

As requested, Archie found the most expensive hotel in Arrosfar. Of course, it wasn't a hard decision as there was only one in the town. A few of the party who lived there went home, but the rest were checked in and then left to do as they would for the rest of the evening. "We'll leave at 10am sharp tomorrow morning." he said, handing out the last of the room keys. The last key he handed to Sammy as he said, "You'll be sharing a room with me if that's alright."

Sammy stared at the key in his hands for a moment before looking up at Archie and blinking a couple of times. A bright happy smile (one that only *Archie* had been lucky enough to have directed at him so far) spread across Sammy's face as he nodded his agreement, liking very much the idea of staying with Archie. He had honestly been worried when Archie had been passing out keys, the thought of being all alone in an unfamiliar room making him nervous. 'I'm probably not going to sleep anyway, but still...' the boy thought to himself, relieved that he wasn't going to be alone.

"Alright! "Pat said as she came down the stairs, having gotten her key right away and already stashed her belongings in the room." Come on Benny, " she said,grabbing the young man's arm and beginning to drag him toward the door, " I know exactly how you'll be spending your paycheck. " she turned toward Archie and Sammy and gave a salute, " See ya folks. " she said.

Benny just let himself be dragged by Pat, knowing full well that resistance was futile anyway. "Oh... *great!* Why *my* paycheck?" he said, holding out the "A" in 'great' sarcastically in an attempt at being reluctant, but failing miserably for the simple fact that he couldn't stop smiling and laughing. "See ya later I guess!" Benny called to Archie. "Catch you later Mute!" he called to Sammy with a wink.

Sammy smiled shyly and waved goodbye to the duo as they left. Sammy thought it was interesting yet kinda funny that Benny had latched on to the silent part of his personality, and dubbed him "the mute" or just "mute" as his nickname, but Sammy didn't mind. He was just glad that Benny liked him!

Archie waved and smiled at their interaction. "Well," he said, lifting his bags with effort obvious by the strain in his voice. "I guess I'll put these in the room then hit the marketplace." he turned to Sammy, "You're welcome to come with me or go and explore yourself. Just don't get lost if you do." he teased.

Sammy smiled at Archie's teasing and nodded, reaching over and gently taking one of the bags from Archie, wanting to help his new 'boss' as much as he could. 'It's heavier than it looks!' the boy thought, nevertheless making his way towards the room. He didn't want to go anywhere alone, as much as he loved exploring new places, so he figured that staying with Archie would be the best thing at this point.

Archie smiled and adjusted his grip on the other bag, before following his assistant. He missed the hotels in bigger cities where there were bell boys to haul the bags. He supposed that maybe it was a sign that he should travel lighter. He and Sammy got to the room and dropped off the bags then headed out of the hotel. Archie looked around,. It wasn't as busy as he would have liked, but they weren't in the center. Each city had a social center where the hustle and bustle took place. That was where Archie loved to be. "Now let's see... " he said, trying to call to mind the last tune he had been here, "which way was that marketplace?"

Sammy looked from left to right, his eye catching sight of a man pushing a cart full of what looked like rugs and things. 'He's coming from the right,' the boy thought, cocking his head to the side slightly, 'so maybe that's where the market is?' He then closed his eyes and listened for a moment, his hearing being quite exceptional from years of listening for predators in the swamp. 'There!' the boy thought, his suspicions were practically confirmed. He could hear voices. Faint, but there nonetheless, coming from the right! With this in mind, the boy reached up and tugged lightly on Archie's coat to get his attention. Not waiting for a response, the boy started in that direction, not letting go of Archie and tugging him gently along.

Archie glanced down when he felt the tug with a, "hmm?" Then he followed the boy's gaze as he allowed the gentle pulling to guide him. "Ah!" he said as a few people came into view, "Here we are!" The marketplace, like the hotel, was not particularly grand. And it still wasn't nearly as busy as many places Archie had visited and enjoyed, but he still paused for a moment, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath which he released with a large grin. "The heart of the city." he said, "You're almost always bound to find it at the market." he smiled down at Sammy and wondered when the last time the boy had been to this or any village or seen this many people was.

Other than the previously mentioned doctors visit as a baby, Sammy had never been to the town before, or anywhere else for that matter... And it was probably pretty obvious by the way that Sammy's little hand started clinging to Archie's coat tightly. Despite that, he nodded in understanding as he looked up at Archie, trying to smile while also trying to hide the great amount of nervousness and slight fear in his eyes. He looked away from Archie and regarded the crowd, not even being able to comprehend that the 'crowd' really wasn't all that big compared to most other places. 'Maybe I should have stayed in the room and waited for Archie to come back...' he thought to himself, feeling out of place. 'But as long as Archie's here I'll be fine... right?'

Archie noted the discomfort of the boy. 'I guess that it can be a bit overwhelming if you aren't used to it.' he thought to himself. He reached for the hand clinging to his coat, held it within his own and gave it a little reassuring squeeze as he bent down and smiled at Sammy. "Crowds are really just a group of individuals." he said, "They're a little less scary if you notice a few people at a time instead of looking at the whole group." he glanced around, "For instance," he said, eyes landing on a woman in front of a bread seller's cart, "look at that woman over there with the child. What do you suppose she's doing? Maybe she has a large family at home with children just like you and so she is here to buy food for them. She looks a little worn down doesn't she? I doubt she wants to be here for any longer than she absolutely has to." he pointed a different direction. "Whereas that young gentleman looks like he's eager to be here and buy up the whole market! Look at the way his face lights up when he studies those revolvers. Maybe he's secretly a prince and he's only recently run away from home to explore the lives of 'common' people." Archie winked at Sammy. "Or look at that salesman over there. Sure he's yelling pretty loudly, but that's only because all the others selling things are competing with one another to get our attention. How else is he going to sell his wares if he doesn't strain so to make his voice heard?" he looked at Sammy and smiled. "Just stay close and don't be afraid, most of the people here are just like you and me. They care far more about whatever

they're trying to do than they would about an old geezer like me and a young gentleman like yourself."

Sammy held Archie's hand just as gently as he was holding his, the physical contact making the child just a bit calmer than before. His bright eyes shined with curiosity upon hearing Archie's words of wisdom about crowds, and he silently followed Archie's gaze to each of his examples. Sammy nodded slowly every now and again as Archie spoke, partly to show his understanding and partly to show that he was listening carefully. He smiled slightly at Archie's comments on the mother, but what Archie said about the "prince" made the smile grow a little bit bigger. The stall owner didn't seem *that* scary after what Archie had said, and with Archie's hand in his, Sammy felt like he really *could* be brave in the face of all this. He looked into Archie's eyes with a small, still slightly nervous smile, and nodded in acceptance, giving Archie's hand his own gentle squeeze. "I'll be brave for Archie," Sammy thought determinedly.

Archie smiled and patted Sammy's hand before straightening back up, still keeping a hold of the young boy's hand. "First place we ought to go is someplace for some new clothes," he said, looking up and down Sammy's wardrobe. Too big in some places, too small in others, and too dirty or ruined in most. "Just an outfit or two for the trip," he said, "Then when we reach Gamberage you can see a *real* tailor for suits fit for an assistant." No matter how good the tailor here was, Archie was sure he couldn't hold a candle to the talent found in a larger city. He glanced up and down the street, noticed a small shop with a sign hanging out front. Though he couldn't read the title from this far away, he could see the pair of scissors depicted. A few stalls nearby also seemed to show fabrics and clothing. That direction seemed the most likely place to find clothes. "There we are," he said, pointing before starting across the crowd to the building.

Sammy nodded in agreement, liking the idea of blending in a little better than he did. Contrary to what the others probably thought, Sammy was well aware of how dirty, ragged and old his clothes were. He even wouldn't mind getting a proper bath sometime soon, since they really didn't sound that bad... at least how Pat talked about them they didn't. He followed Archie obediently, letting his eyes roam around as he did, actually thinking that is was kind of interesting.

As expected, the clothing in this little place was nothing spectacular, but at least it looked like the couple of shirts and pants would fit the boy...mostly. The clothes, though the right length, would still be baggy. How on earth could one boy be so thin? Still, at least they were clean. "Here," he said, handing Sammy a few shirts and pants. "Why don't you go and try some of these on? Let me know which ones fit best and we'll get the right size. There's a dressing room back there," he said pointing.

Sammy took the clothes silently, smiling brightly and nodding in excitement. He'd obviously never gotten new clothes that he could remember, so this was quite the experience for him. He turned and went the way that Archie had pointed, going in and closing the door quietly. He quickly tried on each article of clothing, looking at himself carefully. They were all baggy, but comfortable, though Sammy thought that he might need to ask Archie to get him some suspenders for his pants that refused to stay up. He folded them back up and was making his way back to the front, when a pair of large hands forcefully grabbed him, making him drop the clothes in his arms. Sammy couldn't see his assailant, but whoever it was began dragging him towards the back door. He kicked and thrashed desperately, panic gripping his heart as he

was dragged out of the shop. *'Archie! Benny! Pat! Someone! Help me!'* the boy thought, looking for anyone to free him from this person's grasp.

Dragger shook the tiny boy violently once to show that he was *not* amused by the pathetic attempt at a struggle. His tightened grip on the kid's shoulder demonstrated further the message that he had no chance of getting free as the two made their way to a rusted back door which Dragger opened with a tough tug and made his way through, shoving Sammy out in front of him.

Sammy winced when the man's hands tightened around his shoulder painfully. Sammy just stared wide eyed at the door and nearly didn't catch himself when he was shoved outside. He looked around the alley, his heart pounding in his ears as he realized that the place was full of people all leaning against the walls... and they were all glaring at him. 'What did I do?!' the boy asked himself desperately, 'Why did they bring me here?'

Suddenly a new hand was gripping tightly onto him again. But when Sammy looked down to see it, it was old and wrinkled, yet still held him tightly. So tightly that its nails were digging into his skin. He stiffened when a horrible raspy woman's voice whispered directly into his ear.

"You have your father's eyes my boy!" it said softly. "Or maybe you're not the boy at all... maybe you are just one of those *wretched* things from that *horrible* place!" she said, getting harsher at him and gripping his arm even tighter. "If you had not come here with outsiders... we would have just killed you on the spot!" the woman hissed. Her other hand came up and gripped the boy's face making him look at all the hateful faces staring at him. "You are a curse! A demon! No better than the beasts that live in that swamp!!" she yelled, making Sammy wince.

Dragger shut the door tightly behind him and bolted it shut. He spat toward the demon spawn boy and lumbered toward the old woman. "To the well?" he asked, voice rumbling low in his chest.

The old woman nodded firmly. "The others have the supplies we'll need," she said, gesturing to a couple other people there, "We need to take care of this hell spawn quickly, before the outsiders notice his absence and start to look!" She then pulled Sammy roughly forward as she hissed again, "We have plans for you little demon! You may have tricked the outsiders into thinking you are innocent, but we here know better!"

Sammy suddenly tried to jerk out of the old woman's grasp, realizing too late that even if she had let go, there were too many people! One of the men leaning against the wall took a step forward and slapped Sammy across the face, the sound resonating in the alley. As he was pushed forward again, Sammy fought back tears. He was trapped... he couldn't escape... and there was no one to come help him. At least no one who knew he was gone yet. *'Please,'* the boy prayed silently, the spitting and cruel words of the villagers hitting him just as hard as the physical slap, *'Please send someone to help me!'*

Archie tapped the counter impatiently. He glanced at the clock. It shouldn't take so long just to try on some clothes. He moved to the changing room, thinking he would knock on the door to see what the holdup was. He froze though when he saw all the clothes scattered on the floor. "Sammy?" he called, stepping over the clothes and checking the dressing room though he was pretty sure he would find it empty. "Sammy?" he called again, moving through the store. Where had that boy gone? He called a few more times as he searched, even asking the clerk

if he had seen him to no avail. On a search near the back he found a rusted door, but it wouldn't budge when he tried to open it. He bundled up the clothes, told the clerk to hold on to them, and hurried out the front door to see if he could catch a glimpse of the missing child, nearly slamming the door into someone as he exited.

"Hey! Watch it!" Pat said, dodging the door. She looked at the assailant crossley until she recognized Archie. "Oh! Hey boss." she said, "what's the rush?"

"Have either of you seen Sammy?" he asked.

Benny gave Archie a confused look. "The mute? I haven't seen him boss. Besides, I thought he was with you! Did you lose him?" he asked, concern overtaking the confusion. The kid wasn't used to this place and was obviously not exactly comfortable, so him being alone is definitely a problem.

"You mean you got him to leave the hotel?" Pat asked, "I would've thought someone as shy as him would just have wanted to stay back. So many people around would've terrified me as a kid." she glanced around as if she'd find him just by quickly looking. "Where'd you last see him?"

"He was just in there with me." Archie said pointing behind him at the shop." He went to change then suddenly was gone!" he glanced around anxiously.

Benny was nervous for the mute. "Then we need to look for him!" he said firmly. "He seems like a pretty smart kid, so if he just got lost, he'd probably go somewhere out of the way of people. You know, the opening of an alley, an empty doorway, that kind of thing." Benny hesitated for a moment before pressing forward. "And if he was taken..." he paused only for a moment, "then we should probably check the alleys and back ways for him." he added.

Archie nodded, "There was a door leading out back, but it was bolted. Worth looking at though. Sammy's things were near there." Taken? Who would take such a helpless boy? And why?

"I'll ask around, see if anyone has seen him." Pat said. Poor kid! Getting lost in a crowd was never a good situation, especially in a strange place. "Maybe I can round up some of the crew, see if they can help look for him."

Benny nodded. "That sounds good to me Pat," he said, turning towards the alley beside the building. "I'll check out back. The bolting on the door is probably on the outside, so I'll go undo it and check to see if there was a scuffle. See if there are tracks or anything," he said a determined glint in his usually carefree eyes. This was not the first time he had looked for a missing person, so he knew what to look for. They would find that boy. He would make sure of it.

Archie nodded, "I'll come with you." he said to Benny as Pat headed off. If there was something going on, he wanted to be at the front, and he knew from experience that Benny was the best way to actually find the man, boy in this case, that he was looking for.

As the two men made their way around to the alley and Pat disappeared into the crowd, a fourth party who had been listening to the conversation stepped forward. So he'd be taken had he? She'd tried to warn them. Her straight mouth turned down in a grimace and a small growl escaped her lips as she briskly turned away from the building and began marching the opposite direction. Going to track him from behind the building was a waste of time. She knew exactly where he was being taken, and exactly who was behind it all.

Benny made his way to the back, stopping and looking at all the different footprints. "I'd say there were about ten or so people here a little while ago," he said softly, barely remembering to talk out loud for Archie's sake. Walking over to the door, he stopped again a little in front of it and crouched to see another pair of footprints. "There was a eleventh person waiting here for something," he said, turning to open the door. He tried a couple of times to open it, only succeeding on the third time. "Whoever opened this was a large man, very strong too," he said offhandedly. He now walking into the back of the store, looking at the ground carefully. "There was a bit of a scuffle," he said softly, his suspicions confirmed. "You can see scuff marks on the ground here and here," he pointed to each spot, "And you can tell which ones are the mute's! One pair is smaller and has a residue. From those shoes that are falling apart most likely." he mumbled. He walked around Archie and back outside, talking all the while. "He was dragged outside... pushed out the door... and then he just stood. He was probably scared of all the people that were out here... someone else came and stood very close to him, probably to hold him and make sure he didn't try to run." Benny stopped his musings and turned back to Archie while pointing down the alley. "They went that way... with the mute in tow," he said with firm confidence.

Archie followed his studying of the scene silently. When the sheer number was described to him, he shook his head in amazed confusion, "Why?" he asked to no one in particular, "Why would they go after him? He obviously doesn't have money, he's far too thin to be carted off as a slave or worker..." His eyebrows drew together. If he knew the motivation, perhaps he would know how worried he really ought to be instead of absolutely terrified at the possibilities of what could have happened to that poor boy. He shouldn't have let him out of his sight, even for a moment. The words of Mrs. Stalt the previous day floated through his mind, "*No good will come of it! No good...*"

Sammy was terrified. The only other time he had been this frightened was the worst day of his life, when his world fell apart... which he always tried to forget and not think about. But this old woman! She kept talking about his papa! How he was a horrible person and that he was insane before he even went to live in their little house, but that once he did, he let the "evil" in the swamp corrupt him. They had taken him to a small building that Sammy assumed was some kind of church. Sammy's arm was throbbing with waves of pain, the old woman's nails broke through the skin and made blood start to ooze. The building had many bundles of herbs hanging from the ceiling, and many tables with odd objects like cups, charms, and bottles filled with liquids. But what caught Sammy's attention was the large stone basin or tube sticking out of the ground. While some other people started pouring some of the bottles of liquids into the half filled tub, the old woman kept telling Sammy how evil *he* was, and how he should just go back where he came from and die...

"We know how to take care of *hell spawn* like you!" she hissed in Sammy's ear. "It really is a shame. If only your mother had never met your hellish father! Then this wouldn't need to be done!" she said softly. She saw tears start to slip down the child's face, so she nodded to one of the men in the room, it was time to begin.

Sammy didn't even have time to think before the old woman suddenly let go of him and he was whipped around and punched solidly in the face by the same man who'd slapped him

earlier. Sammy fell to the ground without a sound. He could hear someone whisper about how his silence was proof he was a demon. His head was spinning, and his face throbbed painfully as he was suddenly scooped up by the man who first grabbed him and was set into the stone tub, soaking through his dirty clothes instantly, his head just above the water.

"Strap him down," the woman said to Dragger.

The larger man nodded in response and yanked the boy to his feet. Despite his stoic appearance, he was a little nervous to be handling such evil. He would have to be well cleansed after this ritual was over. But it was a price that he was willing to pay if it meant that Arrosfar could be safe. He lifted then lay Sammy on a long wooden slat with leather straps attached to it. These he secured tightly around the boy's wrists, midsection, and ankles before stepping back and looking toward the old woman for further instruction.

"When he drinks the water, Cut away his shirt and put the symbols on with the blood," she said.

Sammy couldn't even think to resist the man, as his head was pounding so hard from the punch he'd received earlier, so all he could do was just let it happen as he was moved. When his mind cleared a bit, he shivered, part from fear and part from how cold the water had been, and started tugging on his restraints slightly. 'Please... someone help me!' Sammy thought, holding back more tears. Every time a tear slipped, he had been struck, so he held them back determinedly. Two of the women came forward, one of them grabbing Sammy's head and forcing his mouth open as the other poured something from a bottle into it. Sammy choked slightly and coughed as the liquid gushed down his throat, but he ended up swallowing most of it anyway. 'It's like bitter water or something,' the boy thought, the women backing away.

Dragger moved forward with another man as the women backed away. The other man held a bowl in both hands. Dragger took a step even closer, reached down to Sammy's neckline, and ripped down the entire front of the shirt, pushing the ripped halves aside and exposing the thin chest. He reached back and dipped his fingers into the bowl. The other man followed suit and they both used the blood to draw the proper symbols across Sammy's front. The last was a line that went from his belly button all the way up his neck and face. During this final drawing, Dragger used one large hand to hold the head tightly in place in case the boy tried to struggle. When complete, he and the other man stepped back and looked once again toward their elder.

The old woman nodded at each of them "It's almost over," she said to the occupants of the room, each of them starting to mumble unintelligible words under their breath as she stepped forward. It was a chant, a prayer asking to cleanse evil from themselves and the town. "Now we just need to finish this," she said, coming up to the strapped down boy, pulling out a ornate knife as she did.

Sammy saw the knife glittering in the dim light of the lamps hanging from the corners. He then started struggling against the leather straps desperately, knowing what the woman was going to do. He looked pleadingly at each occupants of the room, silently asking for them to help him, to change their minds! *'Please! Please please! Stop!'* he cried out in his mind. For the first time in years, Sammy *wanted* to make noise. He wanted to scream, to sob, to beg for them not to kill him! But all he could get himself to do was look on with desperation... then finally just close his eyes tightly as the knife was raised and hope that it wouldn't hurt too horribly.

A loud banging noise was heard from the other end of the church as the large door hit violently against the wall. "What do you think you are doing here?" A loud, sharp, and very angry voice called. Verisha Stalt marched across the tiles, her sharp footsteps echoing off the walls of the room. She stopped in front of the old woman with the knife, eyes blazing. "Put that thing down Calarook. And silence, the lot of you." she spun full circle, glaring at each and every person in the room in turn.

Lady Calarook glared back at Verisha, lowering the knife and facing her fellow Elder. "You know who and what this boy is Stalt!" she said, gesturing to the boy who was staring with wide watery eyes at Mrs. Stalt. "We are taking care of the problem before it sticks!" she hissed, setting the knife down on the table with a clatter.

"You are committing murder." Stalt hissed back, again she glared quickly at those around to make sure that they knew that they were included in her fury, "All of you! And using the order as an excuse and this sacred building to commit such crimes and sin is truly blasphemous. A problem that boy is, Lady Calarook, but a demon or the hell spawn you seem to think you have strapped to that table he is not!"

Lady Calarook's eyes had a deep fire within them as she glared at Lady Stalt. "You *are* one of us Stalt, but there are many here who agree with me on this subject, and the *majority* rules! Not the minority!" she said, sneering at Verisha. "But tell me... what would you have us *do* if not take care of the problem permanently?!" she said heatedly.

"The majority has agreed to cast the shadow of murder and invite in the type of spirit which you are now pretending to eliminate?" Verisha asked, "I wasn't under the impression that there were so many *fools* pretending to be believers!" She shouted 'fools' and the word echoed off of the walls for a few seconds after she had finished her sentence. "Take care of the problem permanently indeed! This sacrilege is just the kind of thing to invite the evil which you seem to think you are casting out. Even were this the proper procedure, what gives *you* the authority to organize and conduct such a ritual without the knowledge of all the elders? Why was *I* not contacted *before* all this took place?"

All around the room there were mumbles of acceptance and agreement to Verisha's words, and Lady Calarook just kept glaring at her fellow elder before sighing and stepping back. "You are right," she hissed, "We all thought that we should move quickly while the outsiders were preoccupied, so we acted. It was not my intention to cause contention within the order," she said, bowing her head low for a moment in acknowledgment of Verisha's equal rank. "Since all the Elders are here, and you obviously don't agree with the last verdict Lady Stalt, what do you suggest we do with the... *boy*," she said, wanting to call the boy something else, but holding her tongue.

"I suggest that you give him back to me." Verisha said stiffly, though her tone had at least lowered somewhat now that it looked like logic was finally seeping through these thick skulled followers. "So that I may *finish* the cleansing process that *I already started* and would have reported to all the followers had someone even thought of including me in this...plot." she spat out the last word with obvious distaste. She turned toward the rest of the group, "If all the elders are here as you say Lady Calarook, then may I suggest that we all discuss and agree upon this option? Since the fool, Archibald Von Calvistan picked up this child of the swamp I have been searching my books and performing the proper cleansing rituals. I would be happy to share

details of exactly which rituals I performed, when, and how to any who doubt that my work was thorough. Any of you who know me however and know why I am an Elder however,” she said, her voice lowering and the fire in her eyes turning for a moment into a deep and solemn sadness. “will know that my work *has* been thorough.”

All the elders around the room began muttering amongst themselves before all nodding or agreeing with Lady Stalt on the suggestion. None of them really wanted to kill a child, they were just doing what needed to be done in their eyes. Seeing this, Lady Calarook sighed softly and nodded as well, also knowing full well why Verisha was an Elder. “It seems like all the Elders agree,” she said simply, “Take the boy away Lady Stalt, back to the outsiders, and someone will be at your home tomorrow to see about your cleansing rituals and procedures.” she said gesturing for Dragger to unstrap the child.

Dragger quickly complied, his hands shaking slightly as he tried to undo the straps. He was horrified at the thought that they might have almost made a terrible mistake and at the horrors that might have come down upon them if it was the wrong decision. He would wait and see what the Elders concluded, they would find a way to rid any evil that had been brought here or might have been brought here. He lifted then lowered the boy gently to the floor.

Verisha bowed slightly to the other elders as was expected after receiving their decision then immediately moved behind and grabbed both of Sammy’s shoulders as Dragger set him down both to support him if he needed it and keep him from running if he tried it. She leaned over slightly to get a good look at his face, most especially his eyes. “Are you alright to walk?” she asked, her tone almost daring him to say no.

For a moment, Sammy had been even more frightened when Mrs. Stalt showed up, thinking that since she hated him too, she’d just stand there and watch. But as the argument progressed, he may have gotten more panicked -not being used to such high levels of contention- but he realized that she was helping him! When the big man picked him up and set him on his feet, Sammy just reminded himself to breath and tried not to start shaking when Mrs Stalt grabbed his shoulders. He turned his head slightly to look at her when she spoke, and after a moment, nodded slowly in affirmative.

“Good,” she said, straightening up. “I will await your visit.” she said to the other elders then, sharply to all, “Now get all of this cleaned up before anyone can see what you’ve done.” Keeping a hand on Sammy’s shoulder, she made her way across the floor and out of the church, this time closing the door more softly though it still made an echoing “clang” through the silent hall. As soon as it was closed, she paused and let out a deep, slightly shuddering breath. She looked down at Sammy for a long moment. Then, shaking her head at the foolish way her heart was galloping all over the place, she looked ahead, “Pull your shirt across your chest and cover up those ridiculous scribbles.” she said as she briskly started down the street to her own home.

Sammy simply nodded and pulled up his shirt, holding it together with both hands, doing as she said without a word.

“Really, expecting just anybody to be able to replicate the correct symbols. A preschooler could have done better! Fools, the lot of them.” she muttered to herself. “Honestly, what did they think they were doing? The entire ritual was a sham. None of them even have the slightest idea of what a demon is let alone how to dispel one. And *you*?” she said, squinting down at Sammy,

“a child of hell? Don’t make me laugh. Why the whole thing is ridiculous! I said that it was getting out of hand with the stories some were fabricating about the father but does anyone listen to me? No! Of course not! What do I know anyway? Just every spell and every ritual by heart! And every necessary herb or ways to spot evils and what type of being or beast causes which kind of misfortune or hurt. I know more than half of the elders combined, and all of the believers for sure, yet does anyone even think of *consulting* me? No! Honestly! I was *on* that expedition! Did they think that I would just drag some kind of great evil among our houses? Of course not! Who do they think I am? Who do they think *they* are? Fools! The lot of them!” she continued ranting to herself as they turned down this street then that, following a crooked pattern that made sense only to Mrs. Stalt herself that passed through alleys, open streets, nooks, and many twists and turns. At last they reached the a slightly crooked house which, unlike it’s owner, actually appeared slightly welcoming behind it’s wire fence that Mrs. Stalt shooed Sammy through. In the yard was a well kept and organized garden and in the windows, baskets of flowering herbs and plants. The old woman opened the back door, a faded but still cheery red color, and guided Sammy into the house itself which was as tidy and well organized as the yard had been. She shut and bolted the door, then released Sammy and made her way into the kitchen section of the open bottom floor, still rambling to herself.

Sammy was silent as usual as he listened to Mrs Stalt rant away about her fellow “Elders” or whatever it was they called themselves. When she pushed him into the little house, he looked around with curious eyes, trying to calm down on the inside and push any thoughts of his parents that the horrible experience invoked down as deep as they could go. When she suddenly released his shoulder, he just followed her into the kitchen, still not saying anything.

Assuming that he had stayed in one place by the door, Mrs. Stalt turned from the sink from which she was grabbing a pot of water to see him much nearer than she thought he would be and she started, her ranting suddenly interrupted by the gasp of surprise. She quickly recovered with a shake of the head and simply gave the boy a look before silently moving to the fireplace where another pot of water was heating. Her silence didn’t last very long however. “At least I had the good sense to heat some water...of course it was going to be for dinner, but as that will obviously be postponed....” she replaced one pot with the other and moved over to something between a shallow tub and a deep basin which she dumped the water into. She turned on a spout which poured cold water into the hot. “If I could ever get heated water into this blasted house...” she trailed off. “A woman of my age shouldn’t be doing such hard labor anyway.” she didn’t seem to be having any trouble as she slammed the empty pot into the sink then made her way back to the tub to test the water then turn off the spout when she was satisfied that it was still hot, but not too hot. “In or out?” she said, turning suddenly to Sammy.

Sammy cocked his head slightly when he surprised Mrs Stalt by accident, but was glad she didn’t get mad at him or anything though. He watched her get the water ready and pour it into the tub thing, liking this one much better then that last one that he was *forced* into. He listened to her speak, not saying anything still, and then cocked his head to the side again when she asked him the strange question.

Stalt sighed, honestly, it was like talking to a child. She blinked a few times as the countering statement that he *was* a child floated through her mind. It had been a while since she’d talked to any children. Adults acting like children, sure, but an actual child.... She snapped

back to the current conversation and said slowly, "You're going to get cleaned up. Do you want to go *in* the tub, or would you rather stand *out* of it and use it like a basin. It's a convenient enough size to be either option and inconvenient enough to be suitable as either."

Sammy's eyes lit up in understanding and walked over to the edge of the tub and looked in. After thinking for a moment, he pointed into the tub, thinking that he'd rather be *in* it and get as clean as possible.

Stalt nodded, "I don't have the time or energy to be washing someone, and I won't be touching any of those symbols. There's surely bad luck or evil in them to any touching them other than the one wrongfully marked." she shivered ever so slightly then grabbed a large sheet which she hung over a cord strung across the walls before the tub as a makeshift curtain. "You're old enough to clean yourself I assume?" she stated more than asked, as usual as she turned back to him.

Sammy nodded in understanding to her words, and nodded again in affirmative. 'I've taken care of myself for a long time, so I think I can wash myself...' he thought with an inner sigh. He walked behind the curtain that now hung, and quickly took off the remains of his shirt and pants before climbing into the tub and starting to scrub himself determinedly, wanting to get the blood off as soon as possible.

"Throw out those ruined clothes." Verisha said as she hung a towel on a rung just inside the curtain that he could use when finished, "We'll want them disposed of as quickly as possible." When they were thrown out as requested, she bent out and pinched them between her fingers with a look of utter disgust. Holding them as far away from her body as possible, she made her way to the backdoor, and to a heap of dying weeds and other garbage where she dumped what was left of the clothes and started them on fire, grabbing a few herbs from the sill and tossing them at the flames while muttering. Whether it was a chant or continued complaints and observations against the world, even she herself couldn't really say. That job done, she made her way back inside. "Won't do to have you running around naked." she said to the curtained off tub as she moved to the far corner of the room to a large chest. "I'm sure I have something here that would do. Anything will be far too large I'm sure, you're far too small. And I don't suppose I'll ever get it back." she grunted as if this required a huge sacrifice on her part as she opened the chest, about to continue her rant. Looking at the contents however, stopped her again for a moment. It'd been a long time since she had opened this box, and she seemed hesitant suddenly to touch anything in it. With a gruff sniff she dispelled any such notions and began rummaging through. Old books, a few toys, and other knickknacks came out, one by one. "Clothing on the bottom, of course!" she muttered in annoyance as she pulled and stacked the items one by one. "Couldn't put them on top, could I? No, of course not! You would think that I would have the sense to-Ah! There!" At last she pulled out a pair of black trousers and a white shirt. She unfolded these children's clothes and held the shirt out in front of her. She was silent again as she just stared at it for far longer than was necessary to determine that it would be too wide for the boy, but the length might be about right. Finally she cleared her throat, stood, and made her way over to the tub again. "Clothes are on the chair by the fire." she said, a slight tremor in her voice. She turned away from the corner quickly though there was no way the boy could see her behind that curtain, and made her way back to the box. She sat down on the ground and prepared to start packing everything away. A well-loved and worn cap that was on

top of a few more sets of clothing at the bottom of the box caught her eye however and she gently pulled this out and held it on her lap.

Sammy just listened to the shuffling and muttering and talking that Mrs. Stalt was doing while he scrubbed. When he was satisfied at how clean he'd gotten, he reached for the towel as he stood up and quickly dried off. He walked over and picked up the clothes, just staring at them for a moment. 'Why does Mrs Stalt have these?' the boy thought curiously. 'Maybe she has a son that's grown up, and he left them?' With these thoughts in mind, the boy got dressed silently, the clothes being too big, but only a little too long. He walked out to where Mrs Stalt still knelt, tilting his head at the sight. 'I wonder if I ask why she has these clothes if she'll get mad at me... I don't want to make her angry!' he thought.

Verisha sniffled and tilted her head back, blinking a few times to shove back any moisture that was accumulating in her eyes. A movement out of the corner of her eye attracted her attention and she turned to see Sammy watching her. She sniffled again, cleared her throat and wiped lightly at her face to make sure there was nothing there. "Too big I see." she said, looking the boy up and down. Her voice didn't quite have the same amount of harshness that usually did. It was strange, seeing his old clothes on this young boy. "Knew they would be." she said, turning and starting to place the items back quickly into the trunk to avoid looking at the boy. She'd start dragging up memories if she did, and she didn't want to be dragging up more memories. Still, she left the hat...for last, she told herself.

Sammy stared for a moment, not sure of what to do. He never would have thought that he'd see Mrs Stalt like this, and he wasn't sure what to think. But, after thinking for a moment, Sammy carefully padded over to the chest and knelt down beside Mrs Stalt, watching her for any negative reaction. He then slowly reached out and picked up one of the toys and held it out to her, wanting to help if she'd let him.

Verisha was stuffing items back in as quickly as she could, but when she turned and saw Sammy holding a toy, she froze, one hand still in the chest. He didn't look much like her boy, and he certainly didn't act like him. And really, they weren't that close in age. And for heaven's sake, this child came from the very place that had taken him from her. So why, by just looking at him, did her eyes see the need to fill with more tears and her lips see fit to tremble in such a weak way? "This is ridiculous." she scolded herself as she leaned her head back again and took a deep breath to pull everything back together. "I knew that it was a bad idea to open up this old box." she pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and dabbed at her face then sniffled gently into it. She glanced over at Sammy, evaluating him in her mind based on what she had seen and what she knew of him, remembering Calarook's words she sniffled to herself, "Demon indeed." she said quietly, "Ridiculous. If anything, you're more of a ghost, a phantom of the past. And not a very good one at that." she sighed and adjusted her sitting position on the floor to one a bit more comfortable. "There's not much a resemblance between the two of you, my David I mean. You're far too skinny, and much too quiet. And heavens, the way you clung to Von Calvistan. Really." she shook her head. "But a phantom you remain, and somehow, despite the differences, you have managed to get under my skin, and that isn't achieved easily."

Sammy listened to Mrs Stalt's words carefully, worried for a moment that he *had* done something wrong. He cocked his head to the side slightly when she called him a phantom, but realised why when she started talking about "her David". 'So she *did* have a son!' he thought.

He wasn't sure if she was insulting him or not by the way she talked about the differences between him and her son, "*You're far too this, and much too this*" but her voice didn't sound mean, so he figured that she wasn't. He didn't really know what to do about how he "got under her skin" so he decided to give her a questioning look and tug once on the collar of the shirt he was wearing. 'What happened to him?' he asked in his eyes.

She could see the question. She could pretend that she hadn't seen it, but she had. And now even if she didn't answer out loud, her mind would seize hold of that question and answer it for itself. She looked away, down at one of the toys which was still in her hand, and took a deep, shuddering breath. "My David..." she hesitated, biting the inside of her lip to keep it from moving. "he...never grew out of the clothes you're wearing now. Never became too old to play with these either." she held up the toy for a moment before dropping it and the hand that held it back down into her lap. "Children!" she said, seeming to change subject with the most annoyed tone that she was capable of, which wasn't much. "Never listen. But then, no one ever listens to me anyway.... They thought that they were invincible! The whole lot of them! Would go out and play right out there, on the edge. Didn't matter that a different elder warned them every night or that they would have to have regular cleansings!..." she had looked at Sammy during the last few sentences but now her eyes dropped and she shook her head, "Thought they were invincible..." she said again, softly, "But they weren't.... he..." her voice choked and she had to clear her throat once again, "he wasn't." she finished. She looked at Sammy, "I don't know if you were with Von Calvistan's group long enough to hear how 'Crazy old Mrs. Stalt thinks that something is going to jump out of those trees and eat us.', but I know that it was said around camp, or something very like it anyway... And it was true, I did think that something could very well come out and take out the lot of us. And do you want to know why?" she leaned closer to Sammy and said softly, but strongly, "Because it *has*." she leaned back and looked down at her hands again, "...but no one ever listens to me...." she muttered quietly.

Sammy listened wide eyed as Mrs Stalt explained. 'So *that's* why she's so afraid of the swamp! That's why everyone is afraid probably!' he thought, his heart getting heavy at the thought. 'There must be many sad stories here,' he thought. Sammy had never really thought about the world outside his little home, after all, it was like it didn't exist most of the time! Archie had brought it all *to* him... and taken him out to see even more. He thought of the clothes that he was wearing and who they belonged to before. He then thought about the clothes he had worn before these ones... the coat and pants had belonged to his papa... 'Ever since I can remember... I've been wearing another person's clothes,' the child thought sadly, 'Someone who had died...' His head came up when Mrs Stalt said for the second time "no one ever listens to me", she'd said that a few times before, but never with so much hurt. So, without thinking, Sammy placed the toy he was still holding on the ground and reached out a hand and set it on the woman's knee carefully. 'I'm listening!' his eyes said.

She looked for a moment at the hand that he rested on her knee, then up into his eyes. The moment their message reached her, her eyes welled up with tears. No amount of sniffing or swallowing would push them back, they ran down her face in little silent rivers. She placed her hand over his and squeezed it tightly. Her trembling lips formed a small smile, just for a moment, then they were pursed together again as she took a deep breath to prevent this sign of emotion turning into a full blown sobbing session. Her handkerchief moved quickly from one eye to the

other, wiping away any tears there only to have them replaced a moment later by fresh ones. After a few deep breaths however, she seemed to catch each one that escaped and her face was relatively dry. She kept a hold of Sammy's hand all through this and patted it with her other hand as soon as she was finally composed. "Well..." she said, glancing at the things still left on the floor. "I suppose we ought to put the rest of this away. Wouldn't do to have everything scattered about! An old woman like myself could trip and kill herself on any number of these things...." she grabbed an old book and moved to gently place it into the box.

Sammy held back his own tears, shoving his memories down firmly, not wanting to break down right now. Mrs Stalt was hurting, so that was what should be important! When she grabbed the book, he nodded simply picking back up the toy from before again and putting it gently in the chest, being careful with these treasures of a life lost. He helped her until they were all put away, leaving only a single hat on Mrs Stalt's lap.

"Thank you." she said, this time laying an actual smile on the young boy. It wasn't much of a smile, in some ways it might have looked almost like a grimace, but it was the biggest one she had displayed in many years. Her eyes narrowed a little and the smile faded as she noticed a bit of red contrasting with the boy's pale skin. "Hmmm." she grumbled, "You missed a spot. Come here." she pulled him in closer and wiped at the dried blood with her handkerchief. *"Have to throw this out and burn it later too."* she grumbled inwardly, *"It was a nice handkerchief too!"* Neither of these forced complaints made it past her mind however and she scrubbed away then grabbed the boy's chin and forced it this way and that to make sure that he'd gotten it all. "Bit here too..." she said, pushing up the chin with one hand to force Sammy to look upward while wiping away a bit stuck on the throat. Once that was cleaned she bent his chin back down and looked one more time at his face, this time noticing that a large bruise was starting to form. One of the idiots back at the church must have given the poor kid's face a good smack. "Have to get something for that." she muttered as she finished her examination.

Benny sighed in frustration, glancing back at the very worried man behind him. Archie was even more stressed since they'd run into one of the village elders who told them about the "cleansing process", and it was starting to annoy Benny. He reached up and knocked on the door firmly, having followed the tracks here after a *lot* of staring and work. "He's got to be here Archie," he said with a sigh.

"I hope so." the other man replied with a sigh of his own as he looked at the darkening sky. He couldn't get Stalt's words out of his mind, they just kept replaying over and over as he saw images of Sammy's frightened face in the marketplace. He shook his head once more to try and clear away the images and focus on this house.

Verisha was in the middle of telling Sammy which shelf to find the potatoes on in the pantry so that she could finish making soup for dinner when she heard a knock at the door. "Who on earth could that be at this hour?" she grumbled, pulling down the "curtain" from the bathtub and slinging it over her shoulder. She finished gathering up the towel and rags that Sammy had used to clean himself and moved to the door. Another knock, and she realized that it was the back door being knocked at, not the front. "Odd..." she muttered to herself, moving instead to that door, unfastening the bolt, and opening it a crack.

Benny's eyes widened when he saw who opened the door. "Mrs Stalt?" he said dumbly. She couldn't have... could she...?

"Ah, so you lot finally decided to show up." Verisha said, opening the door a little wider and placing the hand not otherwise occupied with laundry on her waist. She'd figured that Von Calvistan would come searching for the boy sooner or later, she'd just thought that it would have been sooner. She looked at Benny, "And you're supposed to be some kind of tracker aren't you? Took you long enough to find me."

Archie stared at the old woman in surprise. Her? She was the one that had taken Sammy? After all of that talk, all of those dirty looks, it did make sense. She had warned Archie herself hadn't she? She meant no good would come from her! Archie's eyes wandered to the cloths in her hand. Blood. His eyes widened and he looked back at her. "What have you done to the boy?" he asked.

Benny had seen the blood too. And he was horrified at the thoughts that were running through his head... the images... what *had* she done to the mute?! He knew that she had no love for the kid, and her cruelty was obvious, but this? How could she? To a child?! He heard Archie's question but didn't wait for an answer. "Mute!" he called dodging around Verisha and hurrying into the house.

"Now wait just a second!" she started to protest. Barging into someone's house uninvited, hadn't he ever learned any manners? Her protest was cut short however as Mr. Von Calvistan followed suit, pushing past her into the house.

"Sammy?" Archie called as he stepped in. His eyes swept the room, finding the kitchen, the fire, the tub...and red water within. A chill ran down his entire frame and he moved further into the house, heart pounding wildly at the thought of what they might find in this house.

Verisha dumped the laundry she had been holding in a heap by the door, shut it loudly, and simply glared at the two men, arms crossed across her chest and finger tapping in annoyance.

Sammy had very nearly dropped the potatoes -or whatever they were- onto the floor when he heard the two shouts. 'Archie and Benny!' the boy thought with excitement. He set down his precious cargo onto the table quickly, wanting nothing more than to be back by Archie's side. He stepped out of the pantry and caught sight of Archie, a bright smile appearing on his sweet face.

At sight of the boy, unbloodied and even smiling, Archie rushed over and swept him up in a large hug, relief coursing through his body. "There you are!" he said with a sigh, he held the boy back at arm's length and looked him up and down, "Are you alright?" he asked.

Benny sighed in relief, letting his boss have at the mute, him just standing back and smiling at the reunion. 'He's alive. He's okay.' he kept repeating to himself. But his eyes caught sight of something on the boy's face, something he was very familiar with. A bruise, and a big one too. He didn't say anything though, knowing Archie wasn't dumb and that he'd notice it. 'Stalt couldn't hit that hard! At least I think she can't..' he thought, 'Then who did?'

Sammy hadn't thought about his experiences that day since Mrs Stalt had brought him here, the house almost seeming like a separate world, out of sync with the rest of the town. But seeing Archie and happily hugging him made him remember... How at that time, all he wanted in the world was for Archie to be there and hug him, to tell him that it was okay, and tell him not

to be afraid! He bit his lip to hold back tears that suddenly wanted to come, because tears had done him absolutely no good today, so he nodded all the same to Archie's question.

What was it with this day and emotions? Verisha felt her heart both constrict and throb at the sight of the two. She couldn't stand it, today especially. To counteract, she looked away and grumbled to herself about how she supposed that she wasn't going to get any dinner tonight either because of the two.

"You're sure?" Archie asked again, studying Sammy from the bottom up. "She didn't do anything to you?" he used his hands on the boy's shoulder to turn him this way and that before making him face him again. Now he got a good look at Sammy's face and the large bruise forming there. "What's this?" he asked, reaching out for it gently.

Sammy winced badly and had to force himself to keep still as Archie touched his face. He kept forgetting it was there until it throbbed or he touched it by accident himself. Again, thoughts of his frightening experience came forth and he couldn't stop the one or two tears that finally leaked out when he squeezed his eyes shut at the pain.

"Hey now," Archie said, rubbing Sammy's shoulder with a hand, "It's alright. Sorry, does it hurt if I touch it?" he pulled back and looked at the boy sympathetically for a moment. "What happened?" Archie demanded, turning to Mrs. Stalt. Based on the talkative levels of the two individuals he decided that he was far more likely to get a detailed response from the woman than from the boy.

In response, and still feeling miffed about her privacy being invaded and the 'she didn't do anything' statement, Verisha merely briskly replied, "He was punched in the face obviously."

Benny rolled his eyes at the response. "No kidding! We *obviously* couldn't tell!" he said with his own annoyance.

Mrs. Stalt merely glared at the boy, arms still crossed and finger still tapping against her arm slowly.

Archibald stood up, "A more detailed explanation, if you please Mrs. Stalt." he said seriously, taking a step toward her. "Working in what happened to his face, who he was taken by, why you are carrying bloodied towels, and what your involvement in this is would be a good place to start."

Verisha locked her jaw and looked down her nose at her former employer. "Outside this town, it may have been 'your' company and 'your' rules Mr. Von Calvistan. And though I was not always happy to, I always would take orders that were given. However, we are *not* out in the wilderness and you are no longer my employer. This is *my* house and *my* city and you have no right to barge in like you own the place and make whatever demands you want!"

Benny was not in the mood for any of this, and the usual happy carefree man just snapped back to the old woman. "That may be the case! But the fact remains that the Mute was taken *by force*, and we have found him *here* with *you*!" he said, waving one hand in gesture to the house, trying to keep his voice down to a reasonable level. "Not only that! But what's the first thing we see when you open the door? *Blood*! Blood *all over* everything *you* were holding! What *should* we do in that situation? Just stand at the door and politely ask 'Hey Mrs Stalt! Those are quite the bloody towels! Are they from cutting up the Mute into little pieces and throwing them to the chickens?'" he said, grinding his teeth in anger.

"Chickens indeed!" Verisha sniffed, "What kind of terrible things could you have running through those deluded minds of yours to possibly think *I*, an old woman, could do anything. Blood all over anything, really. I had two slightly red towels yet by your description I was standing in an operation room. Lots of things have blood. I could have been cleaning a *chicken* or something for dinner, or even been painting. You all would just assume it was blood wouldn't you, just so you can barge your way into wherever you want and demand anything you want. Starting with that 'Hey Mrs. Stalt.' may have suited your purposes quite well."

Archie gritted his teeth to keep from saying or doing anything that he might regret. His emotions had flailed all over the place today and the last thing that he needed was a lecture from this woman.

Benny clenched his fists at his side and took a breath to call out a retort, but his boss beat him to it.

"Alright then, Mrs. Stalt." his voice was strained to try and keep it under control. "You say we have it all wrong. Well then, would you care to enlighten us? We shouldn't have assumed that something was wrong here? Well perhaps you should have assumed that we were worried about the boy and, if you weren't doing anything, brought him back instead of making us trudge across the entire town worried sick! And if you *were* involved in his disappearance then you'd be wise to share everything you know *now*!" Despite his initial attempts to keep calm, his voice had raised by the end.

Benny just stared at Mrs. Stalt with hard eyes before opening his mouth to speak. "I think you should do as Archie says Mrs. Stalt," he said firmly, trying to keep his own voice from raising. "We want answers about what happened to the Mute, and *don't* skip out on any details!"

"Now what is this? A police interrogation?" Mrs. Stalt snapped. For the second time that day, blood coursed hot through her veins and her will to fight only increased as her heart pounded faster. "You want answers about what happened to the boy? Well I have a question of my own! How did he get taken away in the first place? I warned you that trouble would come, did I not Mr. Von Calvistan? So what kind of thick headed fool was in charge of watching him? I don't see any bruises or signs of a struggle on either of you. Was someone else supposed to be watching him? Or was one of you really *stupid* enough to let him wander about on his own?"

Her words cut Archie hard enough that for a moment he was at a loss of what to say. He couldn't even remember how to breathe.

Benny didn't hesitate to jump in at that point. "Oh *yeah*! You told us alright! *About what?!*" he yelled. "You didn't tell us *anything* about *why* we shouldn't have come here, did you? What were we supposed to think?"

"You were supposed to *listen*!" Mrs. Stalt shouted back, "Of course I didn't tell you what to expect, no one gave me the time to! No one even bothered asking me for more details." Idiots! The entire world was filled with *idiots*! "Tell me, Mr. Novak," she said, leaning toward the young man, "If someone warns you of approaching danger, do you often turn them away without bothering to ask for any more information? Doesn't seem like a very good idea for someone in your line of work especially."

"Yes I do ask as a matter of fact!" he yelled. "But usually I'm more willing to listen to people who don't have a **reputation of excessive and never proven paranoia!**"

Verisha laughed. Actually threw back her head and let out a short, sharp cackle before turning her fiery gaze back on Benny. "You'd be surprised the truths that you would find if you tried listening to someone who seems to be suffering from paranoia." she said.

This was getting out of hand, and off track. "Mrs. Stalt-" Archibald said loudly, holding up his hands and trying to break in,

"Oh! I'm *sure* I *would* be, you **old hag!**" he shouted, having wanted to yell at the woman for a long time.

"You watch your tone young man." Verisha snapped, "Or do you have as little knowledge of how to respect your elders as you do of proper manners!"

"Oh, I have plenty!" he yelled back, "I just use them for people that I think are worth it!"

Sammy had been silent as usual throughout this loud argument. But his heart had started pounding and his eyes widened in fear as the shouting got louder and louder. In his mind, the yelling turned to screaming... it was happening again, in his minds eye... his parents...It was happening again! His breath getting caught in his throat, Sammy slowly moved over to Archie's side and reached up to cling to his coat, closing his eyes and burying his face in the fabric. 'Please make it stop!' the trembling boy pleaded in his mind.

Archie had been about to speak again when he felt Sammy at his side. The boy's actions made him more sure that this conversation needed to come to a close. He tried a few more times to break in, but neither party paid him any heed. Finally, he lifted his fingers to his lips and let out a loud, piercing whistle that he continued to blow until both Verisha and Benny stopped talking. "Alright!" he said in a loud voice, "That's enough!" he paused and looked at both of them before turning to Verisha, "Mrs. Stalt." he said, his voice tight with an attempt to keep his annoyance and anger at bay. "I will answer your question gladly if you would be kind enough to answer ours. We just want to understand what happened. You're right, you did try and warn me and I blew you off. However, a little more clarity of the possible danger instead of a vague sentence of how you think that it would be a bad idea might have prevented the whole situation." Mrs. Stalt opened her mouth to reply, but Archie continued talking, his voice rising slightly to show that he wasn't finished. "That being said, you were right that it was a bad idea to let him out of my sight. I was the one who was supposed to be watching him and I recognize that it was my fault that he was taken. I should have been watching more closely." he placed a hand on Sammy's head then shoulder. "Now will you please just help us understand what happened and what your involvement was in this? I just want to make it right."

Verisha huffed and turned her head away from the others. She felt a little out of fuel, and was getting far too tired for any more arguing. "I suppose that you wouldn't be satisfied with a general statement saying that a few believers went a little....overboard but that no permanent harm was actually done?"

Benny sighed. "Not really, at least I wouldn't," he said softly, his own energies spent. "I wouldn't want generals, I'd want hard facts with details," he said, looking over at the young boy who was one of the main topics of this whole conversation.

Sammy had looked up from Archie's coat once everyone's voices were lowered, and he even let go of Archie and stepped back a bit. He just watched Mrs. Stalt with curious eyes, waiting to see what she'd say, and honestly hoping she'd tell them the whole thing so that they

would know. Besides, if she didn't, then they would just never really know, because Sammy couldn't really tell them himself, so it was really up to her.

Mrs. Stalt sighed and ran a hand over her face. "I know that I was far from being a popular member of the team, and that I have a... 'reputation of excessive and never proven paranoia' as it were." she sent a look over at Benny before continuing. "So you might not believe me when I say that I am not the most... 'paranoid' person that you would find in Arrosfar. I and many, if not most or all of the people here have certain beliefs which none of you would understand and which would take far too long to attempt to describe. Let me just say, in defense of this religion, that it has kept our people safe for hundreds of years." she hesitated and then shook her head, "but recently the swamp seems to have become more active. people here have grown afraid, and turn to a darker side of these beliefs to try and do whatever they can to protect themselves. A child of the swamp, that's what that boy is. Born in it, raised in it, and we all thought, died in it. With the evil that reeks around that place, it's no wonder many would begin to believe that he had the same evil born inside of him as well. His father alone and even his mother were... unclear to the nicest of believers and full-fledged demons to others. Just the fact that they lived so close to the swamp, worked inside of the swamp, met with and interacted with the creatures that live there..." she shivered. "It isn't natural. And no good comes from anything that has come in contact with that evil ground."

Sammy clenched his little fists as he listened, trying to hold back the images that flashed and the screams that echoed in his mind. He'd calmed himself, only to be thrown into it again... the pain... the memories... the fear. These people thought of his family as demons, horrible monsters from out of the darkness, and after what Mrs. Stalt had told him about David, Sammy -to an extent- could understand their fear. 'No good', she'd said. 'If only they knew', the boy thought. 'I've lost family too.' he forced himself to keep listening, wanting to know as much as he could about this place and what they thought of his parents.

"The first, and last, time that the father made his way into Arrosfar," Stalt continued, "things started happening. Crops died, animals as well. People became sick or found themselves with bad fortune. His very presence in that swamp had cursed us. It took several cleansing rituals and prayers to set things right again. Villagers here made it very clear that he was no longer welcome. His wife was only allowed in because she would give us notice and allow herself to be cleansed before entering. Her regular cleansings kept the evil away. Then she stopped coming. We all assumed that the evils of that wretched place had finally consumed them. Then....he showed up." she looked at Sammy.

Sammy wanted to hide. The people here blamed his papa for things that he had no control over! Things he had nothing to do with! He could see his mama's face... his papa's smile, much like his own he'd been told... and they were still dying. Sammy held back the tears that were coming once again, needing to know -for his own peace of mind- everything.

"After four years, the child appears." she turned her gaze to both of the men. "You have no idea what kinds of stories have been told about the creatures that inhabit that place! Creatures that devour your soul just by looking at you... It's only natural then that the sudden appearance of this child after so many years would set everyone on edge!" She shook her head, "Even I didn't dare touch him at first. If it was some sort of monster, I didn't want to be taken in like the rest. Of course, after a few simple tests I knew that he was perfectly human."

"Tests?" Archie interrupted, "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing serious," Stalt said, shaking her head, "I merely wore a few charms when I moved near him and saw how he reacted, put some herbs in his soup when he wasn't looking, harmless yet secret tests. If the demon knew that I was trying to smoke it out, it would have avoided being trapped, and any one of you who had interacted with him could have very well been taken as well." She looked at Sammy, feeling a little embarrassed about admitting how she had been invading his privacy from the beginning.

"As I said, only a few tests easily showed me that we didn't have a demon on our hands, just a frightened little boy. Some deep cleansing and he would be alright. That would take a couple weeks to a month however, and the party was quickly approaching Arrosfar... I did what I could- with similar methods as before, nothing to be worried about. But I kept them to myself because I knew that if anyone found out about my actions I would be stopped, and labeled as more paranoid or crazy than I already was. If he was to even stand a chance near Arrosfar, and if I was going to keep the city clean however, I needed to proceed. After I realized that there was no way I could finish the process before we arrived, I decided that I would speak to the other elders when we arrived if they had any qualms about the boy. If they didn't bring up his presence then.... Well, then I wouldn't have bothered mentioning that it was the same boy at all. But..." she paused again, "Like me, someone else recognized the father in the boy. They do look so alike...and we knew his mother well enough for me at least to see her inside of him too." she looked softly toward Sammy. She had liked his mother...they hadn't spoken much, but she had been kind.

Sammy looked back, reading her eyes carefully. There was no hatred in her eyes that he could see as she talked about his mama and papa. Not that he could see at least. Despite the pain in his chest, there was some kind of warmth that appeared. He looked like his papa. And people saw his mama inside when they looked at him. And... that made him proud. Because there were no other people in the world that Sammy would want to be more like. So he gave a small smile in return to Mrs. Stalt's soft one.

"We-the elders that is-are supposed to gather and discuss matters before any drastic actions are taken." Verisha's voice tightened and her eyes began burning again, "But I suppose they all thought that I would be 'too busy' to even bother trying to talk to me. A small group of believers took matters into their own hands and took possession of the boy before he could...pollute the city."

"But why didn't they just come and speak to us about it?" Archie asked, "I mean, if setting their minds at rest just required this...'cleansing' that you're talking about, why go through all of the trouble of kidnapping him?" It sounded to him like many people were cleansed, whatever that was. It couldn't be *that* difficult of a process if it was carried out so often.

"You've misunderstood me a little." Verisha said, "The members weren't concerned about cleansing the boy himself....their aim was to cleanse the city itself..."

"What do you mean... the city itself?" Benny asked nervously, his stomach had been turning as he'd listened. The mute's poor parents! The things they had to have gone through!

Verisha looked almost sympathetic as she glanced at Sammy. "They...didn't realize as I did that there was nothing...otherworldly about the other boy... There are procedures used to...dispose of demons and evils that make their way into the city. And there are procedures

used to cleanse the city and people.” she shook her head, “By mashing together some strange combination of rituals and performing the ceremony as quickly as possible, I suppose they thought that they would destroy the evil and save Arrosfar.”

“What ‘procedures’?” Archie asked, “What kind of ‘ritual’ were they trying to do?” His stomach knotted and something told him that he probably didn’t want to know.

Sammy’s thoughts were whizzing around his head as he listened. Not only were his knees weak from the screams of his parents that echoed in his mind, but the memories of his... “adventure” only a couple hours ago almost made him stop breathing. He looked down at the ground, still listening, but holding back the flood that was about to burst.

Verisha shook her head, “I’m not completely clear on all the details. Like I said, they were combining a few rituals-a terrible idea mind you. They’ll be suffering the consequences of such a crime for weeks, mark my words.” A look at the others in the room told her that she still hadn’t explained quite enough. She sighed, “In short terms, and without going into all of the details, they would perform the ritual which involved the symbolic use of ram’s blood and the ancient Tralidan language,” she gestured toward the towels, “Then, as the end of the ceremony and to seal the cleansing process, they would...dispose of him... I don’t know what they thought they were going to do with the body afterward, but-”

“Dispose of him?” Archie cut in, his voice cracking a bit. Ram’s blood? Symbols? What kind of tribal beliefs were being followed here?

Verisha’s nodded, “It’s a necessary part of destroying any demon.” she said softly, but stiffly.

Benny couldn’t believe it. He swallowed hard a couple of times before he could get himself to speak. “They were going to kill him?” he asked, looking at the boy. Was he shaking? “Just like that, they were going to snuff out a child’s life and stash the body?” he let out a shaky breath. “Don’t misunderstand Mrs. Stalt, I’ve been listening... I just can’t understand how a person can get in that kind of mindset!”

Sammy was indeed shaking as Benny thought. Trying to stop, Sammy wrapped his arms around himself in a tight “self hug” to quell the trembling that his body insisted upon doing, still not looking up from the floor and holding back the tears.

“Like I said, I am not nearly as paranoid and extreme as you might have thought if I am compared to some of the others here. These are dark times, darkening more with each passing day it seems. And the darkness around seems to seep into people’s hearts and eyes until they can’t see past the fear.”

Archie’s arm reached around the boy and pulled him tightly to his side when he noticed the shaking. “But, but he’s just a boy!” he said, as shocked as Benny that anyone could possibly get into a mindset that said killing a child was alright.

“That was exactly what I told them when I found out.” Verisha said, the memories lighting that fire once again. It was only heated by the obviously negative toll this line of discussion was having on the boy. She shook her head and her shoulders sagged, “I’m not sure what is becoming of our people. Using such a sacred task as an excuse to perform such deeds... It’s disgusting!”

The air was heavy for a few moments as everything that Mrs. Stalt said sunk in for the two men. Benny looked at the Mute, obviously upset by the conversation. Archie’s arm was

around Mute tightly, so Benny figured he'd be okay in the long run. "I think I should go tell the others that we found the Mute," he said softly, breaking the silence. He walked over and patted the Mute on the head comfortingly before making his way towards the front door. Before stepping out, he turned and gave an apologetic look to the woman of the house. "Sorry about the yelling Mrs. Stalt," he said, "Won't happen again." Not waiting for a response, he closed the door after him and left.

Verisha shook her head and sniffed, an almost smile playing at the corner of her lips at the sudden announcement, apology, and exit. She then looked at the other two. The boy was still obviously shaken. It was only now that she realized that perhaps having a child present when discussing all of this, even if he had gone through a bit of it himself, was a bad idea. She should have at least tried to soften it a little bit. That was what you did with children wasn't it? Her eyes wandered over to the fireplace where what she had prepared of the soup was bubbling. "Oh!" she exclaimed, the word sounding like more of a growl. She hurried over to it and gave it a stir. "Good, not ruined." she said, tasting it. "Needs those potatoes though..." she glanced back at the twosome. "I can't very well be expected to finish this with all of these interruptions and you two staring over my shoulder! Go into the other room and sit down, I'll call you in when I'm finished."

"Oh, well we wouldn't want to-"

"Hush! I've made too much already and I don't have any use for leftovers. Go on! Sit! Get out!" she shooed the two toward the old couch sitting near the chest she and Sammy had gone through earlier.

"Better do as she says I suppose." Archie muttered to Sammy, keeping his arm around the boy as they moved toward the other room.

Sammy barely nodded as Archie led him to the couch. He's managed to push down the urge to cry, and feeling had come back to his legs so that he could stand with no trouble, but the shaking was still subsiding. As he sat there, Sammy didn't even think as he suddenly leaned into Archie's side and snuggled in comfortably, wanting the physical contact to assure him. He didn't make a sound though, he just stared at his own knees.

Archie wrapped his arm around the boy and pulled him in close. He rubbed up and down Sammy's arm and stared off into space, thinking over the things Mrs. Stalt had said. The house was silent for a while except for the banging of cooking materials and quiet muttering from Verisha in the kitchen.