with his bruised face and mauled clothes, it did more to make him look unhinged. “I said I never took the job; I didn’t say I never went back there.”

3.

Robbie had Haakon attempt to approach the cabin three more times, paying close attention to any changes in either his movement or his aura that would tell him at what point the magic took effect. Each time he got around the same distance to the cabin before he wandered off and walked through the woods and over to the stairs before coming to a halt. There the charm would start to wane to the point where Robbie could pull him from his trance. Even though he kept turning around after about forty feet, Robbie suspected that the charm actually took hold a little sooner, and sure enough on Haakon’s third attempt, he noticed a subtle change in the warrior’s aura, about five feet before he wandered off. Using the firestone,

Robbie burned a large patch of grass where he believed the spell took hold, before going to collect Haakon.

From the moment he first laid eyes on the powerful spells chaotic nature, Robbie knew that simply dispelling the charm wasn't going to happen. He felt completely drained, and it was far too powerful for him to contend with. Even now that he knew what the spell was, and knew that he had the right artifacts to deal with it, he was unable to muster the strength to dispel it.

"I'm going to give it a go now," Robbie told Haakon after the warrior asked if he was to try again, "I have a pretty good idea as to where the charm takes effect but it could potentially affect me at a different pace than you, so I'm going to need you to pay close attention as to where exactly I start to wander off or act different."

Once Haakon gave appropriate assurance that he understood how important it was to be precise, Robbie started forward along the same path he had Haakon walk each time and kept his eyes on both the cabin and the patch of grass he marked.

'Alright, stay focused. I've got to be prepared if our host decides to make a move. Okay, almost there.' Robbie passed the patch of burnt grass and started to think that maybe he'd be able to make it to the cabin unaffected. *"I wonder if Scott's pissed that I called off by text. He's been pretty understanding when I've had to miss work, but he still hadn't got back to me by the time I was sealed in here. Damn. When I get back, I'll- ,"* "Ow!"

As Robbie pondered the fate of his job, entirely unaware of the finer details of his surroundings, he fell over a large rock that protruded from the ground and landed hard, one arm underneath him, his face bouncing off the solid earth. Life came rushing back into focus, the pain running through his arm and chin at the forefront of his attention.

From what Haakon told him, it seemed the charm took hold slower for him than it had for the warrior, so Robbie forced himself to give it another go, not only to make sure, but to get a better taste of the magic. "This time stay close once I

leave the clearing. It would be really inconvenient to come out of this with a broken arm, or twisted ankle.”

When Robbie came too in front of the stairs, same as Haakon had, he knew that his plan should work, at least in theory.

4.

Returning to their designated starting point, Robbie took out two items from his bag and held them tightly. With the pure-iron shiv in one hand and an ancient metal lock in the other, Robbie started towards the cabin for a third time, mind and eyes focused on the cabin and the monstrous power within.

Their plan was simple, while Robbie approached, Haakon would begin pouring power into Sársauki, and when Robbie took down the barrier, he’d throw the cabin door open, while at the same time Haakon would launch himself with enough speed to clear the distance before the magic could change his course. They’d tested that latter part of the plan, and it had worked, in theory. Haakon had slipped into his Asha-Hadad trance and collided with the barrier protecting the cabin before the magic took hold.

‘Fifty feet to go. Forty feet to go. Thirty feet to go. Maybe it is time I move and really go off-grid. Sure, some things will suck but I really just want some peace and quiet. I mean, is it too much to ask to go more than a year without putting my life in danger?’

Robbie cursed when he came to in front of the stairs again, Haakon right next to him, having jumped the gun on his trance-state and launched himself at the cabin in rage.

On his next attempt, instead of focusing on the cabin and the magic permeating the air, Robbie did his best to focus on every inch of his body, every facet of his being. He took a step forward, paying attention to the pull and release of the muscles in his legs, the steady beating of his heart, the air that filled his

lungs and the blood that was flowing through his veins. His thoughts were too focused to keep track of how far he'd come but that didn't matter, he felt the swift river of magic the moment it began to flood his senses and moved to act.

Robbie cried out through clenched teeth, his eyes traveling downward to find the source of his pain. The pure-iron shiv stuck out of his thigh, nearly three inches of metal burrowed beneath his flesh. "Dammit." He'd almost been quick enough, but the magic had taken hold faster than he expected, and instead of a small cut, the break in concentration, combined with his momentum, had left the shiv buried in his leg. The pain pulled him out of the charms grasp, but it wasn't long before Robbie could feel it clawing at the edges of his mind. Focusing on the burning pain, Robbie kept moving forward but with each step the air around him seemed to grow heavier, until it felt like he was wading through a pool of mud.

Another roar of pain escaped from Robbie's cracked lips. Again, he had been a little too slow, the blade sinking in and drawing a fresh pool of blood just a couple of inches below the first wound. When he was only ten feet from the cabin, he cried out for a third time, only this time he'd managed to make a thin cut that hardly bled but hurt enough to pull his focus.

Robbie started to limp the last few feet and came stumbling up against the door. He could feel the thin but powerful layer of magic that was keeping them from getting inside. He opened his left hand, which shook from the effort, and held the metal lock up against the barrier. If it weren't for the charm trying to force him away from the cabin, Robbie was sure he would have been able to take down the barrier without much trouble, but as it was, with the hypnotic magic looming over his thoughts, tuning an artifact's frequency to the barrier's was nearly impossible. Fortunately, the Unlock-Lock didn't need him to do the tuning, it just needed him to get it started. He tried to focus on the artifact, but his thoughts were being rapidly muddled. Pain was the only thing he knew that worked to clear his mind of the charm, but it seemed to be giving diminishing returns. So, as he stared at the artifact in his shaking hand, frantically fighting to keep control of his thoughts, an idea formed that felt as dumb as it was desperate. Without time to give it a second thought Robbie mustered up what strength he had left and drove the pure-iron shiv through the palm of his hand.

The pain was immense, beyond what he'd expected. His vision blurred and he let out a heaving cry. For several seconds all he knew, all he could think about, was the burning, throbbing pain in his hand, and it took a full-bodied effort of will to push the pain aside enough to be able to think. Already he could feel the tendrils of the charm slithering back into his mind, but he focused his attention on pouring his aura into the lock, which was made substantially easier by the blood soaking into it. Immediately the artifact got to work. Robbie could feel the magic of the cabin's barrier flare to life as the artifact's magic began to prod. At first it felt like two powerful magnets being forced together but the artifact adjusted until its magic matched that of the barrier. Slowly the polar shove of the two forces lessened until it disappeared entirely, and the artifact let out a low hum, signaling its success. With a cry of effort and a roar of pain Robbie pulled the blade from his hand and let it fall to the ground. He yanked open the lock and the barrier protecting the cabin was dispelled, but the charm trying to keep him away was still very much active, threatening to undo all his efforts. Reaching out with a shaking, blood-soaked hand, Robbie grabbed the handle and opened the cabin door.

Chapter 26. Burdened: Duty. Choices.

1.

Det. Randolph couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so hungover. Over the last handful of years, he hardly ever drank anymore, besides for Christmas and birthdays, but he thought he must have had a few too many. It was the only thing he could think of that explained why the world was so loud and why the light was stabbing daggers through his eye lids. It was a few seconds before all the noises stopped being jumbled together and he realized that people were shouting and a few more before he realized someone was trying to shake him awake.

"Jim? Jim you with me buddy?"

“Yeah, I’m with you,” the detective grumbled.

“Oh thank god, you had us freaking out. Paramedics are on their way. Parkins, how’s the new guy looking?”

“I think he’s starting to come to as well,” a nearby voice answered.

“Alright. Keep him in cuffs ‘til we get this mess sorted.”

As his vision cleared, the detective was startled to find himself standing and almost stumbled backwards. “Wha- what the hell is going on?”

“We’re still trying to put that together,” Det. Dillard said, “you’ve just been standing there staring at nothing for almost five minutes. The new guy as well. It was real freaky. No one’s sure exactly what happened but the father of that missing girl is dead.”

“What?” A look of disbelief replaced the relief on Det. Dillard’s face as he gestured for Randolph to turn around. Just a handful of feet away, someone was laid out along the walkway, a fire blanket hastily thrown over them to keep them out of sight of anyone passing by. “My god. Who did this to him?”

“Not sure yet. Sarge is having I.T. pull the security footage.”

Det. Randolph let out a long, tired sigh, and tried to switch gears, setting aside most of the questions that were bouncing around in his head. “Alright, has anyone told Mrs. Wilson about her husband?” As the detective spoke, he watched the paramedics pull up in multiple ambulances, ready to spring into action, but he thought there was going to be little for them to do, besides wait for the coroner to arrive.

“No, she left. Apparently, you walked her and that audacious woman out the door.” Det. Dillard gave him a rundown of what they believed transpired, ending with the sergeant putting out a call for all officers to be on the lookout for the two women. Det. Randolph tried to focus on what the other officer was saying, but a scene played in his mind, like something he’d caught out of the corner of his eye, of Ms. Lenoir telling Mrs. Wilson she was going to take her to see Amber. He

wasn't sure what she'd done to them, but he knew this was her doing. "I'll let you know if anything comes in, but right now, we need to get you looked at."

"No. You need to go in there and tell the sergeant to get everyone on this right away. We need everyone we can spare out there looking for them." Before Det. Dillard could say anything else, Det. Randolph started to walk away, angrily waving off the confused paramedic who came to talk to him.

"Jim, where the hell are you going? You really ought to get looked at."

"Were you listening? We need *everyone* out there. Amber, the missing girl. She's somewhere in town, and they know where she is."

2.

The madness infesting the witch's mind was so loud, little else could be heard. The swirling enigma of thought and chaos felt like a tangible thing she could touch, but every time she reached out for it, it seemed to just be a little further, there, but always out of reach. It ran through her body, and laced her senses, giving everything a new and exciting, but also frightening, shine to it, as if her whole world was being run through a swirling, hyperreal filter. Her magic also felt different, like it was being distorted, but also full of possibilities she'd never noticed before. The stubborn part of her that always needed to be in control was frightened, but another part of her liked it. It was freeing. There was a euphoric feeling that came with its embrace. She knew if she just let herself go, and dived headfirst into it, she'd be a lot happier, but that stubborn part of her kept fighting against it. She wasn't sure if Maldrik's artifact created the madness, or if it just exasperated something that was already there, but the moment she touched the effigy she had felt a dam in her mind break.

During her more lucid moments she wondered how everything went so wrong, and wished she would have tried her hand against the two-horn and the demonic nun. *'Now my only hope is for Haakon to realize something's wrong and*

flees before I can give him new orders. ' Right now Haakon had orders to flee the area as soon as he steps out of the building, but if he sees her there and hesitates, then it is all over. Their plan had already backfired, and if she ordered Haakon to stand down, they were doomed to be used up, then crushed beneath Maldrik's heel once he was done with them. She didn't know for sure how the demon found out about her plan, but she suspected either Belmore or the nun had found a way to listen in on her.

How long she stood there in that church, lost in the madness, before Maldrik ordered her to bring Maria to him she wasn't sure, but when he did, she felt like she'd gained *some* of herself back, and she fought desperately to hold onto it, but it was an uphill battle. When she returned to the church with Maria, she was only vaguely aware she'd lost an important battle against the encroaching madness.

When she again returned to herself, the sun was in its descent, though it looked as if there was still daylight to be had. She'd been stirred by the excitement in the air and found herself trailing after Maldrik, with Maria in tow, while the members of Filli Mirukam piled into a series of stolen cars.

"Where are we going?" the witch asked.

It was Qrown who responded, regarding her haughtily, as he paused getting into one of the nearby cars. "Well look at that, there's still something going on in that head after all." For a second, it seemed like that was all he was going to say, but a crooked grin spread across the two-horn's face, and he added, "*Crevve* says something's happening to the domain. So, we're going to go wait for whatever emerges."

Chapter 27. The Heroes You Got

1.

Stumbling forward, Robbie lost his balance and tried to catch himself as he hit the ground. He reached out with both hands and immediately regretted it, as the moment he tried to brace himself his bleeding hand buckled. He sprawled forward, dusting the floor with his face and let out a loud, angry cry of pain, which was met with a high-pitched shout from the other side of the cabin. He managed to look back in time to see Haakon soaring through the air, his axe transformed into a massive blade by hard-light. For a moment he believed they'd pulled it off, but hope flipped to dismay as the door slammed shut in the warrior's face. The cabin shook from the impact but held firm, the barrier already back in place.

Fear and adrenaline momentarily overrode the pain and lethargy that was racking his body, allowing him to get to his feet. He prepared to launch a desperate volley of magic at the domain's master, but he spotted no demon, nor fae, nor any other creature that could have turned this office building into a cavalcade of monsters and death. The only person in there with him was a small, dark-haired girl, who sat on top of a large bed in the corner of the cabin, holding a thick, light blue comforter up to just above her chin, revealing bed sheets with a family of cartoon dogs on them. On the wall behind her were posters of other cartoon characters along with a few people from movies and tv. Clothes, toys, and books all littered the floor, as well as a board game that had either been knocked over or thrown about. Nothing about the inside seemed to suggest a cabin in the woods, nor layer of an all-powerful demon lord. It was like a kids bedroom had been transported there, complete with a dresser, and a half full laundry basket. *'What the hell is going on?'*

Once he was sure no one else was in the small room with them, Robbie tried to speak, but his throat felt as dry as a desert and all he managed to say was, "Hell-," before he started coughing profusely. The girl whimpered in response and pulled the blanket closer. As he tried to catch his breath, he kept a finger raised to let her know he needed a minute, but with his face buried in his right elbow, he held up his blood-soaked left hand, giving Amber a clear view of the wound. The girl tried to back up further onto the bed, but her back was already to the wall. *'Man, you're just nailing this rescue.'* He limped over to the dresser and found it wasn't just for show. He pulled out the first shirt he found, a gray t-shirt with

Winnie the Pooh napping under a tree printed on it, and wrapped it around his hand. *'Sorry kid. Hope you weren't too attached to this one'*

Once his coughing fit was through, Robbie took a couple of deep breaths before he tried speaking. "Sorry about that," Robbie began, his voice sounded hoarse and deeper than he'd like, but he continued, "I haven't had anything to drink since I've got here. My name is Robbie. Robbie Parker. You're Amber, yeah?" He gave the girl a moment, hoping she just needed to find her voice, but all she did was stare at him with frightened eyes that were growing wet from gathering tears. "It's okay. I know you're scared, but I'm here because your parents sent me to rescue you."

The young girl remained silent for a while, and when she spoke, her words were heavy with suspicion. "How do you know my mom and dad?"

"Well, your mommy flew across the country to ask me to come get you."

"But not daddy?"

'Uh-oh.' Robbie thought quickly, trying to avoid the emotional landmine she'd just laid out. "Well, no, but umm, that's just because one of them had to wait at home, in case someone else came to your rescue." The excuse sounded lame in his ears, but he watched her visibly relax, just a little, although the fear and distrust emanating from her remained. *'She desperately wants to believe me. I just need to stay patient and pray the domain's master doesn't come knocking before then.'* "I'm sure I'm not what you pictured when you imagined someone coming to save you, things were a little rougher than I'd planned for, but I promise you, I just want to get you home to your mom and dad."

Another silence hung in the air while the child continued to peer at her would be rescuer with suspicion. "Why you? Why not the police or the FBI? Or the CIA?"

Robbie stifled a laugh, just barely, the image of a police officer trying to place Gōremu in the back of their cruiser showed boldly in his mind's eye. "That's because, well, this is a bit different from the cases they usually work, you know?"

My partner and I are here because the bad guys are a little scarier than normal, and there were a whole lot of them out there.”

With her brow furrowed and her lips pursed together, Amber appeared to be giving what he said some serious thought. “So, are you like a superhero?”

The question caught Robbie off guard, and he spoke before he could register what she’d asked, “What do you mean?”

“You know, a superhero. Like Batman, and Thor, and Wonder Woman. You said it’s your job to fight the scary bad guys, right?”

“Well,” *‘I didn’t say it like that but guess I did kind of imply it. Shit.’*, “yeah, sometimes, but that doesn’t make me a superhero.”

“Do you fight monsters?”

“I mean...,” *‘Not usually by choice.’*

“And rescue people like me?”

“Uh, on occasion.”

Amber no longer hid behind the comforter, her eyes beaming with hope. “Then you are a superhero, right?” For a few moments everything the girl had gone through over the last few days seemed to disappear, the look on her face was like her birthday had come early, or more in order, like a superhero had stepped out of the comics to rescue her. “Do you have powers? Can you fly?”

Robbie smiled and tried to ignore the pang in his chest. He didn’t want to lie to her, but he needed her to trust him. Especially with the domain’s master still out there to contend with. “Okay, fine you got me but, *shh*, you can’t go around telling people that, alright?” He shot her a wink for good measure, and immediately felt like it had been too much, but she seemed to eat it up.

“Right. Yes. Okay,” Amber whispered excitedly, “So can you fly?”

“Unfortunately, not anymore, but come with me and you’re sure to get a good look at what I can do.” Robbie held out the firestone and let a small ball of

fire form in his hand. Amber nearly squealed with excitement, and though he let the flames dissipate, he kept smiling and waited patiently for her to settle down. Once she was silent though, Robbie let his smile fall and intentionally waited a few beats before he spoke. “I want to be clear though. This isn’t going to be an easy stroll through the park. This place is incredibly dangerous. It’s still full of nasty, terrible monsters who will try and hurt us. Whatever happens, you need to stay close, okay?”

Amber started to tell him she understood, but her eyes went wide, her face turning an impressive shade of scarlet, all traces of excitement gone. “Oh no!” Amber cupped her mouth with both hands like she’d just let slip a word she wasn’t supposed to say. “I’m sorry. Oh Dory, why didn’t you let him through?” Amber looked past Robbie when she said this, who immediately turned, expecting to find someone standing behind him, but no one was there. Amber appeared to be listening to someone speaking, and when she spoke next, the only thing she could seem to say was, “I’m sorry”, and, “Dory’s sorry too”.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize. Why don’t you just explain to me what happened. Why are you sorry? And who is Dory?”

2.

A few days ago

Tears ran down the young girl’s cheeks as she sprinted barefoot down the street, too afraid to look back and see if she was still being chased by the ghoulish thing that had taken her from her home. She didn’t know what *it* was exactly, the sickly old man with two burning orbs for eyes. Just thinking about it running after her made her whimper and try to run faster, but she was already drawing painful breaths and had little more to give. To her, The Ghoul was like something out of one of the horror movies her dad liked to watch. She wasn’t allowed to watch most

of them yet, so he mostly put them on when he thought she was asleep, but she would often just pretend to be sleeping, then would sneak downstairs to watch from the other room, ready to hide if he got up for any reason. It was easy for her to picture this old man chasing down a bunch of teens and killing them in overly dramatic ways, always popping up out of nowhere, and somehow still alive at the end of the movie.

'Why is this happening?' she thought, her mind a panicked jumble. *'Mommy. Daddy. Where are you?'* She had caught a glimpse of her mother right before the man, who wasn't really a man, jumped out her window. She felt sure her parents were out there looking for her, she just had to find them before The Ghoul found her.

She ran until her lungs burned too badly to keep going and she was forced to come to a stop. As she slowed, Amber felt her legs start to shake a few steps before her knees buckled and were scraped up by the sidewalk. She let out a cry of pain and immediately tried to stand, but her legs protested, and she flopped back to the ground. Sure that this was the end, she looked back, expecting the burning eyes of her kidnapper to be blazing down at her, but it was nowhere to be seen. What relief she felt was quickly gone as she continued to look about and realized she was lost. She knew her mom's office was in one of the handful of high-rise buildings that comprised Bedford's center city, and she thought that *maybe* she could get home from there, but from what she could tell it wasn't on this street. *"Mommy, daddy, please find me."*

Afraid to lay in the open where she could easily be seen, Amber crawled under the small awning of the closest building, a six-story office building that appeared to be shut down for the night. With her lungs still on fire and her legs feeling like Jello, Amber sat, legs pulled against her chest, praying that the sickly old man wouldn't come this way. Every sound coming from nearby buildings, or traveling down the empty road from somewhere unseen, sent a chill down her spine, and clawed at her already frayed nerves.

After a few minutes she tried to stand, and, using the building for support, she managed to get her footing, though her balance was a little rocky. She waited

several seconds before she started to walk away, determined to either find something she recognized or someone who could help, hopefully the police, but preferably her parents. She felt sure they'd hopped in their cars and were frantically driving around town looking for her and all she needed to do was find somewhere that she would see them that The Ghoul wouldn't find her.

She only managed to get a few steps out from the awning when the sound of someone running came bounding from down the road. She only caught a glimpse of the runner, but she was sure it was The Ghoul. Suppressing a frightened shout, Amber tried opening the door to the office building, but, late as it was, the door was locked. As the footfalls got closer, she began rattling the door, pleading for it to open. *'Please. Please open!'*

For several months strange things had been happening around her. Things that she couldn't explain, but she knew she had caused. When it first started happening, she had been scared but excited, years of tv and movies filling her head with ideas of wizards, flying brooms, and long dark robes, but her parents had just been scared, so she tried to hide them. Try as she might, these strange events kept happening and became harder to ignore. With no way to practice, and no real understanding of what she was doing, she'd yet to get them to work when she wanted. Even escaping The Ghoul had been a confusing rush of emotions and lights. The closest she'd come was when she'd watched a wilting rose bush spring back to life after wishing she'd seen them in bloom, and tried to picture what they might have looked like, and even that had been unintentional.

'Open! Open! Please open!'

Desperate, she tried visualizing a lock turning and the door opening, and felt a strange sensation, like a mass buildup of static electricity, flow through her arms, to her hands, and into the door, which opened so suddenly it almost knocked her over. The young girl practically dove into the building and desperately tried to spot the stairs, but the only light was what little came through the glass door, making it nearly impossible to see what was around her. As she looked about, it occurred to her to lock the door in case the sickly old man had seen her enter the building, and

turned to do so, but screamed when she spotted him, eyes burning bright with brilliant blue flames.

“No! Stay away from me!” she screamed as a fresh wave of tears began cascading down her cheeks. She wanted to run, but she couldn’t make her legs move. Her mind felt disconnected from her body and all she could do was cry and beg for someone, anyone, to save her. At the same time, a surge of heat, and static was filling the lobby. All the lights in the building flickered on, then shattered, raining down glass and plunging them back into darkness. For just a moment the air became so heavy Amber thought she was going to drown. When the sensations passed, she gasped and opened her eyes, expecting to find The Ghoul right in front of her. Instead, she found he was still standing right where he’d been, on the other side of the unlocked door.

“It’s alright. He won’t harm you.”

Amber started to scream. Someone was in there with her.

3.

It was a while before Amber felt like she could trust the nameless, bodiless wisp that had come to her rescue. She’d been just as afraid of it as she was of the monster who was trying to bust its way in. For a while all she could do was stand there and whimper. She didn’t believe the words being whispered in her mind but no matter how hard the ghoulish kidnapper punched or kicked or rammed the door, it held, and there wasn’t a scratch to be seen on the glass. Even once The Ghoul’s bombardment stopped, she remained wary of the wisp. When she finally relented, the wisp instructed her to go to the top floor and created a small orb of light for her to follow. She took the elevator to the sixth floor, which was just a small hall with a couple of offices on either side and sat on the floor and closed her eyes at the wisp’s instructions. She was nervous but did as she was asked.

“Don’t worry this won’t hurt.”

The wisp didn't lie, what Amber felt wasn't pain, but it was almost as bad. She felt like somebody reached into her mind and was flipping through it like a book, her memories filling the pages. Thoughts came and went. Impossible memories from when she was hardly a year-old flooded her mind but were rapidly replaced with others, like her failed attempt at ballet, which soon gave way to a time when she and her grandma sat in the kitchen at midnight, eating ice cream because Amber had had a nightmare and couldn't get back to sleep. She wanted to scream, but it was as if she was frozen in place. When the sensation finally stopped, she slumped over and went to sleep, utterly exhausted.

When she woke, sometime later, she was on the floor, back in her bedroom. The sense of relief brought tears to her eyes. *'It was just a nightmare!'* Still crying, Amber ran to the door and called for her mom and dad. She hoped they were still in bed so she could throw herself under the blanket and lie down between them, but her hopes were dashed when she opened the door and found herself in the middle of a clearing, somewhere in the woods. Before she had a chance to really register the oddity of her surroundings, she noticed movement amongst the trees and realized a true monster was looking down at her, its hulking bipedal form rising above the treetops. She stood, paralyzed, until she caught more movement out the corner of her eyes and realized the woods were infested with monsters. With a shrieking cry, she threw herself back into the cabin and began frantically looking for things she could put in front of the door. She pleaded for help while she dragged her laundry basket across the floor and was greeted by the same soft voice that had spoken in her mind before. The wisp still had no physical body to speak of, but now, no longer in near total darkness, Amber noticed a distortion of light standing by her bed, as if there was a haze in the air in the approximate shape of a person.

"It's okay. Those monsters will not harm you. They are here to protect you."

"How do you know?"

"Because I made them."

“Oh. Okay, but umm, what about my mom and dad?” she had asked, sure they were hot on her trail and bound to find her soon.

“Worry not. When your parents arrive, I will know, and their path to this floor will be unbarred and free of monsters.”

With no choice but to trust the wisp and wait, Amber set about checking her real-fake bedroom. Everything was there, all her clothes, her toys, her tv. Only not everything was right. It had taken her a while to notice but many of the books on her shelf were blank or missing pages. What hadn't taken her long to notice was that neither her tv nor any of her other electronics turned on. Apparently since the wisp did not understand how the tv or her tablet functioned, she couldn't make working replicates, and the books were blank because she didn't know their contents. They, and everything else in the room, had been made from, “- *an image in your mind*”, the wisp had explained.

It wasn't long before Amber lost all sense of time, and the wisp didn't seem to know how much time passed either. Bored and emotionally unraveled, she spent a lot of time sleeping, which made her sense of time even worse. The wisp was always with her, but it did little to relieve the loneliness she felt. It answered her questions when she had them and was always calm and polite as she did so, but otherwise it did not speak, or engage. Still, she felt grateful the wisp was there and decided to give it a name. Dory.

For what she guessed was the first day, Amber felt she had done a pretty good job of keeping her mind off of the craziness that had happened and was still happening to her. When she did think about it, she would tell herself that her mom and dad would be there any minute, but each time it was harder to believe.

Early that morning an alarm began to blare, shaking the walls and reminding her of her school's fire alarm. She grabbed one of the pillows off her bed to clamp it over her ears and shrieked, “What's happening?”

“Someone has entered the building,” Dory replied calmly, *“One moment.”* The wailing dropped to a barely audible buzz, like a dial had been cranked the other way.

Amber ignored the fresh ringing in her ears as a geyser of excitement swelled up in her chest, “Someone’s here? Is it my mom and dad?” She was nearly jumping with excitement, desperately ready to see her parents and be free of this nightmare. The couple of seconds that it took Dory to answer felt like an eternity, and when she spoke, Amber felt the warmth of excitement freeze into bitter disappointment.

“They are not.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am sure. Do not worry, these intruders will never make it to this floor.”

“Oh. Okay.” Amber trusted Dory, but she had the near overwhelming urge to ask the wisp if she was sure that she was sure. Instead, she just stood there for a while as tears flooded her eyes and silently flowed down her cheeks. Her dad sometimes teased her about being *“an obnoxious crier”*, but days spent crying left her head pounding, her throat dry, and her voice hoarse. Now, the tears fell without any fanfare.

Not long after the intruders arrived, Dory told Amber to lay down and close her eyes. Amber tried to tell her that she wasn’t tired anymore, but the wisp was insistent, so she laid down anyways. She figured she would lay there staring at the ceiling for a while, but she felt surprisingly drowsy as she got into bed and fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow, only waking up when a strange man came bursting into the cabin.

Amber's frantic explanation of what had happened and who Dory was, was a mostly incoherent ramble but he thought he had a general idea as to what happened. While he still wasn't sure exactly *what* Dory was, it was clear they'd rescued Amber from the flaming eyed monster. Robbie wasn't sure if this was when the domain was created or if that happened later, but he felt sure Dory had been the one to create it, since she'd been the one to fill it with constructs. Because the constructs were created from Amber's thoughts, the young girl kept apologizing, now that it truly dawned on her what Robbie had gone through to get there.

"It's alright, really. You have nothing to apologize for," Robbie assured her for at least the dozenth time, "I am kind of surprised by some of the choices though. You've played *Radiant 3* and *Avalon's Fall*?"

"No, mom and dad won't let me play games like those," there was a slight pause as her cheeks went rosy and she added, "I watched MatPlayz play them after they went to bed."

"I'm guessing they didn't let you watch all those horror movies either." Amber looked downcast but smiled as she did so.

'I'm still not sure what's happening, but this is going better than I ever hoped. If Dory really is an ally, and I can get the Quiliq necklace to Haakon, we might be able to get through this without giving her any further nightmares.'

Robbie told Amber his *sidekick* was out there waiting for them and started to ask if Dory would let him go talk to him, but his words trailed off as he felt increasingly dizzy, and his blood-soaked leg started to wobble, forcing him to hobble to the dresser to brace himself. He waited a moment for his head to stop spinning, but the lightheaded sensation didn't fully fade. Taking a deep breath, he gingerly tried to put weight on his injured leg, which nearly gave out, and would have sent him to the floor if he wasn't already holding on to the dresser. *'Shit. It's a lot worse than I realized.'*

Amber let out an audible gasp when she took a good look at his blood-soaked jeans and started to cry as she watched him struggle. "It's alright kid,

I just need a minute is all.” He kept his voice calm but inside he felt the twang of panic brewing. “You got a towel anywhere? I need something to wrap this with.” She ignored his question and started begging Dory to help him. ‘*Dammit.*’ He didn’t particularly want to use anymore of Amber’s clothes as a blood rag, even if they were just magical re-creations, but he had underestimated the damage he’d done to himself and was well past the point that he should have stopped the bleeding.

Robbie took out another t-shirt and started to rip it while Amber continued to speak to Dory. Gritting his teeth, Robbie wrapped the torn shirt tightly around what he thought was the worst of the wounds. Breathing heavily, Robbie took out a third shirt and started to rip it, but was startled, and dropped it when he noticed Amber standing next to him, having crossed the room without him noticing.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I-It’s okay. D-Dory’s going to help you. You just have to hold still.” Before he could protest, Amber gently placed a hand against his leg, which stung like hell, sending a ripple of pain through his entire body. Squinting from the pain, he thought he saw someone standing behind Amber, so close she was practically on top of her, but only for a second.

A swelling of magical energy filled the room, so strong it was practically palpable. Amber stood there, an ethereal, ocean-green light, radiated from her palms, and danced around the room, turning her wide eyes into puddles of the same light. The pain in his leg disappeared for a moment as his entire body went numb. After a few seconds the numbness was replaced with a heat that grew in intensity until it was nearly painful. He could feel the muscle fibers in his leg stitching themselves together like they were being threaded with a needle, yet it hardly registered next to his sheer astonishment.

When the young girl stepped away, beet red, soaked head to toe in sweat and breathing heavily like she’d just run a marathon, the deep slashes in his leg and the hole in his hand were gone. Not even a thin scar to mark where they had been. And that wasn’t all. He’d felt ill since he’d woken up on this floor, sure he would need

to get to a hospital if they somehow made it out of there, but now he felt better than he had when they'd first arrived. Better than he had in years.

“How did you do that?”

The girl took a shaky step back, eyes unfocused, but gave Robbie a tired smile and said, “What do you mean? I didn't do anything. Dory did,” before her legs gave out and she toppled over.

Robbie reached out and managed to scoop up Amber before she hit the floor and carried her across the room to lay her down on her bed. “Hey. Hey, are you okay?”

She didn't answer right away and when she did, her voice was tired, her eyes barely open. “I'm okay.”

Robbie smiled, “Okay good.” Inside his mind reeled. As impossible as it seemed, there was no denying what he'd just witnessed. Robbie took a few steps back and slowly, almost reluctantly, let his vision shift and took a look at Amber's aura.

5.

For a few seconds Robbie thought he'd gone blind, though instead of darkness, there was a warm, white light. It was all encompassing, giving him the impression of a vast nothingness. He put his hand so close to his eye he was nearly touching it, yet it was as though it wasn't there, and even when he closed his eyes, the light remained. So overwhelming was the sight and sensation, he'd forgotten what he'd been doing, and it was only when he remembered what he was looking at, did he let his extra sight fall, and he realized he could still see.

A chill ran through Robbie, prickling his skin, and leaving all his senses on edge. *‘What the hell is she?’*

“Are you okay?” Amber asked timidly. She’d sat up and was looking at him with concern.

Robbie blinked and wiped away tears he hadn’t known were there and tried to give Amber a reassuring smile. “Y-yeah, sorry, no need to worry. I’m just in awe of your friend. The power to heal is quite amazing.”

Amber smiled, clearly relieved, “Isn’t she awesome? She doesn’t say much, but she’s kind of like a superhero too.”

“Yeah, she really is.” Robbie took a few moments to compose himself before he asked, “Do you think she’ll let me go talk to my friend? It’s still dangerous out there, so we’ll have to plan our way out.”

“Dory says to wait here, and she’ll make us a safe path down. She’s pretty tired from healing you, so it’s going to take a few minutes. She says your friend can come in now though. We’ll all be safe here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yup. Dory’s my friend, she wouldn’t lie.”

“Uh, right, of course. I’ll go get him.”

Despite himself, he was nearly overwhelmed with relief at the thought of this nightmare being done and over with, and he had to resist the urge to sit down and take a moment for himself, worried that Haakon might come charging in and start swinging before he gets a grasp on the situation. *‘He probably can’t tell that the enchantment’s gone, but better not take the chance of him getting impatient and trying it anyways.’* As he walked to the door, a smile pulled on the corners of his lips. *‘We’re almost done.’* That thought was quickly replaced with another, a stark contrast that immediately erased his growing relief, and caused him to pause as he reached for the door handle. *“No matter what happens, do not let your guard down until the very end, even if it seems like we’ve won. Remember, nothing here has been as it seems.”*

Recalling Haakon’s warning, doubt began plaguing Robbie’s thoughts and he started to worry that this was a trap. He thought he’d figured out what was up

with Dory and Amber, but he no longer felt sure. *‘What if I’m wrong and this is just a faint to get me out of the cabin? But then why did she save me just now? Damn it.’*

“Is something wrong?”

“What? Oh, no, sorry. I was just giving myself a moment to prepare, in case there are still monsters out there.”

“It’s alright. Dory says it’s safe.”

“Right...”

Robbie slowly opened the door and found, as promised, that there were no constructs waiting for him, only Haakon, who stood about where Robbie had expected to find him. Only something felt off. *“Nothing has been what it seems”. ‘So, if the person keeping Amber here is actually protecting her...’*

Robbie reacted before he had time to register what he was reacting to. He took a few steps back and reached into his pocket, pulling out a large, jagged rock and began pouring his aura into it. The stone pulsed with purple light as the magic inside became active and took effect, just as the cabin’s roof was cleaved through.

Inches from Robbie’s face, the hard-light blade began to shudder as its master fought against the magic that held it suspended in the air, the flames in his eyes growing more intense as Haakon struggled.

Chapter 28. Defying Gravity

1.

Robbie did his best to push aside the jumble of questions running through his mind, and tuned out Amber’s frightened wails, in order to concentrate on the

flow of aura he was feeding the hunk of jagged, obsidian stone. He could feel Haakon struggling against the gravity altering magic imbued into the stone; if he slipped up now the warrior would break through and bury the axe into his skull, but if he fed the stone too much, too quickly, it was likely to shatter, and the results would be the same. Slowly, carefully, he increased the flow of aura, shifting it around, inside the stone, until he was ready to release it. When he did, the flow of gravity on and around Haakon shifted and he was flung from the room like he'd been yanked back by an invisible rope. The door to the cabin was violently slammed shut in Haakon's wake, cracking the frame, and loosening one of the hinges.

"No! No! NO! NO!" Amber was yelling, "How did it get in?" The girl's words were coming out in a high pitched shrill. Robbie turned and saw that her whole body was shaking underneath the blanket that she'd pulled over herself.

'*Shit.*' "Amber. Amber! Look at me!" The young girl stopped screaming but still sat with the blanket fully draped over her. "It's going to be okay. I'll take care of the bad guy. I'm a superhero, remember?" Amber lowered the blanket just enough so that Robbie could see her red, puffy eyes. "You just stay in here, okay? When I step outside, ask Dory to fix the door and tell her to only open it for me." Amber nodded but said nothing. Robbie gave her his most confident smile, and hoped his battered appearance didn't take away from it too much. Knowing Haakon's next attack could come at any second, Robbie didn't wait to see if it had the desired effect and quickly stepped outside, ready to fight.

2.

Robbie kept the gravity stone primed and ready to activate, sure that Haakon would attack the moment he stepped out of the cabin, but to his surprise the skeleton warrior just stood in the middle of the grassy field, his eyes no longer brilliant flames. Robbie put a dozen yards between him and the cabin before

coming to a halt, and the two of them stared at each other across the short distance for a long moment, judging if the other was going to make the next move.

“I don’t suppose that was a misunderstanding?” Robbie asked halfheartedly.

“I’m afraid not. While it pained me to pull such an underhanded move, you’ve proved yourself to be much harder to kill than one would expect. Yet I still somehow managed to underestimate you. I will not dishonor you or myself further by making that mistake again.”

“It was mostly just luck,” Robbie shrugged, before fixing Haakon with a serious look, “So, no talking this out then?”

“I have an explicit order to kill you once we reach the child.”

‘Damn.’ “Yeah, I kind of figured,” Robbie tried to come off as calm and composed, but he couldn’t quite hide the anger he felt when he said, “You and Lenoir must have been having a real good laugh this whole time.”

Even if Robbie hadn’t been reading Haakon’s aura, he would have been able to see that his words had stung. The warrior’s grip on his axe tightened, while at the same time his shoulders seemed to slump, his head lowering just a little. Robbie got the feeling that if Haakon had eyes, he would have looked away, either in embarrassment or in shame; perhaps both. It was not the response Robbie had been expecting.

“I take no pleasure, nor solace, in the things that I have done these past few days. Nor, I imagine, will I enjoy what is to come in the time ahead. But I have my orders, and I will do what I must to survive, and to protect Madame Lenoir.”

“Then why the warning? If you hadn’t said anything, I probably would have walked face first into your axe. I certainly wouldn’t have felt the attack coming in time to react.”

“That was... a momentary lapse in judgement. I truly didn’t know what we would find in the cabin, and I suppose I had hoped a situation might occur where you made it out with Amber. A part of me still does. I would let the two of you go and deal with the consequences if I had the choice, but the orders I’ve been given

aren't the kind I can disobey for long. I'm sorry, Robbie, but I must end this now. I pray you find a seat in the halls of Valhalla."

3.

Haakon attacked before he finished speaking, still hoping to end things with one clean strike. He brought Sársauki arcing toward The Artificer, but all at once his movements felt sluggish, his axe increased in weight until it felt like he was trying to swing a boulder. His movements weren't entirely halted like they had been in the cabin, but they were slowed down to the point that The Artificer was easily able to step out of the way, and backed up a few feet, before the extra weight was suddenly gone. The sudden change was meant to throw the warrior off balance, but he quickly adjusted and pivoted on one foot and used the momentum to bring his axe arcing upwards in a killing blow, but The Artificer was already too far back. Haakon kept on the move, not wanting to give his opponent a chance to pull anything else out of his bag of tricks, but every time he got close, he would be hit by the gravity altering magic, and his movements would become slow and sluggish, or he'd be sent soaring in a random direction, away from The Artificer. No matter how fast, or from what angle Haakon went at him, The Artificer was always ready, as if he knew where the next attack was coming from before it happened, which, Haakon quickly realized, was *almost* what was happening.

'He's reading my aura so accurately he's practically able to tell what I'm thinking. Curse him. Rae'Hal this advanced shouldn't be possible for a human.' He also cursed the ghoulish construct that took his hand, feeling that if he could strike with both blades, he might be able to slip through The Artificer's defenses. *'Of all the constructs, and with my own axe.'*

After facing nearly a minute of constant onslaught, Robbie found his opening and went on the offensive. Haakon was pulled violently to the ground by a tremendous shift in gravity that pinned him there with enough force that he began sinking into the dirt. If not for his own skills with Rae'Hal, and the many layers of

protective magic that Lenoir had piled on him over the years, he was sure that the increased force of gravity would have left him a pile of dust. Instead of being crushed, Haakon gazed up at his opponent defiantly and watched the anger etch into his features while he pulled the firestone from his pocket. The oppressive gravity relented fractions of a second before he was bathed in a stream of fire. What remained of his clothes and beard were consumed by the flames, his axe harness left hanging by a thread, but he was otherwise unharmed. No longer being forced to the ground, Haakon nearly took The Artificer's head in retaliation, but The Artificer threw himself to the side just in time, and enveloped himself with altered gravity and slipped away, before Haakon could strike again.

"I thought you said you weren't going to underestimate me this time," The Artificer panted, "All you've done is come at me head on. Aren't you supposed to be some kind of esteemed warrior?" Despite his bravado, it was clear that he was already running out of steam and was trying to slow things down to catch his breath.

"I haven't. Now it's just an endurance game. While you huff and puff about, I'm as ready to go as ever. This fight is mine, artificer. Lay down your stones and whatever else you have, and I'll make this quick and painless."

"Screw you."

Haakon laughed, "I figured that would be your response, but it was worth a shot."

"You may have the upper hand but don't count me out just yet. You're not the first person I've fought that, on paper, should have bested me. Besides, you'll never get into the cabin without me."

"Perhaps, but as you just said, 'don't count me out yet'. I may not be a master artificer, but I have used many artifacts over the centuries, and I have time on my side. Even if I don't manage to get inside the cabin, the powers at play will simply find others in our place. My point being; poor Amber's fate is inevitable. Might it not be better to let me take her now, rather than to prolong her suffering and loneliness."

“Why? So you and Lenoir can be the ones to make her suffer instead? What the hell do you two want with her anyways?”

Haakon kept quiet. There was nothing he *could* say on the matter.

“What’s the matter? I couldn’t get you to shut up earlier, now you have nothing to say? C’mon! I’m all ears! Let’s hear your big villain speech!”

For over a thousand years, Haakon had wandered the world, in one form or another. He had fought in countless battles, had loved, and lost, had seen dreams come true, while others were deftly crushed. He’d been stuck in a decaying body, lost in a frozen hellscape, and had spent decades in a cave, fading in and out of existence, yet these last few days felt like the longest of his life. He didn’t want to be there. He didn’t want to do what he’d been ordered to do. Those orders made The Artificer an enemy, and, despite how he felt about them, this was a fight he planned on winning. He couldn’t keep dragging things out and take the chance of slipping up. “Like I said. Nothing is what it seems.”

Haakon hoped that the vague, cryptic answer would get under The Artificer’s skin, as he was clearly struggling to keep his anger in check. It did, though it was nothing so much as to get his opponent to act brashly, but, for just a second, his focus wavered. Haakon threw everything he could into a quick attack, the glow of Sársauki’s runes and the flames in his eyes, coming to light, the sign of the *Logi* trance-state. He cleared the distance in the blink of an eye and angled the axe to cut The Artificer’s head from its body. Just a few inches away, Haakon felt the shift in gravity try to rip the axe from his grip, but he held tight and struck the side of Robbie’s head instead of his neck.

4.

If Haakon could frown, he would be doing so, as he watched what should be the headless body of The Artificer bounce and tumble across the open field. For just a moment he thought maybe he’d mixed up Sársauki and Refsing, but that

wasn't the case. Instead of the expected sensation of his blade biting into flesh and crushing bones, he had undoubtedly struck something metal, and The Artificer had kept his head, although Haakon thought he had to have broken his neck. It wasn't until The Artificer came to a stop that Haakon was able to get a clear look and saw that he was still alive. *'How is he still breathing? Why is it so hard to kill this guy?'*

As The Artificer attempted to get back on his feet, Haakon watched him closely, trying to figure out what he'd used to protect himself. The Artificer hadn't taken out any new artifacts, as far as he could see, but he noticed a strange sheen on The Artificer's skin where the axe should have struck.

Haakon was beaming with questions, but, realizing he'd let himself become distracted, started pouring aura into his weapon, until Sársauki's runes glowed with power. He leapt into the air but was hit by a wave of shifting gravity that retched him higher into the sky until, with a loud crunch, he slammed into the upper limits of the domain, like an invisible ceiling in the clouds.

To his dismay he felt the effects of the reverse gravity dissipate and become a heavy force that plummeted him back to the ground from nearly two-hundred meters up. His mind started to scream as he flailed towards the ground, but he held on to enough of his faculties to get his defenses up before he smacked the ground with enough force to send up a plume of dirt. The fading panic slowed his reactions, and The Artificer was able to pull out a yellowish-brown stone and activate its magic before Haakon could do more than get to his feet. The ground beneath him opened up into a giant mouth that tried to swallow him, but he threw himself to the side before he could be pulled under.

Back on the move, Haakon launched the charged up Sársauki at The Artificer and followed in its wake. As he hoped, The Artificer didn't have enough time to reverse the weapons direction to send it back at Haakon and instead used the power of the jagged stone to send it careening to one side. As he did, Haakon moved in with Refsing, blade aimed for the other's head. Instead of altering the gravity on Haakon, The Artificer was yanked away, impossibly fast, narrowly avoiding the deadly blow. Haakon tried to push the attack, and keep The Artificer off balanced, but it wasn't long before they fell back into the same rhythm, Haakon

charging at The Artificer before getting flung away, or slowed to the point where The Artificer could *almost* casually step aside.

'Damn it. I didn't want to do it like this, but I grow tired of this dance. Goodbye friend, I wish we could have met under different circumstances.'

Haakon backed off, keeping on the move, long enough to slip into his Asha-Hadad trance. The Artificer's mastery of Rae'Hal was giving him enough insight into Haakon's next move that it allowed him to react, but he was just barely able to stay one step ahead. In both the Asha-Hadad and Logi trance Haakon's speed and strength were enhanced, but he was betting that in his Asha-Hadad trance his actions will be nearly unpredictable, as there was little conscious thought at all when making them. He would bombard his opponent until he slipped up and Haakon was able to take his head.

5.

No longer able to read Haakon's actions, Robbie used the artifact stone to keep the gravity around himself heavy to slow Haakon as he approached. It worked for now, but each swing of Haakon's axe seemed to get a little bit closer.

'Shit. Shit. Shit. I can't do this. I can't do this.' Panic was overtaking his thoughts as each of Haakon's attacks came within a hair of their mark. *'Come on, don't give up yet. You've come this far. You have to think of something.'* He wanted a way to put distance between them and get to the woods, where he hoped to use the more confined space to his advantage, but Haakon was staying on him, not giving him the space to run. What's more, there was something else pulling at his attention, preventing him from fully focusing on keeping his head. Something inside him had been stirring since not long after he met Lenoir, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could push it aside.

With limited options, Robbie waited for Haakon to attack head on and took a risk by shifting the gravity from around him to around the skeleton. He felt the

rustle of air as the gemstone blade nearly found its mark, before being pulled into the air along with its master.

6.

Haakon watched The Artificer take to the trees with the aid of his artifact, like an animal trying to hide from a predator, believing the trees would help keep him safe, but he had not witnessed Haakon's brutal deforestation. With his fear dampened by the Asha-Hadad trance, he took off at breakneck speeds the moment his bony foot touched the ground and when he came upon his prey, Haakon launched himself into the air and came to land in front of The Artificer, nearly disemboweling him, but a sudden change in gravity allowed The Artificer to step to the side, just out of reach. Haakon felt the shift at his core and was hurled backwards, although he would have sworn he was falling. The moment gravity returned to normal he was moving again, pushing harder and harder, and laying into The Artificer with a series of strikes that were no longer aimed at him directly, but at the stone artifact in his hand.

It only took a few seconds, during which Haakon lashed out over a dozen times. The final strike found its target, barely impeded by the slightly increased gravity, and shattered the stone. The Artificer let out a cry of pain as the force of the blow bent his wrist back and broke both his ring and middle fingers.

In his Asha-Hadad trance Haakon did not hesitate to deliver the killing blow, the blade coming down between the neck and the shoulder. This time he felt the blade bite into something soft and wet, but his axe came to a sudden halt before completing its arc. Instead of flesh, his axe cut into a silvery-blue goo that appeared to be leaking from The Artificer's body. Warning lights flashed in his mind, pulling Haakon back from his trance-state as he struggled to remove Refsing from the slime.

He retrieved his axe with a heaving effort but not before The Artificer looked at him with a morose grin. "Uh-oh."

Haakon backed away several meters and had to keep himself from backing away several meters more. A primal fear coursed through him as he watched the silver substance slip back into The Artificer's body. "Don't tell me that thing's an artifact?"

The Artificer let out a deranged giggle, different from his usual laughter. "Got it in one! Though I am, "The Artificer", after all." The Artificer started scratching where the artifact had emerged from. "I haven't felt it this riled up since the day I forced it into servitude. What a disaster that was. No, really. But what else could I do? I'd already broken the seal," he was shaking now, shaking and looking about wildly, as if he expected something to come racing through the trees, his voice barely above a whisper, "I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt. Oh man, why didn't I listen?" He started laughing again and scratching even harder. "But I did it! I did it. I did it. I did it... Oh, I did it, and I've been fighting... fighting for so long, but that's my punishment... and you know what? You know what? I don't think I can hold it back anymore." For just a few seconds The Artificer stopped shaking and looked to Haakon with a sense of recognition. "It's coming."

Chapter 29. The Monster Inside Me

1.

Turkey. 2019

"I'm telling you something's not right here," Emily said yet again, while the other two tried to eat their dinner over a series of flashlights, "I really think it's meant as a warning."

Robbie, who went by Darren then, looked up from his half-cooked soup to find the tall blonde woman looking at him intently, her passionate blue eyes

pleading for him to understand. “You’re right, they probably are a warning. A warning to stay away from whatever treasure is inside.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

Robbie looked over to the massive underground structure and began absently scratching around the patch over his eye, “Fine, but you’re basing this theory on six-thousand-year-old *Dresimire* hieroglyphs. Even if it is a warning, who cares? We’ve already dealt with all the traps that littered that damn maze, and right now, all we have to show for our effort is that bundle of broken tile. Plus, I already got a good look at the seal on the final room and can confidently say it’s not cursed. As I said before, I don’t mind checking it out while you two wait here.”

Still not convinced, Emily looked to her husband for support, who sat off to the side, trying not to get involved. “Marco, you understand what I’m getting at, right?”

The dark haired, heavily tanned man sighed and put down his bowl before looking over at his wife and his friend. He hated it when the two of them disagreed, it always meant a headache for him. As per their arrangement, it was Emily and Robbie’s job to head up the expeditions; Emily researching, planning, and handling anything of historic value, while Robbie acted as their guide, security, and “locksmith”, which, in theory, meant they made all the major decisions. Marco only had one job, officially anyways, but it was fundamental, as they were no longer sponsored by a university. It was his sole job to secure their funds, though unofficially it had fallen on him to, when necessary, smooth talk police, landowners, or local officials, to get access to where they wanted to go, as he had done to get them there. Despite their agreed upon arrangement, it had also become his job to make the decision whenever the two of them disagreed on what to do next, so he often found himself making crucial choices that he didn’t want to make. What was worse, he was then forced to deal with the ire of whichever one he hadn’t agreed with. So, whenever possible, he sought a middle ground. “I understand your point... and I also understand his... I don’t think we should rush back in there,” He shifted to look at Robbie directly, “I think we should give Em a chance to see if she can piece together what some of those hieroglyphs say. If it

turns out you're right, or she can't make heads or tails of them, we'll go ahead and check it out tomorrow."

No one was particularly happy with the idea, so they all agreed to it, and silently made the long trek back to their campsite, near the auspicious hole in the Turkish countryside.

2.

Robbie tried to wait for Marco and Emily to go to sleep before he made his move, but when it became clear the archaeologist, and inspiring epigrapher, was determined to work through the night, he used his prized artifact, the grafted together wind and gravity stone that he'd paid a small fortune for, to silently slink through the campsite, and to quickly move along the winding path into the earth.

Despite their agreement, and Marco's attempt at placating them both, Robbie knew that by the time the sun rose Marco would have been persuaded to back whatever his wife decided, which would certainly be to leave this place for now and come back when they have more information. And that was if she didn't manage to translate the hieroglyphs. If she did, Robbie knew she would want him to collapse the entrance to this place and maybe go as far as to try to find someone who could place a seal on it. While he was no expert in the Dresimire writing, he'd been forced to learn some as a child, and he knew enough to know that Emily was right to be worried. He wasn't sure if the entire grand structure was meant to be a prison, but that final room certainly was, and the hieroglyphs warned of a horrid death for those who entered. It was why he hadn't protested when Emily got spooked and wanted to leave, and why he hadn't truly pushed the issue when she refused to go back inside. The truth was, he didn't actually want either of them anywhere near it, but he had to play his cards carefully. He couldn't tell them what the warning was, but he also couldn't act disinterested, otherwise Emily would have had them packed up and back in the city, until she had the chance to translate everything.

He didn't like deceiving his friends and had *almost* chosen to tell them what he suspected, but another section of the writing had caught his eye, giving him an idea as to what might be inside, and he felt like he couldn't pass up the rare opportunity, despite the danger.

The second to last room was a high ceilinged, massive rectangle, about sixty feet long and thirty feet wide, with large hieroglyphs all along the walls. At the far end of the room was a door that led to the prison room, which was sealed tight with an ancient spell. Robbie carefully reexamined the seal, making sure not to rush in his excitement, before dispelling it with relative ease. He approached cautiously and shined his flashlight into the final room and found it was much smaller than the one he was currently in. There were no markings or hieroglyphs to be seen, the only thing in there was a large ceramic urn, almost as tall as he was, and nearly as wide at the base. There was nothing special or ornate about the urn, except for a series of runes that were carved into the bottleneck, but there was another seal on it, more powerful than the one on the door. It didn't take him long to disperse it though, and he did so without stepping into the prison room, wary there was a trap hidden beneath the seal.

Once the seal was gone, Robbie looked the room, and the urn, up and down once more, but saw nothing to indicate any kind of trap, magical or otherwise. Cautiously, he stepped inside, duel elemental stone primed and ready to go, in case he'd been wrong. When he was halfway to the urn, he was struck with a sudden and resounding silence. An intense buzzing had been echoing in his mind for some time now, but he only realized it now that it was gone.

Whatever was inside the urn started to shake and push the lid open.

3.

Present Day

A silver slime poured from Robbie's body, and came reaching out for Haakon like a massive, gooey hand. As he backed away from the clawing goo, he realized it wasn't slime but some kind of liquid metal. At around six meters the rush of cascading silver came to a halt, and snapped back like it was on a leash, coming to form a wide, semi-congealed pool at The Artificer's feet.

Haakon stared at The Artificer as though he was seeing a whole new person. The thought of that *thing* living inside him sent a sense of revulsion swarming through his nonexistent body. He couldn't imagine what could have led him to make such a vile decision, but he was sure it was quite the tale. *'Of all my ill-fated opponents, you might truly be the one I mourn the most. The stories you could tell must surely rival my own. Oh Aveline, why did you have to go and get us involved in such unsavory affairs?'*

Haakon charged, slipping into his Logi trance and pouring aura into Refsing. He leapt forward, going for the head, but struck a two-meter wall of hardened metal. Still moving, he spun and swung his axe, coming in from the other side, but the metal wall shifted, turning back into liquid, then resolidifying in a new place. He spun once more, coming in low but the artifact easily shifted and resolidified in front of him again. Haakon backed away but kept on the move, weaving through the trees to mask his approach while the liquid metal artifact became a stirring puddle dancing around The Artificer's feet, waiting for Haakon to strike. Haakon charged at his opponent from behind but hit another wall, so he leapt over The Artificer and struck from the front, but the liquid metal crashed down between them, forcing Haakon to back away, but not for long. He struck at The Artificer from every angle, looking for a weakness in his defenses, but so far, the liquid metal had no problems matching his speed, and began maintaining a half-dome around The Artificer at all times.

Not once did The Artificer flinch at Haakon's attempts on his life. He just stood there, stock still, and pale as a ghost. His eyes fluttered like he was having a seizure, and parts of his body were twitching from muscle spasms.

Since his speed wasn't enough, Haakon decided to back off, just long enough to envelop Refsing in hard-light, and launched himself forward, looking to overpower the artifact. A full dome formed around The Artificer, absorbing the force of the impact. Tendrils shot out from the dome that solidified into sharp, needlelike blades looking to skewer him. Haakon moved away quickly but not before losing a few more ribs. The artifact shifted and went chasing after him but before it could strike, The Artificer's eyes stopped flickering, and clarity came back to them. There was a moment, where everything seemed to stop, before the liquid metal artifact reformed into a massive, four-meter sword that came sweeping down at Haakon, cutting through the trees like butter. Haakon caught the blade with Refsing and was sent tumbling through the woods, only stopping when he crashed into a tree. Still in danger, Haakon scrambled to his feet and out of the way of the giant sword's next strike.

'Damn it all. What the hell kind of artifact is that thing?'

4.

2019

"I knew it!" Emily exclaimed triumphantly after she hung up the phone.

Marco stirred on his cot and spoke with words heavy from sleep, "You knew what babe?"

"The hieroglyphs! They're a warning about what's inside that room. Or, more accurately, it's both a warning, and the history of what's inside. I sent Ilya all the pictures I took, and she showed them to that old elf lady she used to work with, who then helped me put together a rough translation."

Marco sat up and tried to wipe the vestiges of sleep from his eyes. "Alright, so what is it?"

“It’s an artifact! One created by a Dresimire sorcerer and used by a Dresimire warlord. I’m not sure if they were the same person or not, but it seems like the artifact was created to be both a weapon and a shield.” Marco came to stand behind Emily and looked down at the page of scribbled notes she’d written while talking to the changeling. “*Esmelda*, the elf, believes the artifact was called *Verndari*, which roughly translates to strength, but can also be written as protector.”

“It must have been a pretty dangerous weapon for them to go through so much to hide it.”

“From what it sounds like it was truly something to behold on the battlefield, but that doesn’t seem to be why it was locked away. When the warlord died, his followers developed a pseudo-religion around him, with the artifact as their greatest relic. For centuries they kept it safe, but some of the magic in the artifact began to mutate after a time, and it eventually became a living artifact.”

“Okay, but shouldn’t that have made it more valuable?”

Emily gave him a familiar, tired smile that he’d come to think of as her *lecturer’s smile*, because whatever she said afterwards always left him feeling like he’d asked a question the teacher thought he should already know the answer to.

“Sure, to a collector, or someone looking to use the artifact’s power, but they viewed this as a holy relic, an object to worship upon. They also might not have understood what was happening to it. Remember what Darren said when I asked him about living artifacts? It’s something that only happens in *our* world, and since only complex magic mutates, and over a period of centuries or more, little is known about them, even today. As far as he’s aware, nobody’s ever figured out why only certain aspects of the magic change, and Esmelda said pretty much the same thing when I had Ilya ask her. In this case, it was the artifact’s ability to consume that mutated.”

Marco frowned, a wave of revulsion making his stomach turn, “Wait, it’s a weapon that eats people?”

“I don’t think so, not originally anyways. From how it sounds the artifact had the ability to consume other weapons and such, so it could replicate them.”

“But then it mutated and started eating people?”

“Not quite. Mind you, some of this is just guess work, but if I’m right, then the artifact gained an appetite over time, one that became harder to feed over the years, but more alarming, it also gained the ability to eat organic matter. It seems like before the mutation it could only consume inorganic things like metal and stone. I imagine that those who watched after it feared what would happen if it escaped the reliquary they kept it in, so they had a prison built underground, and hired sorcerers to seal it inside, and left traps in case someone found it someday. They even changed its name to Elsheriiha as a further warning. Gluttony. Devourer.” The couple stared at each other silently for a long moment as internally they both shuddered. “It’s going to be even harder to convince Darren to leave once he hears there’s a living artifact down there. I’m just glad we waited. Perhaps we should go and – Hey! Where are you going?” Emily got up and took off after Marco who had suddenly sprinted from the tent without a word. When she stepped out and saw him open Robbie’s tent her heart dropped, realizing the same thing her husband had.

Marco cursed and yelled, “Grab the flashlights! He might not have left that long ago.”

5.

Present Day

Robbie’s body was riddled with new sensations, and none of them were pleasant. His senses were melding with Elsheriiha’s and he felt like his body and mind were stretching and being reshaped along with the artifact. The feeling was both disorienting and alarming, as was the horrendous hunger that made him feel

starved and left him wanting for food on a primal level. He tried his best to ignore all this, but it was nearly impossible, and it split his focus even further. As disturbing as all that he felt was, his main focus was trying to keep Elsheriiha at bay, and to keep from losing his head to the deranged skeleton.

As he struggled for control, he got a better feel for the artifact than he had in all the years he'd carried it inside him, too afraid to ever do more than keep it locked away. It was almost like he could see some of the things the artifact had consumed over the years and now made up a core part of what it was, like tangible memories. Hundreds of weapons, shields and pieces of armor had been fed to it before it was locked away, and all of it was there for him to call upon. He thought if he could gain full control over Elsheriiha, then he might be able to take on the undead warrior, but it felt like a tall order. Elsheriiha was trying to take control of his body, while at the same time he was trying to take control of the artifact, leaving him locked in a game of tug-of-war, with deadly consequences should he lose.

Haakon came charging at him, and Robbie chose a pair of similar sized polearms. The two weapons formed and solidified on either side of him in a near instant. Though Elsheriiha was fighting for control, it didn't seem to fight his actions taken in defense. One of the polearms went straight at Haakon head on while the other went sweeping in from the side. Haakon easily sidestepped the one coming at him head on and leapt over the other, but before Haakon got much closer, both of the polearms melted and reformed together, creating a horizontal guillotine-like structure, whose deadly blade came racing towards him. The skeleton warrior was forced to leap out of the way, lest he be cut in two, and had to hit the ground rolling to avoid the massive hammer that came down to crush him.

Robbie cursed as he watched Haakon scramble out of reach. Not only had he missed but not all of what happened had been by his command. Elsheriiha wasn't fighting his acts to defend himself, but it wasn't leaving them entirely up to him either, and if it hadn't, he might not have reacted in time to save himself. He prepared for the skeleton's next attack, forming a large sword and shield, when he was suddenly pulled under the lake of consciousness he'd been fighting to keep afloat on.

6.

It became clear to Haakon that The Artificer was struggling for control of the living artifact. It was also clear that The Artificer was slowly losing the battle. He still hadn't moved and continued to slip in and out of lucidity. When the artifact was in control it protected The Artificer with walls of metal and deadly spikes, but when The Artificer took control, the artifact would change parts of its vestiges into swords, spears and all manner of armaments.

'The damned thing has a will of its own. Since it's protecting him, it must be feeding off his aura. If I can fully wake him or sever his connection to the artifact, it might become dormant, or at least less responsive.' The idea was good on the surface, but he wasn't sure how he'd accomplish either task.

Twin claymores formed and rose into the air, lashing out at Haakon one after the other. He deflected the first one and slipped around the second, but before he could close the gap, the first claymore turned into a spear and would have pierced his heart if he still had one. The other claymore came sweeping at him and took what was left of his broken arm, but he kept moving. The two weapons reformed together and started to become an axe the size of Sársauki's hard-light blade, but suddenly splashed down to the ground as the artifact took control once more. Haakon tried to take advantage of his opponent's shift in control, but he struck a metal wall when he went in for the kill. He tried to stay on the attack, but it wasn't long before The Artificer was back in control, for the moment, and the artifact became a giant scythe looking to reap his soul. He dodged the first few swipes from the scythe but was forced to catch one with a charged up Refsing and slid back along the grass for a couple meters before he was able to hold his ground. Axe and scythe sparked as they tried to overpower each other. Haakon poured all he could into Refsing and thought he felt the scythe start to waver, but another part of the artifact formed an ornate sword that glowed as it came arcing at him, forcing him to retreat.

As he clashed blades and dodged spears, Haakon cursed the ghoul that took his other hand once more, sure he could land a killing blow if he had both Sársauki and Refsing. The thought gave the warrior an idea though and, deciding this battle warranted a different approach, he waited for the artifact to take control again and took off towards the clearing with the old wood cabin, careful to keep an eye on the liquid metal artifact for as long as he could.

7.

His harness in tethers, Haakon dropped Refsing and scooped up Sársauki without losing stride, but slowed to a stop when he realized the door to the cabin was still partially open. Though he hadn't been able to sense the subtle magic protecting the cabin before, he had the feeling there weren't any new protections in place.

For some time, he thought about going inside, slipping the Sofandi stone in Amber's hand and circumventing The Artificer entirely. From what he could tell The Artificer was currently rooted in place, even when he was in control, and no one appeared to be in the cabin with the child. As far as he'd been able to tell, there hadn't been anyone in there with her before The Artificer either, further confirming what Lenoir had guessed about the child, as far as he was concerned.

'It makes sense, so long as you ignore the impossibility of it all.' He thought about that night, and the concussive force of magic the girl had unleashed to escape him, though he hadn't been sure it was her at the time. He'd landed almost a hundred meters away, amongst tools and a broken lawnmower, inside a shed he'd completely flattened. When he'd returned, she was gone, and when he found her, she'd put a barrier up the second she'd laid eyes on him. At the same time, there had been a surge of magic so great even *he* felt it, and felt it strongly, and with no sign of anyone else who could have cast it.

He was telling himself he'd have to be abhorrently fast so the child couldn't react, but a thought occurred to him that made him wonder if that was true. *'If I go*

in there not in my Logi trance, will she still recognize me? Or will she think I'm one of the constructs she's created?' Looking at The Ghoul hadn't been quite like looking in the mirror. In the darkness of the night the child's mind had filled in the shadows and made him into the ghoulish monster he appeared to be, but to him it was like looking at a reflection of what he'd become ever since Lenoir had gotten them involved with Maldrik's scheme. 'I swear on my honor, I will see Maldrik's head roll in the dirt before all is said and done.'

Ultimately, Haakon decided he must finish his bout with The Artificer before moving on. Just thinking about disobeying his magically implanted order left him with a perturbing feeling that darkened and muddled his thoughts, and he got the sense that if he'd had a normal body there would have been pain that accompanied his mental admonishment. He knew that at some point the magically planted command would become a guiding, all-consuming force and he didn't think he could escape with the girl before that happened.

'Tyr, guide my blade. Mimir, guide my way.'

8.

Robbie felt like he was drowning. At first, he kept bobbing to the surface, but now it seemed that he'd been dragged too deep. The artifact was trying to suppress his emotions. Eating them, like it did everything else. It wanted to make him docile. It was almost there.

Without Haakon to distract it, Elsheriiha was able to focus on getting Robbie under its control, while it greedily ate all that was nearby, growing in size as it did so. He tried to render back some control, but the more the artifact ate the stronger it became, and it consumed with a furious fervor. For Robbie it was like he was eating too, just with his body instead of his mouth, his senses one with Elsheriiha's, and its with him. He got the feeling that the artifact couldn't normally taste, but he could, and it was like his mouth was full of dirt and bark. He felt his stomach turn and he started to heave. A small pool of liquid silver formed in front of him, and to

his horror he got the sense it was there to clean up anything that came spilling out of him. The artifact wouldn't eat him, not yet at least, but it was on a mission to consume anything and everything else.

Tears ran down his cheeks. He was barely holding on. Soon his mind would be consumed as well, and his only hope was to be rescued by his would-be killer. *'Emily... Marco... looks like I'm coming to see you.'*

Two tiny silver tendrils ran up along Robbie's face and drank his tears.

9.

Haakon slipped into the Logi trance-state and tore through the woods as fast as he could, transforming Sársauki into a massive blade and prepared to strike hard and fast. Ten meters from his target, Haakon found himself in a small clearing of felled branches and tree stumps, giving him a clear line of sight to The Artificer, and the tower of liquid metal that was behind him, tendrils stretched far and wide, devouring trees or whatever else they grasped.

'By the gods...'

Haakon hesitated, but only for a moment. He brought Sársauki sweeping towards The Artificer, but a spout of silver erupted from the main mass of the artifact that struck Haakon with the force of a firehose, sending him rolling away to bounce off nearby tree stumps like a pinball.

'Damn it. If that thing would have solidified, I would have been done for.' Haakon scrambled to his feet just in time to get out of the way of another geyser of liquid metal. Several more came flying at him, keeping him from going on the offensive. As multiple spouts came at him from all sides, he prepared to deflect the one he was on a collision course with, but he was swept away by the force of the blast and was bathed in a congealing silver. *'So, it can't solidify while it eats. Still...'* Cracks had formed along many of his remaining bones from the force of the impact, *'my defenses are failing.'*

As he kept on the move, he started to notice more and more liquid metal puddles and realized that the mass it lost when it spat out those geysers didn't return to the main body, and the artifact didn't appear to have any control over them either. The artifact was slowly growing bigger as the trees disappeared beneath its silver maw, but it was losing almost as much mass as it gained with each attack.

Acting before the idea had fully formed, Haakon charged in, but this time his aim wasn't for The Artificer. He moved around the blasts of liquid metal tearing up the earth and brought a hard-light coated Sársauki to cleave through a hunk of the massive blob. Close to a quarter of its mass sloshed away to seep into the dirt, but the larger half recoiled.

Seeing his success, Haakon hoped to hack the artifact to pieces until he found its core, but the enraged blob increased the volley of geysers, and he found it difficult to get close.

Another idea began to form as he weaved through his opponent's assault, but it still required him to get close. It had taken him awhile to notice, but a portion of the artifact always remained connected to The Artificer, wrapped around his legs, and he was willing to bet that if he could sever most of the artifact away from the bit that kept them connected, he would severely cripple Elsheriha and hopefully get the chance to finish this fight.

Haakon slowly but surely closed the distance between him and The Artificer, fighting for every step. Whenever he got within five meters of The Artificer, a wall of liquid metal came rushing to greet him and he used Sársauki to shave away pieces. Not large pieces, but enough that the artifact struggled to replenish them on top of what it lost each time it attacked. When he finally managed to clear the five-meter mark before the wall came crashing down in front of him, he made a sudden pivot, took a few more steps, and hurled himself through the air, amidst the spray of liquid metal, nearly skimming the crashing wave. Stretched out as it was, the artifact still left enough of itself behind to protect The Artificer, not realizing that wasn't Haakon's target. The skeleton cleaved through a section of the artifact, just a couple meters from The Artificer, that connected him

to the larger mass. The moment he did, he was struck with a geyser, but it lost strength as the artifact collapsed into the ground, and he managed to land on his feet. He stood where he landed and scanned all around him, looking for any signs that the artifact was reforming, but the only thing that moved was The Artificer, who swayed for a few seconds before falling to his knees and slumping over.

Haakon had the urge to rush in and finish the kill, but resisted and approached The Artificer cautiously, wary of all the liquid metal beneath his feet. He came to stand over the unconscious artificer and said a silent prayer as he raised Sársauki overhead for the killing blow. He began to bring his axe down, but it was violently ripped from his hand from something behind him. Without thinking, he tried to throw himself to the side, but the trap was already sprung. More of the liquid metal had remained inside The Artificer than he assumed, which had seeped out as he approached and now had him in its grip and was slithering up his legs. Haakon reached out, going for The Artificer's throat, but his opponent had only been feigning unconsciousness, and grabbed Haakon by his boney wrist.

The Artificer stared into Haakon's burning eyes and slowly stood.

"Damn you!"

"I know."

"How do you control such a monstrous thing?"

"I think you saw that I don't. Best I can do is keep it at bay. You weakened it pretty good though, so I should be able to get it back to sleep. I guess I should thank you for that."

Haakon spat at The Artificer's thanks, ready to fight and rage until the end but as he cursed his fate, a thought ran through his mind, there and gone so quick, he almost missed it. For a moment, however brief, he thought about begging for his life. The thought caught him off guard and gave him pause. *'Am I really scared of death after all this time?'*

Haakon was angry that he lost; his pride as a warrior wounded, but he felt himself relax, despite his predicament, and started to laugh. There was so much he wanted to say still, but all he managed was, “There must be one hell of a story there.”

“I suppose so.”

“How do you keep it subdued?”

“Afraid we don’t have time for that.” The liquid metal was up to Haakon’s shoulders and Robbie let go of his outstretched hand. “Goodbye, Haakon.”

Haakon started to say goodbye but instead said, “Be careful. It’s not over for you yet.”

Fully encased in the liquid metal, Haakon could feel it eating away at his bones and was left to wonder what was going to happen once they were gone. *‘Hopefully I’ll finally find some peace.’*

10.

It didn’t take long for Elsheriiha to consume the skeleton. As Robbie watched it crawl back to him, he was filled with an overwhelming sense of anger and disgust, and shouted his frustration to the heavens, while the *Panbeneran* went to work caroling the artifact back under his control. Back to its resting place inside him.

Chapter 30. Corraling the Silver Maw

Turkey. 2019

1.

Robbie was lost in the stone maze, having been driven by a fear so pure, he later thought he knew what it was like to be a rabbit who stumbled into a den of hungry wolves.

'Calm down! CALM DOWN!' With a great effort, Robbie forced his legs to stop moving and tried to catch his breath. So far as he could tell, whatever had emerged from the urn hadn't followed after him, but it was hard to keep from taking off again, the panic he felt was nearly all consuming. He was no stranger to sensing the intent to kill, and the fear that came with it, but this was different. There was no hatred, or anger, nor sense of survival. It was pure. It was predatory. And he was the prey. Slowly, painfully so, he pushed aside enough of the terror that flooded his system to think straight. *'Alright, I just need to find my way out of here before Em and Marco realize I'm gone and come looking for me.'*

Wary that the living artifact might have decided to follow after him, Robbie painstakingly made his way through the labyrinth of rooms, until he thought he heard something that made his heart sink.

"Emily? Marco? Is that you?" His words were met with silence, and he tried to tell himself he was only hearing things, but he was hit with a soul crushing feeling that couldn't be ignored. He made his way through the rooms more quickly, calling for his friends as he did so, but only once more did he think he heard someone calling for him. When he finally found a room with the green and blue arrows they'd left behind, only a minute or so had passed since he first heard someone shouting. He tried calling out for them again, and when he didn't get an immediate response, he made to follow the green arrows towards the exit but was stopped in his tracks by a recognizable scream of terror coming from the direction of the prison room.

Robbie felt frozen as he tried to get his legs to move, but the thought of walking back into the lair of the beast felt outright suicidal. He dug his nails into his palms, and tried to focus on the pain, but he was losing the battle to fear.

A fist came crashing into the side of his face so suddenly, it surprised him, despite having been his. Robbie screamed until his throat felt raw, and he went sprinting through the rooms on shaking legs, following the blue arrows that led to the prison room. Four elemental stones and a dozen rune stones trailed behind him, kept aloft and in his wake with the power of the duel elemental stone. *'Please be wrong. Oh god, please be wrong.'*

Robbie burst into the large, rectangular room just in time to watch the silver blob devour what little remained of Emily and Marco.

2.

For a few horrendous moments it was as if time had stopped. Robbie felt as though he was trapped in a photo taken of the carnage. A pair of legs stuck out of the congealed silver; the rest of the body was unseen inside the writhing mass. Emily was still recognizable, having been pulled in from behind, and after Marco. An arm, a leg and most of her head still protruded from the artifact, but he could see in her eyes that she was already dead. He tried to deny what he was seeing, but it was as though he couldn't look away until he accepted it. When time resumed its normal passage, he ran, his sanity teetering on a precipice. There were no coherent thoughts in his head, just raw, animalistic fear.

If he had kept running, he might not have ever stopped, but the image of Emily's lifeless stare blazed brightly in his mind's eye, and the all-consuming fear shifted into an uncontrollable rage.

Before there was time to let fear recement itself, Robbie came bursting back into the rectangular room, three more firestones joining the multitude of artifacts orbiting around him, and unleashed a torrent of flames that turned the room into a raging inferno. The liquid metal began to bubble and sizzle, but it didn't back away, instead it began snaking its way towards Robbie. When the artifact was about to strike, Robbie shifted the gravity around it and sent it rocketing through the room to flatten into a metallic sheen against the wall. The surface of the artifact

continued to sizzle, but he couldn't tell if he was doing any real damage, so he decided to turn up the heat. He fed the windstone, which fed the flames, and created a concentrated funnel directed at Elsheriiha.

The heat pouring back at him was burning his skin, but he didn't care, he was determined to keep it going until the artifact was nothing but a scorch mark on the wall. Elsheriiha proved to be too resilient however, and it didn't take long for the air to become thin from all the fire, leaving him to watch with dismay as it dripped to the floor and reformed.

Robbie had managed to burn away some of Elsheriiha's mass, but a six-foot round blob of congealed liquid metal remained no matter what he hit it with. He used the earthstone to create spikes and crushing pillars, but the artifact was too malleable. He used wind and gravity to try and pull it apart but no matter how far he stretched it, the magic that constituted the artifacts core held strong. Elsheriiha didn't make it easy for Robbie either. It still wanted to feed, and it was just as fine with skewering or dicing him, as it was with eating him whole. Metal spikes jutting from the artifact kept Robbie on the move, and if he got too close, it would strike like a snake, becoming a lunging mass of liquid metal that tried to come crashing down on him. Robbie used the dual elemental stone to zip around the room, out of reach, but he wasn't always fast enough, and he could feel blood trickling down his arms and legs and over his right eye.

Robbie pulled a new artifact from his enchanted leather bag and hit Elsheriiha with the kinetic force of a speeding tanker truck, which splattered it against the far wall, but it just kept coming. He hit it over and over again, until the blinding rage finally gave way to some sense of rationality, and he made the reluctant decision to retreat. The artifact chased after him, but it became lost in the maze of rooms, too focused on its prey to yet realize it could tear through and consume the very walls blocking its path, so Robbie was able to slip away.

When Robbie returned a couple hours later, he was distraught, broken, and felt like a shell of himself, but he was determined not to fall apart until he made sure the horrid *thing* he'd released never hurt anyone again.

The notes Emily left behind had confirmed what he already assumed Elsheriiha really was, and emphasized the course of action he would likely have to take. The artifact was ancient and powerful, so he wasn't likely to be able to destroy it, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to give it one last try.

The tunnel under the earth opened up onto a massive cavern that housed the prison, surrounded by a twenty-foot-high wall with no point of entry. Robbie stood atop the protective wall and used an earthstone to remove the prison's front wall and reshaped the marble and granite into a dome around himself to act as a shield. Before his protection finished forming, he caught sight of something large and hulking, filling in most of the hollowed-out prison. Four firestones rose into the air, accompanied by close to a dozen rune stones, that turned the prison into a blazing hellpit. The parts of the prison that took the brunt of the flames started to crack and bubble. The heat was so intense, he could feel it inside his protective dome and started to sweat. He continued to push the rune stones and firestones until he felt they were at their limits, only then did he let the flames die, and returned to the cavern entrance.

Not yet satisfied, Robbie held out an ornate sphere full of kinetic magic and fed it aura until it too was at its breaking point. The sphere, and four of the six rune stones enhancing it, shattered when he released the pent-up magic, which leveled the prison with the force of a bomb. The building and the wall surrounding it were ripped to pieces and thrown against the cavern walls, causing large sections to collapse.

When the dust settled, Robbie returned to the surface and waited.

When Robbie felt the artifact oozing its way through the tunnel, close to a day later, he accepted that he only had one option remaining. Even if he collapsed the tunnel, he knew it would eventually make its way to the surface. Deep down he'd known from the moment he'd failed to burn away the artifact that there was only one viable option, but it was something he desperately wanted to avoid. He was terrified, but he wasn't going to let anyone else suffer for what he'd done.

Elsheriiha may have mutated, but it was still an artifact, and he was an artificer. *The Artificer*. If anyone had a chance of bringing this artifact under their control it was him, and he felt it was his responsibility to do whatever he could to make it happen. The artifact was more powerful than anyone he'd ever used, but with the Panbeneran, he thought he *should* be able to wrestle control of it.

When the enormous artifact came slithering into view, slow and bulbous from all the granite and marble it ate to free itself, Robbie filled the tunnel with flames and turned the cave entrance into a red-hot furnace, whose blazing rocks continued to glow brightly even after the fire died. When Elsheriiha was reduced back to its core size, Robbie took a hunting knife and made a careful cut across his palm. He let the blood pool in his hand for a moment before turning it over and letting the blood fall to the ground. He then slowly backed away a dozen feet or so, careful to leave a noticeable trail. Physical contact of some sort is required to use most artifacts, at least for the first time, so the user has a means of transferring their aura, but that same energy can be found in blood, so Robbie waited and hoped the artifact would come lap it up.

Elsheriiha oozed over the small puddle of blood and halted, but only for a second, before darting along the trail, heading right for Robbie. Before he could establish a connection to the artifact, dozens of tiny tendrils billowed from the surface of the charging mass, solidifying and burrowing into his arms, legs, and chest. Most of them immediately retracted but a handful stayed where they were, becoming liquid once more and trailing down his body, both inside and out.

Robbie began screaming, his voice filled with pain and horror. Wherever the liquid metal lay started to burn, as skin and muscle were stripped away. In his panic, Robbie tried to force the artifact away by shifting the gravity around it but

discovered that the dual elemental stone had been broken by one of Elsheriha's tendrils.

The liquid metal artifact became a flat sheet that rose into the air, like a gaping maw ready to take a bite out of him. With no time to run, Robbie plunged his bleeding hand into the artifact, praying the extra blood and physical contact would help to get it under control. New pain shot through his body as the skin around his hand, and the flesh inside the wound, was cooked inside Elsheriha. The rest of the silver wave came crashing down upon him, knocking him to the ground. He cried and sputtered as liquid metal filled his mouth and nostrils, but he remained focused on the alien presence that was becoming clearer in his mind, and gave one last push of will to bring Elsheriha under his control.

All at once it was as if something clicked into place, and the artifact stopped writhing. Robbie rolled over and started vomiting liquid metal, in-between gasping breaths. The flesh around his hand and where the artifact had attached itself stopped burning but was raw and wracked with pain. He was barely holding it together, he knew he was going to break down at any moment, but it had to wait. The horror wasn't quite over.

Elsheriha reformed into a congealed ball of liquid metal and came slithering into view, for just a moment, before it crawled into his body through the gash in his palm. The pain was immense, like liquid fire was traveling through his body, spreading out to every corner. It wasn't long before Robbie lost consciousness, his last thought was that the artifact was eating him from the inside.

When he came to, it was well into the evening. Everything hurt, though some places were much worse than others. Everywhere that the artifact had begun eating away at cried out in pain, vying for his attention. '*Elsheriha...*' Even before he opened his eyes, he felt its presence. He felt it in his body, just beneath the skin, and he felt the insidious, maddening hunger that drove its every action. The feeling was so strong it threatened to consume him.

Chapter 31. Waking Nightmare; Please Be Sleeping.

Present Day

1.

Maria did not remember going out drinking but thought she must have as she came to. Her head was pounding, and the light coming through her eyelids stung her eyes. Still, she was grateful to be awake. She had been having an awful nightmare. She had watched as Greg slowly suffocated over and over, unable to do anything about it. The dream felt so real she was pretty sure she'd been crying, both of her cheeks felt wet.

“Well, well. Looks like your little charm is starting to wear off.”

“The charm works best when unperturbed, and all your talking could annoy the dead.”

Maria recoiled and covered her ears. It sounded like the volume was all the way up on the tv, and she had no idea where the remote was. She groaned with pain and mumbled, “Greg, could you turn that down?”

A shrill laugh made her squirm. She blinked rapidly, trying to get her vision to come into focus. When it finally did, and Maria saw where she was, and what she was sitting across from, she thought she must still be dreaming. She was sitting in the back of, what she assumed was, a limo, and across from two, ‘*No, three.*’, people. Although as her vision cleared, she realized “people” might not be the right word, at least one of them was a monster. It was almost too tall to sit in there without leaning forward, and was too wide to be human, with monstrous arms that were almost as big around as her body. Her eyes became transfixed on its dark, sapphire skin, that fed into the two black orbs it had for eye’s, and the four carmine horns that jutted out of the top of its forehead like arrowheads. She was too

shocked by its ghastly face to really notice what it wore; dark, oversized pants that were patched and faded, and a long-sleeved shirt that may have been white at some point but was now a tan-ish grey, bleached by years of exposure to the elements. The demon's worn-out shoes, and his short crop of dark hair was greasy and unkempt, adding to the image of someone either down on their luck and/or living in squalor, yet something about the way the demon carried himself suggested he was someone who was in control.

On one side of the demon sat Lenoir, still adorned in her purple gown, and on the other was someone she couldn't see, but she knew was there. She could feel the seething malice from this person, or whatever they were, and knew it was directed at her. Her heart was pounding. It sure didn't feel like a dream, but it was the only thing that made sense. After all, it wouldn't have been the first time she thought she'd woken from one dream only to later realize she'd stepped into another.

A few seconds later she found out that the shrill laugh had come from the blue skinned demon, when it let out another one, which made Maria flinch and Lenoir shake her head, clearly annoyed.

"What's the matter? Never seen a demon before?" Despite his shrill laugh the demon's voice was low and raspy. He gave her a wide smile revealing a mouth full of sharp, needle-like teeth.

Maria desperately wanted to get out of the vehicle and run, but she would have to rush past the others to get to the door from where she sat. She briefly considered trying to smash the windows but there was nothing around that she could grab that might be heavy enough. She quickly checked her pockets and found that both her phone and keys were gone. "W-Who are you? What d-do you want?"

"The name is Maldrik. Purveyor of fine goods and Merchant Lord of Dudaa'an," The demon gave an exaggerated, flourishing bow, before fixing her with another grin that was all teeth, "And what I *want*, is your sweet little daughter. You see, I have very special plans for what I'm going to do with her."

“Y-You won’t lay a hand on her y-you b-bastard!” Maria spat, voice trembling. For a few seconds, desolate fear became protective anger, and she met the demon’s haunting gaze, which seemed to look through her.

The demon laughed and smiled wider. “Oh yeah? Well now, I would love to see how you would try and stop me.” He leaned closer, daring her to do something. Maria stayed where she was, grasping her legs so her hands wouldn’t shake, but she continued to meet those soulless eyes with as much bravado as she could muster. “Certainly you don’t intend to fight me? I could snap you in two without much effort. So then, are you offering me something? You looking for a taste of the other end of the Saljarheim descendants?” The demon leered at her, looking her up and down, making her feel dirty; naked. Lenoir let out a disapproving sigh as she stared out the limo window, drawing Maldrik’s attention. “Ah, sorry, I didn’t take you for an old prude.”

“Prude or not, the thought of you in any kind of sexual endeavor is revolting.”

If her words were meant to get under his skin she had failed because the demon just chuckled, and turned back to Maria. “You can relax, I have no interest in humans that way, and don’t worry about your daughter. The witch will watch over her in the intervening days.”

“The witch?” Maria asked.

Maldrik laughed and gestured at Lenoir. “C’mon now, isn’t it obvious. Why else would she dress in such a ridiculous manner.”

Perona scoffed but did not look up from the window, “At least I don’t dress like a broke pirate.”

A frown creased the demon’s sapphire face as he looked over his clothes. “Hmm. You’d be surprised how hard it is to find clothes that I like in my size, even in Dudaan, but perhaps it is about time I updated my wardrobe to better fit my status. After all, that’s something I’ll soon be able to take care of with the snap of my finger. Maybe I’ll have your familiar pick me out some clothes. He dresses rather dapper for a dead man.” Maldrik laughed again as if he said something

abhorrently funny. When his laughter finally tapered off, he returned his dark orbs onto Maria, “Now where were we? Ah yes, we were talking about all the fun me, and your daughter are going to have.”

2.

Maria tried her best to keep from shutting down while she sat there, shaking, and listening to Maldrik prattle on. She didn’t understand most of what he said, much of it involved people and places she’d never heard of, but she understood the important part. Whatever this demon wanted meant Amber had to die. *Sacrificed* was the word he used, to achieve his goals. And that wasn’t all. What she thought had been a nightmare turned out to be real. The demon gleefully regaled how Lenoir made her watch as invisible hands squeezed the life out of her husband.

“I mean, it was cold blooded,” Maldrik roared, thumping Lenoir on the shoulder, who continued to stare out the window, her face devoid of any expression, “took me by surprise, it did. Even after giving you the al’Tabeth I did not see that coming.”

“Why did you do it?” Maria stared at the floor, unable to face those across from her since the demon told her Greg was dead. Her words were so quiet she could hardly hear them over Maldrik’s laughter.

“What was that dear?”

“Why did you kill him?” This time Maria found her voice and managed to bring herself to face her husband’s killer while she did so. Lenoir just shrugged, not even bothering to look at her.

Rage bellowed through Maria, burning away any sense of fear and self-preservation. She threw care and caution to the wind and leapt across the limo, bringing her fist crashing down onto the woman’s nose, twice, and felt it crunch underneath her fist. What satisfaction she felt from it was short lived, as a wave of pain roared through her hand and into her wrist. “Ow, shit.”

Wailing with pain and anger, Lenoir jabbed the end of the parasol into Maria's chest like it was a lance and sent her sprawling to the floor. She looked like she was going to pounce on top of Maria, but Maldrik, who was nearly in tears from laughter, held out an arm and forced her back into her seat. "Now, now. The two of you relax. As much as I'd like to see it, it is far too cramped in here for you two to go at it." A fresh gale of laughter ensued before he turned to Lenoir, wiping tears from his eyes. "C'mon now, can you blame her?" Lenoir scoffed and turned back to the window, not even bothering to wipe away the blood that covered her face. "Hmm. Maybe I shouldn't have let you hold the effigy for so long. Eh, oh well. Serves you right for trying to double cross me." He then turned to Maria, the wide grin suddenly gone, his dark eyes taking on a feral gleam. "Now listen here. As amusing as that was, don't go getting any further ideas. If you're stupid enough to try that with me, instead of finding her warm, loving mother alive and waiting, your daughter's going to find her mother's cold, limbless, corpse. Understand?" Maria nodded, too scared to speak. "Good." As quickly as it left, Maldrik's wide smile returned, and he leaned back and gestured to her as though he had interrupted her and was saying for her to continue.

It took Maria a minute before she managed to say anything, too many thoughts were running through her mind. The demon was all over the place emotionally, at least on the surface, but what she felt from him was a surprising sense of calm, with just an underlining hint of excitement and anxiety. *'Is it all an act, or is he just crazy?'* Finally, she asked, "Why am I here?"

"The witch seems to think we'll need help keeping your daughter in line. Personally, I don't see the point. I have plenty of means to keep her subdued. Isn't that right?" Maldrik lifted a beefy hand and patted the invisible passenger. Maria felt the malice that had been steadily directed at her immediately shift to the massive demon and intensify, "But the two that went in to get your daughter are taking longer than expected, so we had some time to kill."

"So, I'm here because you got bored?"

"Exactly. So, keep that in mind. I have no problem turning you into your daughter's new stuffed animal."

Maria swallowed hard and tried not to let it show how much the idea bothered her. She was saved from having to think about it for long when Lenoir said, in a nasally voice, “Something’s happening.” In the time since Maria came to, they’d come to park somewhere downtown, though she hadn’t paid attention as to where they were. She followed Lenoir’s line of sight and stared at the two buildings they were parked near for a long moment, trying to figure out what she was missing, when it suddenly became very apparent. For several moments, Maria struggled to process what she was seeing, as her brain tried to make sense of the sudden emergence, compounded by a rush of rather mundane memories flooding through her mind. In between the two familiar buildings, that she had driven past hundreds of times over the years, appeared a third office building, right in front of where they were parked.

“What the hell?” Maria blinked and rubbed her eyes, expecting the building to disappear as she did so. She thought it had to be a trick of the light, or hallucination brought on by all the fear and anxiety festering in her mind, but no matter how much she blinked, the *new* building remained. Only she remembered the building wasn’t new. Like the others, she’d passed by this building hundreds of times, had even gone inside a few times when her bank still had an office there.

“Finally!” Maldrik exclaimed reverently, “It’s about damn time.” He turned to Lenoir, suddenly serious, “Alright witch, you have your orders. Go wait for our honored guest, and make sure your familiar did his job and carried out my order. We don’t want any tag-alongs,” he paused then added, “And take her with you.”

Without a word Lenoir struck like a viper, and it wasn’t until she already had Maria by the wrist that Maria tried to move away. Her resistance only lasted a few seconds as a now familiar feeling of bliss spread through her body and became the only thing she could think about.

Chapter 31. The Escape

1.

For a while Robbie sat in a field of felled and half-devoured trees, breathing heavily. Twice he tried, and failed, to set his broken fingers, letting out a muffled cry of pain, before he finally got them on the third. His pained wail was lost in the forest brambles, and he took several long moments before he tried to stand. *'Come on, you gotta get up. You're not done yet.'* His muscles felt like rubber, and pain traveled through his body with each beat of his heart. All he wanted to do was close his eyes, but he knew if he did, he'd be unconscious within seconds.

He was worried that Dory wouldn't take down the barrier and let him take Amber, but when he arrived at the clearing, he felt no magic and found that the door was open. *'Did she remove the barrier after Haakon's presence disappeared, or has the cabin been unprotected this whole time?'* As he approached, he noticed something reflecting in the false moon's light and made a beeline to see what it was. Lying in the grass was Haakon's enchanted axe, Refsing. Anger swelled up inside him at the sight of it, and he started to walk away, but a voice in his head reminded him that he was still in danger and severely lacking weapons, so he reluctantly put the axe into his enchanted leather bag.

Robbie stepped into the cabin, announcing his presence as he did so, not wanting to startle or scare Amber even further. He found her right where he'd left her, mostly hidden under the blanket on top of the bed.

"Are you alright Amber?" Robbie asked, trying not to sound as tired or out of breath as he felt.

She nodded, and slowly lowered the blanket so he could see her face. "Is it gone?"

"Yup. It's gone, I promise."

"How did it get in here?"

"I... I don't know." Inside Robbie cringed, sure she had figured out the truth about Haakon. If she was trying to catch him in a lie, things could get real ugly, real fast.

“What about your friend? Where is he?”

“He... he didn’t make it.”

“Oh, no,” tears filled her eyes, and she looked away, like she was expecting him to get angry and blame her, “I’m so sorry.”

‘Does she really not know? She does look about as tired as I feel... maybe she really didn’t put it together.’ Robbie went and sat at the end of Amber’s bed and tried to sound reassuring as he said, “It’s okay. He knew the risks. The important thing is you’re not hurt,” he paused for a few moments, trying to sell the lie, but his racing thoughts were making it hard to be patient, “Right now, we need to focus on getting out of here. Does Dory still plan on making us a new way out?”

Amber slowly looked back up at him, her words laced with panic when she said, “Dory’s gone.”

“What do you mean she’s gone?”

“She left when the bad man got in. I’ve tried calling for her, but she doesn’t answer. She must be really scared.”

Internally Robbie cursed, but he gave Amber an understanding smile and told her it was alright. On the verge of panic, he tried to keep calm and devise a plan to get them out of there. He thought he might be able to deal with what remained of the constructs, but he had no idea what to do about the chasm they’d have to cross on the floor below or the seal that was keeping them inside the domain. He also had to figure out what he was going to do if they did get out. He knew he would find at least the witch waiting for him, and he didn’t like his odds of taking her head on, let alone whatever else might be out there.

Robbie spent several minutes trying to find a solution to their problems, while fielding Amber’s timid questions, but no matter how he looked at it, they were facing impossible odds. He started to think that maybe, just maybe, he could get Amber to realize that Dory was just an extension of herself, but even if he did, he had no idea how to teach her how to control her powers.

A distant, metallic whine caught Robbie's attention, and he noticed a sudden flux of magic, seconds before their whole world started to shake. Both of them were thrown to the floor, as toys and books rained down from the shelves at them. Amber's dresser rocked back and forth before it fell over, aiming to crush her. Robbie pulled her out of the way and shielded her from further debris while he wrestled out a windstone and wrapped them in a bubble of swirling wind that caught and tossed anything that fell at them. For nearly a minute they stayed like that as the world continued to shake and scream. When everything settled, and Robbie let the bubble of wind pop, it looked as if a hurricane had swept through the room.

For several moments neither of them moved, waiting to make sure it was truly over.

"Stay here," Robbie said as he got up to check the devastation beyond the cabin. *'What the hell?'* They were still in the cabin, but they were no longer in the woods, under the false night sky. It was fairly dark, only a trace of evening light slipped through to where they were, but from what he could tell they were in a hallway, with an entrance to some business or office on either side of them. *'Holy shit. The domain collapsed on its own.'* Before he could get excited, the building started to shake again, not as violently this time, but the whine of warping metal told him they were still in danger. Robbie ran back into the cabin and picked up Amber the moment the ground stopped shaking and ran to the stairwell.

The pair raced down the stairs as fast as Robbie's legs would carry them but when they hit the fourth floor, the door flew open, and both of them were knocked aside as six constructs came barreling into the stairwell. Two massive spiders with human limbs and a hairless, hunchbacked werewolf ignored them and went bounding down the stairs, but a man with large, crooked wings, a man with no skin, whose robes were soaked in blood and plastered to his body, and a writhing creature that was all arms and hands, stopped and turned their attention on them.

Robbie kicked up at the man with no skin, since he was the closest, and tried to ignore the wet squelch as he scrambled to his feet and tossed Amber further up the stairs, out of reach. Robbie's scream of pain over shadowed Amber's, as the

man with wings raked his claw-like hand down Robbie's back. Robbie poured aura into the windstone and sent both the winged man and the skinless man tumbling down the stairs, but the many-armed creature grabbed onto the stairs and door frame and held tightly. Even holding itself down, the creature still had plenty of limbs to try to pull Robbie into its unending nothingness. He backed away and torched the creature until it withered and crumpled. The winged-man and the skinless man got back up and came charging at them, but Robbie turned his flames on them, cooking the skinless man until he was well done. The other was protected from the fire by its wings, so Robbie switched to ice, pulling in moisture through the open door. As the construct came hurdling at him, Robbie took inspiration from the other winged-men he'd fought and thrust forward, as if he was holding a spear. A large, sharp shard of ice formed in his outstretched hand, and the winged-man impaled himself on the unexpected weapon. With its last breath, the construct tried to scratch and tear at Robbie's face, but he twisted the ice shard and shoved hard before letting go, knocking the winged-man off balance and sending it tumbling back down the stairs.

Robbie caught motion out of the corner of his eye and saw that those six constructs weren't the only ones to survive the collapse. With no time to deal with them, Robbie slammed the door and encased it with a thick sheet of ice on both sides. He turned to grab Amber and found her looking at him with wide eyed terror, tears streaming down her cheeks. *'Good job "hero".'* "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to hurt you, and, uh, sorry you had to witness that... but listen, we don't have time to be scared, okay? The building is going to collapse soon." To his relief she seemed to understand and got to her feet. "Alright this is important, so listen carefully." Robbie spat out quick instructions that ended up going unneeded, for they didn't run into any more constructs in the stairwell. They did find signs that some had come scurrying through on both the third and second floor, so Robbie took a quick moment to freeze both of the doorways.

Halfway between the first and second floors, he told Amber to wait there until he called for her, before he hurried the rest of the way down. He found that the first floor largely resembled what he and Haakon had first stepped into, as he looked over the couple dozen constructs floundering around the open lobby,

smashing furniture and looking for an exit. A few had found it, but for some reason hadn't managed to get the door open. He knew if even one of them got outside it would mean death for dozens of people, and decided not to pass up whatever luck had kept them from getting out.

“Hey assholes! Over here!”

Dozens of eyes turned to him, from creatures of all shapes and sizes, most of which he recognized from his journey to the top floor. Normally, he would have slowly burned or frozen them all, but they needed to get out *now*, and he couldn't afford to let one of them slip by while he tried to avoid being stabbed or eaten. So, he made a choice he never thought he would make.

At all times, since the moment he subdued Elsheriha, a part of him worked to keep the living artifact at bay. For years he'd been afraid to divert any of his strength away from this task, but thanks to the battle with Haakon, Elsheriha was severely weakened, so he decided to take the risk. He shifted most of the flow of aura away from Elsheriha and felt a tidal wave of strength wash through his tired body.

For the first time since that awful day, Robbie felt like himself again. He'd almost forgotten what it was like.

The first handful of constructs to come charging at him were burned to a crisp in a near instant, their remains sliding to a stop at his feet. The hairless werewolf roared and leapt at him, only to be skewered on a spike made of tile, that shot up from the floor. While the others hesitated, the temperature immediately surrounding Robbie plummeted as ten spears of ice formed, floating in the air above him. He held his right hand up like a gun and mentally pulled the trigger, sending the ice spears rocketing towards their targets. He skewered four spiders, and two lion faced monks, but his other targets moved out of the way. A deformed goblin threw something round and heavy at Robbie, that left a trail of smoke as it flew through the air, but a sudden gust of wind sent it hurling back at it. Whatever the goblin had thrown exploded on impact, killing it and a trio of lanky, sharp-toothed elves. A few more constructs came charging at him and were quickly cooked alive, leaving only four remaining in the lobby with him. Two winged-men,

who still had their spears, an undead looking woman, who skittered across the floor on all fours, and someone in ornate armor, carrying an oversized sword, stared him down, waiting for him to make the next move. Three of the four were immune to his flames, and he knew the swordsman would be immune from most elemental attacks, if it had been accurately recreated.

Angry, tired, and reveling in the forgotten strength coursing through him, Robbie decided to give something a try that he would normally never think to do. He reached into his enchanted leather bag and took out Refsing. He'd never used an artifact quite like it, but with just a little prodding of aura he felt like he knew how it worked, and thought he heard a low, bell-like chorus in the back of his mind.

Robbie raised the earthstone above his head and created four twisting bouquets of tile spears that tore through the two wing-men and the undead woman, lifting them into the air, but broke against the swordsman's ornate armor, who came charging at Robbie. Just as he expected.

Robbie was no warrior, and he wouldn't normally face an enemy like this head on, but he had no intention of fighting fair. As the swordsman charged, Robbie poured aura into Refsing, transforming it into a massive, hard-light war hammer, that crackled with energy. When the swordsman was nearly close enough to strike, Robbie released a cyclone force wind that slowed the construct and helped him swing Refsing over his shoulder to flatten the swordsman inside its armor.

Breathing heavily, Robbie thought about trying to move some of the gore before having Amber come join him, but a loud metal groan pushed the thought from his mind. He yelled for Amber to come down and started digging through his enchanted leather bag. "Keep your eyes pointed up and come stand by me."

The building groaned again, causing Amber to let out a tired whimper as she came to stand by him. "What are you doing? We need to go."

"I know and we are, just give me a second. There's a chance it might not be completely safe out there. We're just taking a precaution; stay right there." He

wasn't very confident this plan would work, but he wanted to at least try to slip away unseen.

The deafening sound of something heavy crashing reverberated through the building and, for a second, he thought something was going to come crashing through the ceiling. He suspected the domain hadn't come apart evenly, and the building's structure wasn't taking it well. They didn't have time to wait. He just prayed the combination of runes he had in mind, paired with an effigy of protection, would make them hard, if not impossible, to spot, at least for several seconds. Long enough, he hoped, for them to get out of the witch's line of sight and that of anyone else that might be watching the building. "Alright Amber this will only –."

"Mommy!" Amber wailed with excitement.

Instinctually Robbie reached for her as she started to move but he was already holding the bulky effigy. "Amber, wait!" She ignored him and went sprinting for the door. Robbie dropped his bag and the effigy, which shattered against the linoleum, and started after her.

Standing just outside, visible through the glass panel, was Amber's mother. He wanted to be happy about her being there, but even from where he was, he could tell something was wrong. As Amber neared, the door seemed to open on its own and she jumped into Maria's arms, nearly knocking them both to the ground. The door snapped closed behind Amber, and Robbie slowed, just a little, not wanting to accidentally hit them with the door as he came charging through.

He made to push the door open with his shoulder, but it remained shut, and he went stumbling backwards, a fresh wave of pain shooting through his body. Cursing, he approached the door cautiously, ignoring the rumbling from above, and peered out the glass panel. Less than a dozen feet away was Lenoir, who no longer carried a parasol, but instead held a sleek, wooden staff, coated in a dark lacquer and inscribed with five lines of twenty runes running down from its rounded top. These runes glowed as she lightly twirled the staff, a triumphant smile on her bloody face. He watched with dismay as she held up a smooth round stone, the size of a gold dollar. He recognized the artifact, he had one just like it in his bag, and a

few more back home. Robbie screamed and pounded on the door, trying to get Amber's attention, but it was no use. He watched, helpless, as the witch placed the glowing Sofandi stone into Amber's hands, which were clasped around her mother's shoulders. At once the girl slackened and fell limply into her mother's arms, deep in an enchanted sleep.

2.

"Copy that dispatch. Already enroute." Det. Randolph was already downtown when the emergency line was flooded with calls. He'd spent hours driving all around Bedford looking for the limo the two women had reportedly left in, and neither he nor anyone else on the BPD had had any luck. Now, calls were coming in that part of an office building had collapsed, and by the sounds of it, the rest of the building was soon to follow. A total emergency alert had been issued, and they were calling for all emergency services at the scene. "Is this day ever going to end?"

The detective turned onto the road with the building in question and found he was the first emergency worker on scene, and that there were an alarming number of people about, staring and taking videos on their phone. Distracted by all the people, Det. Randolph didn't immediately notice what kind of vehicle was parked outside of the building everyone was watching, sandwiched between two cars that had haphazardly pulled over to take pictures. It wasn't until after he got out of his car, and noticed the three people that were dangerously close to the partially collapsed building, that he also noticed the limo.

He'd parked across the street and away from where he thought firemen and ambulance would need the space and started toward the growing crowd when he spotted them. His heart skipped a beat. He immediately recognized the two women, and although he couldn't see her face, he felt sure the young girl Ms. Wilson held was Amber. Seeing her there, still alive and well, filled the detective with such an immense sense of relief he couldn't help but smile. *'It ain't over yet,'*

he reminded himself, *'Something's not right here.'* Not knowing, or trusting, what was going on, he wanted to get as close as possible before they became aware of his presence.

As he approached, Lenoir, who was carrying what appeared to be a large tree branch, held up something with her other hand he couldn't see clearly, and did so in such a way that he felt she was showing it to someone who was watching from inside the building. She then placed the item into the child's hand, who immediately went limp in Mrs. Wilson's arms. With the child seemingly unconscious, Mrs. Wilson turned and started walking toward the limo parked along the sidewalk.

'No! Shit!'

The detective went from a casual walk to a full out sprint, determined to get to the child before they got her into the limo. "BPD, stop where you are!" Only Lenoir turned to look at him at first, and she fixed him with an annoyed sneer. "It's over you two. Put the child down and step away with your hands in the air."

Mrs. Wilson started to stir, blinking rapidly, and peering about with a dazed look on her face. "What the – where am I?" When she looked up and spotted the limo, the confusion was quickly replaced with stone-cold fear. She turned around and choked off a scream when she spotted the other woman who was standing just a few feet away. "No! You stay away! You stay away from me and my daughter." She looked like she was about to run, but she quickly back peddled instead, refusing to take her eyes off of Lenoir.

"You shouldn't have been able to slip that charm so quickly." Lenoir's words sounded distant, and for a few seconds a somber look replaced the sneer as she watched Mrs. Wilson back away. When the sneer returned to her bloody face, she raised the hunk of wood and pointed it at Mrs. Wilson as though she were brandishing a sword. "That's far enough. You're coming with us. It would make it a lot easier on everyone if you did so willingly."

Mrs. Wilson kept backing away, but her eyes were locked onto the end of what the detective realized was supposed to be a staff, like the ones he had seen in

movies, and at the renaissance faire his wife liked to drag him to. Under different circumstances he thought he would probably find the whole thing ridiculous but, as it was, he treated the woman like she had a gun or any other dangerous weapon. He put himself between her and Mrs. Wilson and Amber, gun raised but not poised to shoot.

“That’s enough out of you. You need to put the stick down and come with me quietly. You’re already in enough shit for whatever your involvement in all this is. Don’t make it worse on yourself by doing something stupid.” While he spoke, the detective risked a glance at the building’s entrance. On the other side of the doors glass panel was a disheveled looking man who had a hand pressed up against the door, eyes closed and head downcast like he was lightheaded and trying to keep his balance. *‘Damn it. What the hell is going on?’* “Friend of yours?” Lenoir neither moved nor responded, she just stared at him, a sneer still pulling her lips tight. In his peripherals he could see someone in plain clothes behind the wheel of the limo, staring forward absently, as if completely unaware of what was going on just a few feet away.

A low groan croaked from the six-story building, drawing the detective’s attention, who was worried he was going to see the building swaying, but whatever was happening still hadn’t reached the outer structure. Panic raced through the detective. There was so much going on, and too many people were in danger, that he didn’t know how to proceed. *‘Where the hell is my backup?’*

“Oh my, that doesn’t sound good,” The sneer was replaced with a look of worry that was obvious mockery, “You better get all these people away from here quickly. They don’t want to be standing here when it comes crashing down.”

The detective ignored her and spoke to Mrs. Wilson without taking his eyes off of Lenoir. “Mrs. Wilson, take Amber and get away from here. You don’t have to go far. Any minute this place will be swarming with police, it’s just not safe right here,” Raising his voice, he also addressed the nearby onlookers, most of whom no longer seemed as interested in the building as they did whatever was transpiring between him and Lenoir, “And that goes for the rest of you too. Everyone needs to clear the way for emergency workers and get to a safe distance

down the road.” As he spoke another officer finally arrived on scene and, assessing what was going on, made to cut Lenoir off from the limo.

“She won’t do that. Not if she knows what’s good for her,” Lenoir purred, “I doubt she wants to go out the same way her husband did.”

“Don’t listen to her. It’s over. She’s not hurting anyone ever again, okay? But it’s not safe here.”

“Agreed, it’s not safe here, which is why she needs to come with us before we’re all buried in rubble.”

“Yeah? You have something to do with that?”

“I didn’t do anything, *butttt* I feel pretty confident saying the building’s structure was damaged since the domain came apart unevenly, and now it’s going to collapse under its own weight.”

“The what?” Det. Randolph cursed. He wasn’t sure if she was crazy or just deliberately messing with him, and decided it was probably a little of both. “Who is the man banging on the door? Is he with you or did you lock him in there somehow?”

“I think that’s the doorman.”

“How many people are in there?”

“I’d say between one and one hundred.” The building let out another rumble that shook the ground, setting off a nearby car alarm.

Focused on the crazy woman and the imminent danger, Det. Randolph didn’t hear the limo’s window slide down behind the officer who was poised to keep Lenoir from fleeing, or the raspy but quiet voice that whispered something into the evening air. He did catch a whiff of the charred scent that filled the air, and looked over to see the officer whip around, gun raised. The detective couldn’t see who was in the limo, nor did he see what they did, but all at once, as if he’d been doused in gasoline, the officer went up in flames.

Det. Randolph moved to help the flailing officer, but he suddenly stiffened straight and dropped his gun. His whole body felt like it was being crushed by a giant, invisible hand.

3.

“Now Maria, why don’t you go ahead and come with me without any more fuss.” Lenoir stepped around the detective, shaking her head disapprovingly.

“N-no, I ...” Maria froze, she’d just been about to turn and run when the officer standing by the limo was set on fire, but now, she felt like a deer in the headlights.

The sound of a door being ripped from its hinges caught the attention of everyone nearby. The door went flying towards Lenoir but, at the last second, it was as if something grabbed it out of the air and tossed it onto the street. A man stepped out of the building carrying something in both hands that were glowing brightly. Maria immediately recognized him as the man she’d met in New York, despite his ragged appearance.

There was a surge of static and heat, followed by a cacophony of lights and sounds. Everything happened so quickly Maria barely kept up. The sidewalk became a giant hand that tried to pull Lenoir beneath the surface, but she smacked the ground with the bottom of her staff and the concrete splashed to the earth like water. A torrent of fire then shot at Lenoir but hit an invisible wall and was redirected straight into the air. Spears of ice formed in the air above Robbie, but Lenoir spoke quickly, and the spears broke like someone had reached out and snapped them. Cursing, Robbie stepped forward, ready to launch another bout of flames when Lenoir roared angrily and swung her staff. A heavy burst of wind followed the motion that lifted Det. Randolph into the air and hurled him at Robbie at a blinding speed. Both bodies crumpled as they collided and rolled back into the building, which was starting to shake as it rumbled.

Lenoir gestured with her staff and the limo door swung open. “Get in. Now!”

Fighting back tears, Maria hurried to the limo as the building started to sway, and the gathered crowd started to flee. She kept her eyes down, not wanting to look at the grinning demon as she awkwardly got inside and got as far from him as she could.

The moment Lenoir got in and closed the door, the limo pulled away from the curb.

Maria sat there, terrified, clutching Amber to her chest. In that moment, there was no doubt in her mind that she was going to die. Not now, but soon. So would Amber, if these monsters had their way. She tried to tell herself she wouldn’t let that happen, but there was little belief behind the thought.

Before the building was out of view, it started to collapse.

Epilogue. Chaos Up On High

The Man in White stood atop one of the large buildings that flanked the scene of destruction in downtown Bedford. It was well into the night but below rescue workers still searched the rubble for anyone who might have been trapped inside. No humans were buried beneath the several tons of concrete and metal, as far as The Man in White was aware, but they would soon start finding the remains of the constructs that had survived the domain’s collapse, only to be killed by The Artificer or crushed when the building fell on top of them. He hoped that there were some remains that were intact enough to rile up those who came upon them, and he would get to enjoy the mess that would ensue. He loved how just the knowledge of what else was out there in the world tended to drive isolated, and even small groups of, humans mad. If there was anything to be found here, he would keep an eye on those who found it, creeping on them from a distance and watching how their lives spiral. Much of the town, and to a lesser extent the

internet, was feverish with reports of a magical duel in front of a collapsing building, and of strange people emerging from cars parked in the middle of the road, who attacked any emergency workers who were trying to get to the crumbling building, particularly the one person, who was not a person, but a two-horned, red-skinned, monster. The Man in White knew from past experience that these events weren't enough to make any real changes. People in this day and age were too skeptical, and already many were declaring the footage a hoax. Even most who witnessed the magical exchange and rampaging demon will begin to question what they saw that day, and people at large will have forgotten all about it in a matter of months, but for those few who believed, it would ruin their lives, and intern provide The Man in White with endless entertainment for months, maybe even years to come. And, as an added bonus, the Filli member's either daft or bold choice to emerge in the middle of a human city without any glamor was going to put some outside pressure on Maldrik.

Because the Merchant Lord ended up with the child, he and several others had lost the first part of the threefold bet, but he wasn't too upset about it. Things were still very much in play for the other two parts of the bet and, as he told *Great Mother*, "*Winning the bet would be nice but so long as the Munnoti awakens to its full power, that's all I truly care about. To see the chaos of a new world brought forth... How exciting.*"

For hours The Man in White stood there, watching things both near and far, before his musings were disturbed and the air around him became thin and acrid as the molecules in the air were diffused and suffocated. He did not need to turn around to know what stood behind him. The many limbed, oily creature peered at him through dozens of eyes, spread across his body, as it stood there writhing and trying to decide if The Man in White's guard was down enough for him to strike a killing blow.

"*Qlouxie!* What brings you out here on this fine night?" He knew all too well why the amorphic creature was there. He'd been expecting it, or someone like it, for some time.

“Bochilaha, nata vo len.” When the creature spoke it was like the words of a dozen different people speaking at once.

“Now, now,” The Man in White chuckled, “don’t go getting ahead of yourself. Only the first part of the bet has been decided after all. My interest was always in the later parts.”

“Cthutilo ivvo khrishli te sen-besu?”

“Hey now, don’t go throwing around accusations so freely. You’re coming close to saying something you can’t take back. All I did was tell the young demon who the Munnoti’s real father was, since I heard she was a longtime admirer of his. What she does with that information, if anything, is entirely up to her.”

“Vabera tuko salax ke vo-te righi.”

The Man in White clicked his tongue twice and stamped his cane before he spoke, a venomous glint lacing his cheerful tone. “We’re all bound by the same rules. If what I did went against them, I would have suffered the consequences but as you see, I’m perfectly fine. Besides, I don’t recall you speaking up when we set the rules into play. Everyone had the same chance to tighten up the wording of the binding spell but chose to keep things loose and open.” For several long moments nothing else was said as the two ancient creatures sized each other up. When Qlouxix finally broke the silence, there was a trace of arrogance in the creature’s many voices. “Perhaps, but I don’t think you should count out The Artificer just yet.”

“Hagash eq vo sin li baefae?”

“I had nothing to do with him making it out of there. I was just as surprised as everyone else.”

“Erbarus tala! Ghashek! Takkela ke saber krvi bshel. Eqkjibi tosul bev.”

The Man in White fixed Qlouxic with a wry smile. “You see, that’s where you and the others who are already celebrating are wrong. To think the outcome of the rest of the bet is settled already is foolish.” His grin grew wider still, stretching past the natural limits of his fleshly form, until blood rolled down his cheeks and it matched the wild glint in his eyes, “This was only the first part after all.”

The expedition is over. This whole trip has been wrought with tragedy. Part of me still doesn't believe it happened. They must have been watching from up in the mountains, and somehow, they knew to wait for Darren to be away, because that's when they attacked. They came tearing through the camp before anyone realized something was amiss. Two people were killed, Tammy Lynn and Hayden, which is a loss that I don't know how to put into words. If it wasn't for Ilya's quick response, and Marco's decisive actions, it would have been so much worse. Almost everyone was hurt, and several were seriously injured, including Ilya. Marco and I made it through without any real injuries, but I can tell what he had to do to protect us is weighing heavily on him. As I write this, I am of two minds. Of course I want to see those involved brought to justice, and while I'm sure they will be found, I also know what hunts those men now is not justice, but a monster. A monster that will burn everything in its path to get to them. - From the diary of Prof. Emily Soneto.