

# Raven

## “Sanctuary”

### Book 1

Copyright © Michael G. Giles All Rights Reserved

Excited beyond words, Raven walked out through the all too familiar double-doors of Guild`House, wherein she had spent the last three years studying in the path of the Locust Magician. A successfully completed three year apprenticeship was not an easy undertaking, and a path upon which many failed. Relishing in her success, she looked up, instantly mesmerized by the stars blanketing the endless expanse of night playing out above her.

A falling star caught her attention as it blazed across the sky in a beautiful display of glittering splendor, compelling her to focus on it in captivated wonder. As it vanished, her thoughts turned toward Professor Maven, her mentor, who, earlier this evening, had reluctantly pronounced upon her the status of Seeker Locust Magician. Her master was a hard and cruel man, quick to deal out punishment – slow to acknowledge success in another.

Professor Maven, a highly gifted Locust Magician, had initially begun tutoring her and twenty-one others in the arts of charming and controlling of insects. Only eleven apprentices had lasted the entire three years. What was worse, only three of the eleven who graduated had been gifted with a single spell to begin their path in life.

Her master was especially hard on the females. As it was, Raven was the only female of her class to pass the final test. Accomplishment burned as bright in her countenance as the falling star blazing through the sky had. This evening, all her work had marked a monumental occurrence as she was publicly advanced from the status of Peasant, to that of Seeker.

She suspected Maven had not wanted to pass her, but her final score had been flawless. The three years of constant stress at always being scrutinized and publicly belittled was now lifted. She had perfectly endured all his meanness, his cruelty and ever-constant contempt. The triumph of her success had ended with the reward of becoming an independent spell caster within the arts of the insect kingdom. She could feel the power within her, and it opened up the future to

endless possibilities and opportunities. The most exciting aspect about her status was the fact that she was no longer considered a child, but an equal in society and her social standing with others.

With his vast knowledge and power in the field of Locust Magician, Maven had seen three of twenty-two students to graduation. This was no small feat within any of the guilds, whether they were steeped within the magical arts, or those not destined to wield the unseen powers of the arcane. Even with his high rate of success in bringing to light the magic within so many, the coldness of Maven's social demeanor repelled everyone from him.

Early on, Raven learned to stay clear of the old man, who was instinctively hostile, bitter, and not just to his students. Simply put, Maven was avoided by a society that feared, avoided and revered him.

Raven shook her head, snorting in contempt at the memory of her master's cold, cruel nature. During the first week of training, Professor Maven had commanded his Manitis, a Familiar named Shaed, to throw out three students. Even though this outburst had been a surprise to the class, Raven suspected the three had done nothing worthy of being expelled from Guild`House so violently. Thus, Raven supposed Maven had been establishing an authority presence. After that incident, the fear of catching her master's attention plagued Raven, driving her to avoid him as much as possible.

Professor Maven's demeanor was to be feared by both student and non-student alike, and not because he summoned a Sludge Worm in the middle of the courtyard and laughed when it mauled a student, or when he called a swarm of bees into the classroom through the open window during study time, then throwing out two more students for not staying on task. No, Raven feared him because, when his eyes fell upon her, she was never able to banish the suspicion that her master, like a vulture, waited for her death.

She was now considered a full fledged Locust Magician. In accomplishing this status of power, she had earned one spell to start her journey. She had always

been rather fond and curious about insects and so had pleaded with her selfish, greedy, not-to-be-trusted parents to let her formally train under Professor Maven. Now, three years later, she was walking in triumph out from Guild`House.

As Raven stopped at the top of the stairs, leading down to the path in front of the guild, the other two students, the remainder of her class, rudely pushed past her, taking quickly to the sky. She stood motionless as they vanished into the night.

“Rude!” Raven yelled after them. “Can’t even say excuse me!” She snapped her fingers at them, wishing she could summon a swarm of bees to harass them. She began smoothing out the ruffled feathers of her right wing. As she carefully groomed her wing back into perfect shape, the two large wooden doors to Guild`House began to close behind her, grinding noisily upon massive steel hinges. As she watched them slowly begin to grind close, a chilled wind caressed her, causing her to shiver. In the attempt to warm herself, she wrapped her arms about her thin frame, which did less than no good.

“Maybe I should hide out in Guild`House tonight were its warm,” she thought, noticing the great doors were halfway shut. Soon, she would be locked out for the night, which compelled her to make a split-second decision. Shaking her head, Raven slipped back inside, entering into a large rectangular room with pillars down both sides, extending some fifty paces into Guild`House. Looking around, she bit her lip.

“What am I doing?” she thought. “I’m escaping the tyranny of home.” she answered in silence. Raven thought about the consequences of being here, now, and shivered to think what would happen if she were to be spotted. Causing her to jump, the two massive doors closed behind her with a boom, followed by a repeated echo that slowly faded within the grand halls of her once guild. Without hesitating, she quickly slipped into the shadows amid some crates and barrels stacked neatly against the north wall and watched a set of stairs with unblinking eyes, as if expecting something.

After a few moments, one of Maven's personal guards, who was on the first of his nightly rounds, descended one of four massive, spiraling stairwells leading out from the chamber into other parts of the complicated and massive structure. He entered the hall, dimly-lit by torches quietly burning at either side of the chamber. As he passed by, Raven could see his hardened eyes glistening in the flickering torch light. As the large man walked by, he stopped, glancing at the crates and barrels where she was taking cover. After a moment, he moved on. Though he never told her, she knew his name . . . Krane. He was tall and strong, well seasoned in the arts of close quarter hand-to-hand combat.

Until he moved on, Raven held her breath for fear of being caught. Onward, Krane walked and searched, making his way through the south alcove, descending a stairwell she knew too well. Dangerous as it was, curiosity had gotten the best of Raven on a number of occasions, encouraging her to follow the head guard on his rounds. As mad as this would no doubt seem to others, Raven had been successful in learning the way Krane preformed his nightly watch. His pattern was simple, and she discovered Krane had never once deviated from the way he preformed it in arrogant complacency.

The guild itself was an ancient fortress, and had stood for centuries. Never, in all the histories, had an enemy breeched its outer wall. It was prideful conceit, the way Krane preformed his duty, yet useful to her. Raven grinned at Krane's back. No one had ever successfully infiltrated this sanctuary . . . but her.

After descending out of sight and hearing, Raven knew she would be alone for nearly an hour, that is, unless Shaed happened along. Raven shrunk at such a thought, then banished it from her mind.

After a long moment, she looked about the large chamber, spying out another alcove, beyond which ascended an exhausting spiral stairway that ended just below a pull down, trap-door staircase that led up into the fortress attic. There were many doors leading into unknown chambers and hallways on the way, but she had never once tested her luck to find out what lay beyond them. She was

insatiably curious, but not that bold. Heading for it, she figured it would be as good as anywhere to rest for the night. She was particular to the attic, due to her familiarity with it. She also enjoyed the solitude within; a place of solace. As far as she knew, no other students had ever ventured into it. It was her place of sanctuary, where she would be safe from others. Once inside the complex attic, there was a small door at the top, out of which she could leave if the need arose.

Ascending in silence, and quickly passing by a number of doors on either side, Raven counted all two-hundred and thirty-three steps. Upon reaching the top, she quickly opened the small door by pulling down on a handle secreted in the ceiling above. It was cleverly hidden, but she had found it the first time she came to the top. As light as she was, it was all she could do to get it to drop. Two years ago, she had to brace her feet on the ceiling and pull on the trap door while hanging upside down just to get it to open. She grinned in triumph as it lowered down.

As she stepped up onto the first stair, Raven heard a creaking sound; an unfamiliar noise that drew her attention back down the twisting stairwell. Shaking her head, she made a face.

“That’s never done that before,” she thought, suddenly spooked. Stopping, she listened, suspecting, but not fully convinced the noise had come from below. Raven froze, holding her breath as she focused on any little sound she might hear. With one foot on the first step, she stared back over her shoulder, waiting in silence. She felt her heart began to race, and her gut tighten. Again, she heard a sound, though it now seemed different. It almost sounded like . . . oh no, she had been followed, and it was not Krane!

Silently turning, Raven moved up into the attic. The moment she was halfway up, the pull-down stairs began to raise. By the time she reached the top, she turned to see the trap door closing. Turning, Raven knelt and pushed on the steps with all her strength, suddenly panicked they would slam shut, thus revealing her presence. Just in time, she caught the door, and strained to close it, forcing its

silence as she heard the distinct sound of someone quickly approaching.

Looking up into the vaulted ceiling of the attic, strewn with a number of support beams, she chose her destination. In one smooth motion, she launched upward, landing on the lowest, even as the trap door rattled, then began to lower. In haste she ascended again, landing on another support beam, tucked her wings back and fled up an angled timber in haste. Feeling a decent foothold, Raven flew up to the top cross-beam and landed by a small door that opened to the outside.

From within the darkness above, Raven peered down, eyes widening, as someone quickly ascended the steps, entering into the bottom level of the attic. Whoever it was, was no more than a shadow in the darkness below. If, by chance, it was Krane, and he caught her, he would beat her. She knew enough about him to know she needed to escape.

Frozen in place, she watched the shadow as it moved about the area below. As it probed and searched, the unmistakable sounds of claws pricking the boards of the floor informed Raven this was not Krane. It was the master's familiar; a fully grown Manitis which had the appearance of a praying mantis, but was much smarter and much, much larger. Even as deadly as this creature was, this was not what she feared the most. Maven could see through its eyes. If Shaed saw her, so would Maven, should her former mentor be focusing on Shaed. And in this case, it would no doubt be the excuse he needed to revoke her graduation and strip her of the one spell she knew. She was in trouble.

Without taking her attention from the Manitis, Raven slowly reached back and probed the door until her hand made contact with the latch. Slowly, she twisted it to an unlocked position as the Manitis leapt up to the lowest support beam and sniffed twice. Steadily, it began to climb upward, carefully picking its way across the first level of supports.

She realized she was either going to have to go home after all, or end up freezing all night. She would rather freeze. In any case, she could not stay, not now. This was disappointing, yet it was time to go. As the dark-plated insect

slowly ascended, Raven carefully opened the door, slipped outside onto the steep incline of the roof without a sound, and carefully shut it again.

Abruptly, a blast of wind nearly took her from the roof. Gaining her balance, she shot a glance at the door. She had to get out of here, and quick. There was no way she had departed undetected. The image of Shaed clambering up to investigate the source of the disturbance caused Raven to take two steps, and leap from the massive tower's roof. Spreading her wings, she cupped a solid wind and soared into the night sky. Correcting her flight with a bit of difficulty, Raven forced herself out of a sideways position. Spiraling downward, Raven flew to the other side of the tower, to evade the notice of Shaed, should it have followed her out onto the roof. Without much of a choice, she headed for home. It was far too windy to stay out of doors tonight.

It did not take her long before spotting the platform that led into the front door of her home. Due to the wind, it was a tricky landing, but she managed it. Looking back, she spied out the area. Fortunately, Raven was not seen by anyone. That was good news. Taking a few deep breaths, she relaxed and mentally prepared herself to be caught.

Before going in, she pulled her left boot off and retrieved a small pouch of coins from her tunic pocket. After dropping the pouch into her boot, she slipped it back on and reached for the door handle. Quietly entering, Raven slipped into the front room and carefully closed the door behind her. With great care, she made for the hallway to her right. At the end of the hall was her bedroom, and she made for it, her hopes rising that she could make it there without detection. As she feared, before Raven was halfway down the hall, she was discovered. She jumped, nearly screaming in fright as the voice of her father came directly from behind, low and serious.

“Raven, come here.” Cringing, she turned with a fake smile, only to be greeted by a glare from her father as her mother walked up next to him, lighting a candle and setting it on a table next to her. With a snap of his fingers, he pointed

to the floor in front of him. Sighing, Raven obeyed. She approached him, managing an innocent smile, hoping it would put them off guard.

“Hello father, hello mother. I have some good news. Tonight I officially earned the rank of Locust Magician Seeker. I graduated – passed the test.” Before she could react, her father grabbed her by the arm, holding her tight, and grinned. Instantly, Raven's mother began frisking her.

“Pay up, Raven, where is it?” Her mother’s voice was nearly frantic as she shot feverishly through Raven’s pockets, her father holding her firmly in place. Her mother soon gave up with an exclamation of frustration and simply walked away. Her father pointed to her bedroom door.

“Don’t come out until you wake up,” he grumped, and pushed Raven down the hall. Shoving Raven inside her room, he grabbed the door handle and slammed it shut. Raven heard it lock, and reached for the doorknob. Before she made contact with the handle, she stopped and withdrew her hand, grimacing.

“Do I always have to check the door? It’s always locked,” she whispered, a gleam abruptly shining in her eyes. Pointing at the door, she whispered cynically. “I’ve graduated, yes, graduated.” She put a finger across her lips. “Now, let me see, what was that spell?” Concentrating, Raven moved her hands and fingers in the memorized pattern Professor Maven had shown her. It was rather complicated, so she had to focus, or fail the casting.

"Munching, nodding, biting, stripping,  
Hear me now, I call on thee.  
Chewing, gnawing, pulling, ripping,  
Voracious insects set me free."

She smiled, confident the conjuring had been cast precisely as it should in order to bring the spell to life. Turning to a mere hole in her bedroom wall, she bit her lip and eagerly waited for the outcome of the spell. If correctly cast, it would

bring all the most aggressive insects to her aid. She wanted her window to be chewed away. She pointed at it, looking to her left, smiling, as if someone were there.

“I mean, I can’t even stick my head out that window. It’s simply much too small, don’t you think?” Of course, there was no answer, and she didn’t expect one. In all her life, she never expected no one to answer.

Often, during her training, Raven would mumble to herself, pretending to have a friend who would listen. She often pictured her friend as a white-haired girl, about the same age and she, with snowy wings and very beautiful. Her eyes were sky-blue and she smiled every time she laid her eyes on Raven. Oh, and the most important fact about her was their unbreakable, enduring, lifelong friendship. Her name was Allanna, and she was not one of the Karritch Gleighdor, as she. Allanna was a Sagen Gleighdor, of the beautiful and gorgeous snowy owl civilization (who she believed to dwell within a forest, just beyond the lower foothills of Ferryl Mountain, her home).

She had never yet flown down into the foothills to see them, for it was a dangerous course of flight, especially at her age. She had overheard others speak of Sagen Gleighdor at times; of the wonderful descriptions and stories of their breed. They were a fair folk, who had the ability to fly, just as she. As the Sagen had the traits of the Snowy Owl, her people had the traits of the Raven, much to the distaste of many other races (for the Karritch Gleighdor were inherent kleptomaniacs and notorious packrats).

She once dreamed of her friend, Allanna. The dream was so vivid, so clear, Raven supposed she had to be out there, somewhere. In fact the dream was so real, she was fully convinced Allanna truly existed. One day, yes, one day she would brave the dangerous flight down the steep and windy canyons of the massive mountain peak she called home. Until that day, she would daydream of her friend in the daylight hours and go on wonderful adventures with her, letting go the cares of her world.

Last night's dream was disturbing. Raven dreamed she was in a forest full of spiders, spiders which had captured and tied up Allanna with their unbreakable webbing. The dream was so real, she . . . a scratching sound brought Raven out of her thoughts, drawing her attention to the small window. Her dark eyes widened in delight as a beetle with large mandibles crept up over the ledge, turned and began chewing voraciously at the wood. Soon more insects joined in the wooden feast, sharing the same spot as they attacked the solid wood framework. To Raven, it was fascinating to see a variety of insects, both prey and predator, working side by side, steadily stripping up small splinters from about the entire window frame and discarding them to both sides of her bedroom wall. It was working! Soon she would escape the tyranny and oppression of her captors. Soon she would be free!

Once she escaped her prison, she would leave, windy night or no. As the insects worked on widening her window, Raven grabbed a small backpack from her closet and waited, watching in wonder as the hole in her wall grew steadily wider.

Two hours later, the hole was large enough to squeeze through with some effort. Waving away the insects, she willed the spell to cease. Instantly, they all poured back out into the night air, soon leaving Raven staring at a decimated windowsill.

"Well, ready or not," she whispered, suddenly sad and excited all at once. Quietly, she squeezed out through her window, and out into the chill of the night, with what little belongings she possessed. Slipping from the window, Raven pushed off hard and beat her wings furiously against a persistent wind she swore was allied with her parents in keeping her home. Landing on a large boulder, overlooking more houses below, she looked back as regret began to torture her heart. It would never change; she had to leave. Looking up into the sky, she began that familiar conversation with her best friend.

"Well, Allanna, what now? Even if I went back inside, I would be strapped senseless for the damage I caused. I wish -" looking up at the stars, Raven fell

silent, gazing at them in reverent admiration. Wishing she could fly up, grasp one in her hand and keep it, she sighed. Oh, how they sparkled and glittered!

“Allanna, I’ll get us both one. What are we going to do now?” She thought back on the last three years in which she either spent in the hall of training, or finding pretty rocks and crystals, of which she had a fair collection. In the sun, the crystals were so wonderfully radiant! She had at least ten of them.

Reaching into her pack, she felt small bag within that carried the crystals collected over the years. Somehow, she had managed to conceal them from her parents. Retrieving the bag, she opened and reached in a hand, feeling for the largest crystal. Finding it, she carefully withdrew it, raised it to her left eye and gazed through it. With sudden enthusiasm, Raven looked in wonder at how the light of the moon illuminated within the piece.

“Wow, Allanna, you should see this. It’s beautiful.” One by one she pulled them out, enjoying the points of illumination within each crystal’s center. In particular, one caught her attention that sparkled like the sun off snow in the evening.

“This one is more brilliant than the others. It’s different. This is my favorite. We should go get more. Oh, look at it through the moonglow!” But, of course, she knew there would be no answer. Raven watched the moon slowly ascending the tallest peak of Ferryl Mountain. Quickly, she again held the small crystal to her eye, peering into it. She grinned, slowly rotating it between both thumb and forefinger as she watched the beauty within its facets. “Yes, this one is different,” she whispered in awe.

Two hours later, Raven reluctantly put all the crystals back into the sack and carefully set it in her backpack. Secured it tight, her attention was pulled to the topmost precipice of the mountain, which loomed like a massive, ominous shadow above her.

The desire to have more crystals entered her heart, convincing her to attempt the flight to its precipice. As she crouched to launch upward toward the tallest

peak of Ferryl Mountain, a gust of wind assaulted her. Pulling her wings in tight, she waited impatiently for it to break, and held her position for a few moments, instinctively knowing when the best flight advantage would present itself. Finally, when the wind ceased, Raven leapt as high as she could, directly into a sudden, unexpected current. Spreading her wings, she caught a good lift and glided upward and back. Turning slightly, she beat her wings, feeling out the shifting currents of nature bent on opposing her.

Soon she was spiraling upward toward the highest point in the mountain, straining to reach a familiar area she had visited before, and more than once. As she struggled upward, she knew the danger of flying at night, especially out in the open like this, but she was free now! As she struggled for altitude, a chill wind began to strike at her with an even flow as she crested the last peak before the summit. The sudden cold began to quickly slow her limbs. She did not have much time to get to the top. If she did not make haste, she would have to glide back down, defeated. With one last desperate attempt, Raven struggled toward the jagged peak, her mind bending upon the many crystals which were there, free for the taking.

"I can do this," she growled, gritting her teeth and persisting upward. With the last bit of strength she possessed, Raven fought the torrent of wind until, exhausted, touched down in triumph. Exhausted, Raven took hold of a large rock, quickly tucking her wings tight against her back.

Gasping for breath, she looked about the mountain top, spying out a good shelter of rock to take refuge behind. Quickly she moved out of the icy gale and crouched down behind it for shelter. She made it, but the physical struggle had left her severely weakened. For now, she was shielded from the buffeting wind. She knew she could not fly until she was rested up and warmed, but that did not daunt her in the least. She was free!

Shivering Raven felt her strength all but drained away, and so pulled a rolled up blanket out from her pack. Untying the leather straps which secured it, she

wrapped it about her, huddling within the shelter of the stone. After a time, she felt a little better as she gazed up at the wonderful stars sparkling in the firmament.

Many points of light, scattered all over the mountain, pulled her attention down from the stars. Crystals! Excited, Raven braved the winds, and headed for each illumination, picking up many of the larger crystals and packing them away until the smaller sack within her pack was only empty enough to tie at the top.

Quickly, she returned to the shelter of rock and waited for the sun to rise. It was too cold to fly now, especially now that her pack weighed more heavy. Pulling her knees up, she wrapped her blanket tightly about her, rested her head upon her knees and waited for the sun to come up and warm her.

After a time, she began to feel much more comfortable and warm. The situation wasn't so bad after all. Of course freedom had its price; that was the sacrifice of being rid of her oppressive parents who loved things and money more than she.

"Allanna," she whispered, her teeth chattering, "when morning comes, let's leave forever." Feeling rather comfortable, she closed her eyes and fell into a deep slumber upon the highest, most dangerous peak of the Ferryl Mountains, oblivious of three shadowy figures nearing her from behind.

Raven came to, finding herself being shaken from a heavy slumber. Groggily, she opened her eyes, looked up into Allanna's sparkling blue eyes and threw her a weak grin.

"What time is it?" she mumbled, struggling to speak. She felt heavy and exhausted, like the time when she had eaten Midnight Sage on a dare. As she spoke, her eyes closed against her struggle to keep them open. Again, she heard Allanna speak in a hushed tone, as if talking to someone else.

"She's conscious," came a girl's voice that warped and twisted into a voice no longer Allanna's.

"Keep both fires stoked up Ogrin, but not too warm. Artemis, look at her wings. What race is she?" As she faded into sleep once again, Raven distantly heard a man's voice reply.

"I don't know. Ogrin, will you please cook up some bacon. No doubt, she'll be hungry when she comes out of it. She's lucky to be alive. Let her rest for now." Distantly, she felt a gentle hand smooth back her hair as the warmth of the fires lulled her into a pleasant dream . . .

. . . Raven opened the front door, glad to be home. This had been the longest training session she had ever attended at Guild House, and she was worn out. After passing the first of three major tests, she craved the comfort of her pillow. Mentally exhausted, she entered the house and closed the front door quietly to avoid waking her parents.

Inside, it was pitch dark. She stopped for a moment, allowing her eyes to adjust. She waited, thinking it odd there was not so much as a candle to light the way. This was the first time she could remember the absence of a night light, and it scared her. Stopping for a moment, Raven cocked her head to one side and listened, her heart quickening. Something was wrong.

"Mother, Father?" she whispered in a quavering voice. A number of

lanterns were abruptly uncovered to reveal the living room filled with strangers, who all cheerfully cried out, "Surprise!". Astonished, Raven instantly found herself in midst of a large number of grinning strangers, all holding a gift out to her. Enthusiastically, they all began singing her favorite birthday song that ended in a roaring cheer.

An abundance of food was brought in and set on the table. There was apple cobbler (her favorite), a cake with a thick layer of creamy frosting, candied apples and more! After eating a large portion of apple cobbler, and one enormous piece of cake, she eagerly accepted the first of many gifts, neatly wrapped in a golden paper and tied with sparkling silver ribbons.

As the first wrapping fell to the floor, one of the strangers pulled a flute from his sleeve and began to play a merry tune as he danced in circles around her. Quickly, he was joined by another with a fiddle, two with banjos, and one with a set of hand drums. The room came alive with music as a party of no small consequence began. Grinning from ear to ear, Raven eagerly opened every gift. When she had opened the last present, a handsome boy grabbed her by the hand and dragged her to the middle of the room, where they began to dance. Other boys and girls broke into couples and followed their example.

The party lasted until the eastern sky began to lighten, signifying the coming of dawn. As the morning approached, her guests began to leave, each wishing her a very happy birthday. When the last guest departed, Raven shut the door, laughing, and turned to stare into a pitch-dark living room. She stopped for a moment, smiling happily to herself. After a few moments, Raven quietly headed to her room and threw herself into bed. Closing her eyes, she fell fast asleep . . .

. . . Slowly, Raven cracked her eyes open and looked around, quickly realizing she was no longer upon the top precipice of Ferryl Mountain. Three strangers stood near, watching her as though they were expecting something to suddenly happen. Frightened, Raven leapt to her feet and threw off the blanket.

One of them, a short stocky man with a neatly braided waist-length beard, grinned up at her, his dark eyes gleaming like two polished obsidian stones. He raised up a wooden mug, as though toasting her health, then began drinking noisily, his eyes crossing as he looked up into the bottom of his mug. To his left a slender woman was hastily filling a plate with sizzling bacon and steaming potato slices. Slowly, she stood and approached Raven, offering her the plate with one hand as she tucked her long auburn hair behind her left ear with the other. She smiled and glanced down at the plate of food.

“I made you something to eat,” she softly stated, blushing. Raven glanced at the food hungrily, but did not take it. No doubt, it was some sort of trick – thieves did this kind of thing, and so she was on her guard.

The third was a strikingly handsome man, whose perfectly sculpted face instantly charmed her. Raven blushed and glanced at the delicious smelling food.

“Well, I suppose I am hungry,” she whispered, her voice filled with apprehension.

“Here, eat it before it gets cold,” the auburn-haired girl whispered. “My name is Krisha. What’s your name?” Reluctantly, Raven stepped forward and slowly took the plate, expecting sudden trickery. She wanted to fly away, but she felt so weak. As Krisha let go the plate of food, Raven decided it would be best to relax and play along, at least until she had recovered her strength enough to fly.

“Raven – my name is Raven.” Krisha grinned and placed a hand on the shoulders of each of the men. Looking down at the stout one, she waited for him to finish his drink. When he finally shook the last drop into his mouth, he lowered his mug.

“This is Ogrin, my faithful bodyguard.” With the back of his sleeve, Ogrin wiped foam from his beard and looked at Raven.

“Og,” he stated gruffly as the other man - the impossibly handsome one - stepped forward, formally bowing.

“My name is Artemis,” he said, “and I am at your service.” Raven averted

her eyes, feigning interest in her meal. Spearling a piece of potato, she worked up the courage to look at him.

“Pleasure to meet you – all of you.” As she took a bite, Raven became curious. After swallowing the most delicious potato she had ever tasted in all her life, she pointed her fork up at the peak above, drawing their eyes to it.

“How did I get off the mountain?” Raven inquired, and then sat down. Artemis grimaced slightly, moved over to her side and sat down.

“As we journeyed, we saw you fly up there. It was Ogrin’s keen eyes which spotted you struggling against the wind.” Ogrin suddenly had a very important look on his face, and held up a hand. Artemis fell silent and nodded to the stocky, musclebound man. At this, Ogrin took a deep breath and sighed, readying himself to speak, which provoked a smile from both his friends. He turned his attention to Raven, an important look etching into his rugged face. Thumping the side of his empty mug, he waited for a moment as Raven gave him her full attention. She didn’t know Ogrin, other than his name, but she was already beginning to like him. Krisha quickly filled Ogrin's mug in silence as he prepared to speak. After this mug was refilled, he looked down at the froth spilling down the side of his cup, licked his lips and sighed.

“Yes, Og saw you fly up. Og was worried when you did not fly down. Now you are here and warm and alive!” Ogrin raised his mug as if toasting Raven in triumph. “Now Og has a new friend, and she should come with us,” he nearly bellowed as a matter of fact, then began gulping down the contents of his drink in one long noisy moment. The invitation provoked nods from the other two, which took Raven completely off guard. When Ogrin shook the last drop into his mouth, he set his mug down on the ground and looked up at Krisha, once again wiping the froth from his thick beard with the back of his sleeve, and grinned. Artemis raised an eyebrow at Ogrin, then laughed.

“What would we ever do without Ogrin, our loyal Dwarven companion?” The Dwarf shrugged and bowed his head, suddenly bashful. Krisha could not

contain a sudden burst of laughter.

“The Kithrin Dwarves have keen eyesight. Thank you for saving Raven from freezing to death.” Ogrin blushed even deeper, but did not look up. Kicking a stick, he waved her away and took a deep breath.

“Og likes to help.” The look on his face made Raven suddenly trust him. There was a genuine goodness about him she instantly admired. Slowly, she smiled at Ogrin. For the first time in her life, she expressed her gratitude, though it seemed unnatural.

“Thank you, Ogrin. I would have died if not for you.” Ogrin kicked a rock, then grumbled under his breath. Feeling a sudden reluctance to look at them, Raven turned her attention back to her breakfast, contemplating what would happen next. What would the future hold for her if she did go with them? The fear she initially felt had all but melted away under their genuine kindness – a kindness that others had rarely shown her in the past.

As the gray of morning gave way to the light of day, Raven carefully rolled up and secured her blanket. After finishing, she slung it over her shoulder and quickly checked the sack of crystals in her pack to make sure they were well hidden at the bottom. Everything was accounted for. Not only had they gotten her safely down from Ferryl Mountain, but none of her belongings were missing.

Ogrin put out the two campfires, making sure they were buried under a thick layer of dirt. Raven watched him work the camp sight over until there was no evidence of them. His skill in hiding the signs of their passing was superior to any she had ever before seen. Soon the four of them stood ready to go.

Ogrin was a mystery to Raven. As he packed everything into one large backpack, nearly as tall as himself (he was no more than three feet tall), she curiously watched him. He refused to let Krisha and Artemis pack anything. Along with all the camping gear, he wore a set of hardened leather armor. Upon his left hip, the Dwarf carried a small war-hammer with a short handle and a loop

fixed at its end. The load he carried must have weighted as much as he did, or more, but it did not seem to concern him in the least. He tested the stability of the pack by jumping up and down, then frowned. Quickly, he removed the pack, set it on the ground, then unpacked the entirety of its contents. He then re-packed it all, meticulously securing each and every item. Then, once again, he hoisted it onto his back. Again he jumped up and down vigorously, testing it. Artemis waited patiently as Krisha hid a sentimental smile and walked over to Raven. Looking her up and down, she grinned.

“Raven, how are you feeling?” The question was rather difficult to answer. No one had ever asked her anything like that before.

“Ummm, I’m okay,” she struggled to answer.

“Good, I’m glad. Hey, are you going to take Ogrin's invitation and come with us, or do you have to get back home?” From the corner of her eye, Raven noticed Artemis glance her way.

“Well, I can’t go home now. Would it be okay if I came with you?” Krisha reached out and took Raven’s hands in hers, smiling brightly.

“We would love you to come with us.” Her voice lowered to a whisper as Raven looked down at their joined hands, rather taken back by the physical contact. It was a foreign, yet pleasant, to be treated with such respect. “I would like it if you would come with us. Then I would have more than just two men to talk to, see?” Raven held back a smirk and looked up, nodding, a sense of relief filling her. She wouldn’t have to travel alone now, and that was a comforting thought. Besides, Krisha was so nice. Curiously, she continued their conversation.

“Where are we going?” Raven inquired, suddenly curious. Krisha turned to Ogrin, who overheard the question, and quickly raised a finger, his eyes filling with enthusiasm.

“Og knows a place! Follow Og!” With that, he turned and stalked away, leading them away from Ferryl Mountain. Raven hesitated for only a moment, then followed Ogrin and Artemis, who walked in silence ahead of she and Krisha.

Carefully, they made their way down the gentle slopes of her homeland, towards the distant border of a huge forest that blanketed the lowlands in a sea of endless dark-green.

As they traveled, Raven fell into a daydream of the Sagen Gleighdor, Allanna, and wondered if she would ever find her. At night, Raven had often dreamed of her imaginary friend, who waited for her arrival somewhere within the forest she was now heading directly towards. This was unbelievable.

As they moved downhill, Raven often glanced back toward her home, a feeling of unrest smoldering within her mind.

The slope of the foothills gradually leveled out into a wide expanse of flatlands nearly as far as the eye could see. Off in the distant horizon lay a thick line of dark-green; the edge of the great forest border. The name of the forest was a mystery to Raven. She was curious about the woodlands which crept toward them at a painfully slow pace, like a snail approaching from too far away. Webs of curiosity filled her mind as she gazed at the great forest, an insatiable eagerness to explore it beginning to burn brightly within her heart and mind. Within its borders there might be undiscovered and hidden treasures, secrets to find. After gazing for some time at the blanket of green on the horizon, obscured by the morning haze, Raven turned to Krisha.

"Krisha, I'm curious." She pointed ahead as a colorful bird chased an insect between them. "I've never been inside a forest before. Are there people who live there?" Her inquire was brought on by the hope of finding the Sagen Gleighdor people. If she could find them, she might just find Allanna. Krisha looked ahead.

"That is Edgewood Forest. I don't know much about it, but I do know this: It is massive and filled with a variety of animal life." Krisha drew near. "I've heard there are ghosts which haunt it," she stated in a quiet tone.

"You have? Is this true?" inquired Raven, suddenly intrigued. Krisha chuckled.

"I bet it's just an invented tale to keep curious children from straying in. It is easy to get lost in such a place." Raven bit her lip, a doubtful expression twisting her face.

"Ghosts?" Do you think it's really haunted?" Raven's eyes shot back and forth from the forest to Krisha a few times before Krisha answered.

"I guess we'll just have to find out. As for me, I don't believe in ghosts. I think people make up things like that. Hey Ogrin!" she called ahead. "Is Edgewood haunted?" The Dwarf looked back and shrugged.

"Og never has, but thinks it is hunted." Krisha nodded respectfully at the

Dwarf, trying hard to keep a serious face. Catching Raven's eye, she winked and quickly raised a hand to her mouth. Artemis threw a secret smile back at the girls as Ogrin beamed a broad grin at Krisha, nodding enthusiastically.

“Thank you Ogrin,” Krisha said, then threw Raven a sly wink.

"Og is glad to help," he said back over his shoulder as he led them on.

Raven watched Artemis in silence for a while, letting her coal-black hair hang down to keep Krisha from noticing. Even though he was Human, and wingless, he was very handsome. No, he was adorable. In the brief time they had traveled together, Raven found herself wanting his attention more and more. Every time he looked her way she felt, well, pleased. She would keep her interest in him a dead secret. After all, he was a stranger.

By sunset, the four had traveled a good ways, bringing them closer to Edgewood. If they kept their current pace, according to Ogrin, who seemed to know the way through the countryside, they would arrive at the forest's border in three days.

Raven came to suspect her father would come looking for her, not out of any concern for her personal safety, but rather to bring her back home. She was sure, with her departure, he would miss the taxing of her pockets, which would, by all means, compel him to act. Truthfully, she felt both lost and relieved. The strangers she had fallen into company with had shown her more kindness in the time she'd been with them than her own father and mother had in five years. She was beginning to realize just how much she had missed out on what life might really be about. Well, it did no good to think about it. She was free now, and that was all that mattered.

By mid morning, Raven felt a sudden chill creep up the back of her neck. In fear she glanced back toward Ferryl Mountain, scanning the horizon and the sky, a rising uneasiness building in her heart. An unwelcome thought made this uneasiness so unbearable, it compelled her to make up her mind to leave the three,

though she did not wish to. She tried to ignore her fear, but she could bear it no longer.

Turning to Krisha, she found herself at a loss for words. Krisha was unlike any she'd ever met, so loving and kind. Reluctant to break the news to her first, she simply blew her hair from her face and continued walking. Soon, that fear gnawing at her began to evolve into a feeling of unshakable dread. The feeling became so persistent, she finally took a deep breath and whispered her decision to Krisha.

"Krisha, I have to go ahead of the group. I can't stay here." Krisha looked at her, surprised, causing Raven to instantly regret her decision. Still, Raven knew she was right. Her feelings had ever served her well. For the safety of her companions, she had to leave.

"Why?" Krisha stopped, snapping her fingers once, loudly, to get the attention of the two leading the way. Artemis halted, followed by Ogrin, who stopped in confusion. Artemis quickly whispered something to Ogrin, who instantly un-shouldered his pack, sat on it, and began staring suspiciously at Raven. As Artemis approached, he threw the girls a charming smile. Noticing the nervous look on Raven's face, he instantly sobered.

"What is it?" he inquired. He glanced at Krisha, then back at Raven, who bit her lip, raked her hair back from her face with one hand as Krisha shrugged.

"She says she has to leave us. Raven, what's wrong? Why do you have to go?" Raven looked back toward the mountains, then into the sky around them, drawing Artemis's eyes to the sky as well. His confused look suddenly changed to comprehension. As he scanned both horizon and sky, Artemis nodded.

"I see, I see. You are protecting us. Go and wait for us just without Edgewood. I'm sure you can get there in no time. When you arrive, don't stray alone into the forest, understand?" I don't want anything to happen to you." Krisha looked back to Ferry Mountain, confused.

"Protecting us? From what?" Artemis ignored Krisha, except for the hand he

rested lightly on her shoulder. Slowly, his attention was drawn to Raven unblinking, as if suddenly fixed in a trance. Ogrin stood and slowly walked over to the three, his suspicious demeanor changing to a frown as a look of regret washed over the gruff features of his face. Raven held Artemis's gaze, answering Krisha's question.

"Krisha, if my people find me with you, they will not be kind," she nervously explained, noticing her inability to break eye contact with Artemis. She felt Krisha take her hand and squeeze. Krisha then let go, now in full comprehension. A deep-set nervousness filled her eyes as she glanced back toward the mountain.

"But we would never do anything to hurt you. You are my friend." Ogrin perked up at the word friend, suddenly very enthusiastic.

"Yes, yes, Og likes you too. Don't leave. Og has to show you a secret," he said with sudden cunning. Still, Raven seemed unable to look away from Artemis, even though she wanted to, and this began to frighten her. As if perceiving her sudden fear, Artemis smiled and placed his other hand on Ogrin's shoulder and squeezed.

"We'll be there in a little more than two days, barring any delays. We'll quicken our pace and take shorter breaks. We'll have time enough to rest once we are back together." Shooting a look at the distant forest, Artemis grimaced, as if an unwanted thought was hatching like a foul spider in his mind.

"Raven, remember, do not go exploring until we are with you." When Artemis looked away, Raven felt as if she had been let go. It was the only way she could explain what has just happened to her. It startled her to realize Artemis had been holding her attention in a gentle, yet unbreakable grip. Wrapping her arms about herself, she shook her head, feeling as if she had been abruptly wakened out of a deep slumber.

"What did you do," she whispered, inadvertently expressing her thoughts aloud. Turning bright red, she quickly corrected her words. "I mean, what would I

do without you three. You have been kind to me. I will wait at the forest until you arrive." Ogrin reluctantly agreed, as did Krisha, who was nervously scanning the horizon. As Ogrin's eyes followed Krisha's, Raven shot Artemis an inquisitive look, to which he smiled fondly at her. Because of Krisha and Ogrin, she decided to let her curiosity go; a thing she seldom did. It was difficult, but there was no choice in the matter.

"I have to go before it's too late," she stated, glancing up into the sky behind them, half expecting to see winged figures approaching. Raven stepped back and stretched her wings, flapping them a few times to warm herself up for flight. As she worked her wings, she shrugged.

"I'll see you all at the border of Edgewood in two days . . . barring delays," she hastily added. Artemis threw her a grin, his eyes suddenly twinkling.

"You will be alright, go." Ogrin waved, a sad look crossing his face, but said nothing as Krisha gave her a fleeting smile. Extending her wings, she raised them high as she delayed only long enough to secure her belongings. Nimbly, she leapt into the air and thrust down as hard as she could, catching a good draft of air that sent her upward over three times her height. Gracefully she spun a full circle about the three. Steadily beating her wings against a gentle current of wind, she gained speed and shot over the grasslands toward the forest in the distance. As she increased speed away, she looked back at her three new friends, feeling guilty, feeling as though she was abandoning them. It was an emotion she had never before felt.

Slightly adjusting her flight path, she glanced back one last time before losing sight of her companions. Why did she feel as though she would never see them again? She was only going ahead to wait for them; it wasn't really goodbye after all. Raven's thoughts ran excitedly through her head as she glided steadily toward Edgewood's border as it steadily drew nigh. Not long after taking off, she easily traveled the distance it would take her companions days to reach. Over the tall grasses she sped, keeping low to the ground as much as possible to avoid

unwanted attention.

Landing a few paces from one of an army of particularly large trees, whose lichen-covered branches seemed like the many arms of some organic giant reaching out to catch the sunlight, she held a hand up to her eyes and stared in wonder into the shadows of the great woodlands. Nearing the great trunk, she slowly placed a hand upon the surface of its rough skin, marveling at its beauty.

"You are wonderful," she whispered in awe, creeping the tips of her fingers over its rough surface, studying its every detail. "If what lies within this forest is as wondrous as you, I should never want to leave." After enjoying it for a few moments, she decided it was time to get out of sight.

Silently creeping in through the edge of the tree-line, she squinted at the sudden change of lighting. Within the border of trees, it abruptly turned into night as though the sun had set. The obscuring shadows within the forest instantly contrasted the brightness of the day, temporarily blinding her. Waiting, she allowed her eyes time to adjust before she warily took a few more steps into the cover of the woodlands.

Out in the open, should her father be searching for her, he could easily spot her; a situation to avoid. If caught in the company of the three, it would be bad, really bad. What he would do to her three new friends, should he perceive any connection between them and her escape, coupled with the damage caused to her bedroom wall, would be terrible.

Raven's father was a member of the Ferryl Mountain Guard, a brutal defensive company which had existed for time out of mind. Half of those who trespassed into Karritch territory were never seen again. All who wandered into this land were robbed, beaten senseless, and left to survive, if they were let go at all. When she was young, she had witnessed what her people did to trespassers, and she did not wish to see it again.

Her thoughts caused a deep anxiousness for Krisha, Artemis and Ogrin. As she nestled down into some leaves, Raven wondered if her new friends would be

alright. Peering out into the open grasslands, she waited in earnest, as if expecting her friends to suddenly come into view.

As she watched a sudden pain struck her in the right shoulder as she was violently pressed into the bed of leaves beneath her by a crushing weight from behind. Crying out in agony, she struggled in vain against an unseen attacker that instantly overpowered her. Struggling to break free, she found herself overtaken and suffocated by the mere weight of her assailant. Slowly, Raven began to black out, her will to escape diminishing, as a heaviness flowed up into her neck, then steadily into her head, causing her to swoon. With all her will she fought in vain to stay conscious. As she desperately struggled, her vision blurred, and then began to close in about her as a heavy sensation filled her entire body. In vain, she struggled one last time against a shadow deeper than night – a shadow that invaded her senses until complete, absolute darkness engulfed her . . .

. . . In a haze of confusion and nausea, Raven slowly came to her senses. Something was wrong, but she could not think clearly enough to pinpoint what it was. Her head was spinning, and her stomach rebelled against a fowl, overwhelming stench. She gagged multiple times, desperately trying not to vomit as she focused on clearing her senses.

Why could she not move? Where was she? The last thing she remembered was eating breakfast with someone, but who? Taking in a slow and deep breath, Raven relaxed as best she could, trying to remember who had made her that delicious breakfast of, of, pancakes – no, not pancakes. Bacon and, and, oh what – potatoes! That was what she had eaten, potatoes!

Fighting to keep her thoughts to a dull torrent of confusion, she managed to conjure a mental image of the hand of the one who had offered her a plate of food. At the thought of food, she dry heaved three times, and had to force herself to concentrate on the slender and delicate hand that held the plate, and not the meal. Following the hand up the arm, Raven mentally pictured the traveling clothes she

wore. Willing her mind to focus, she managed to recall the features of the girl's neck and face, her brown eyes and lengthy auburn hair.

“Oh, what was her name?” Raven thought to herself, trying to distract her gut from emptying what little contents remained within it. If she lost control now, tied up and gagged as she was, she could easily choke to death on her own vomit. Kri, no that's wasn't her name. Krish . . . Krisha! It was Krisha! As she focused her thoughts on her new friend, Raven began to remember. Krisha had not been alone. The stern face of a Dwarf slowly surfaced in her memory, becoming more clear, as if his face was coming into view, surfacing from the depth of an unclear pool of water. His name, she forced herself to remember, was Ogrin. Yes, Ogrin. There was one more that caught her eye the instant she saw him. The memory of him came more quickly. Artemis, yes, that was him. As she pictured his handsome face, she also recalled the warning he had given her. Yet, even though he warned her not to go into the forest alone, she had done so to avoid being caught.

She had been attacked!

Memories flooded her mind in an instant. She was a prisoner, bound and gagged. Raven panicked and began to fight against the ropes which tightly bound her from head to foot. After a moment of struggling in vain, her lungs began to burn for lack of oxygen. The situation seemed truly hopeless, the stench in the air causing her stomach to twist and heave multiple times. Realizing she would pass out if she continued to exert herself, Raven forced herself to calm down as she sucked in breath after breath in the attempt to get enough air to stay conscious. With every erratic beat of her heart, Raven's head throbbed as if it was being struck by someone's fist. As she calmed down, breathing became easier.

Waiting, Raven listened for any sound of her captor as the spinning in her head slowed. After straining to hear anyone else, she decided she was, at the present, alone. She tested her wings for freedom, but they were bound to her body, as was her hands and arms. She was literally wound in strong ropes, though her wrists were not tied together.

With quite a bit of effort, she slowly worked her arms back and forth until she had some freedom of movement within her bonds. It was odd how her attacker had bound her. Frustrated, she screamed as loud as she could, calling for each of her companions in hope of being heard and rescued.

After a time, she abruptly stopped screaming, and bent her silent attention to everything about her. As she listened, a slow and creeping dread replaced her frustration as she heard someone approaching directly before her, even as a sound filled the air unlike any Raven had ever heard before. At first it was barely audible, though the sound of it increased as it neared. Not daring to move, she waited, frozen by fear as a noise filled the air, as if a dozen phantoms were suddenly whispering and contending against one another.

In horror, Raven froze as something touched and probed her in multiple places. Not daring to breath, Raven recoiled mentally. As she was being prodded and poked, the sound of abrupt struggling, mingled with the terrified shrieks of something - definitely animal - drew the attention of her captor. In an instant, the probing stopped, replaced by a rush of movement toward the sound of the struggling creature. As it moved away from her, the whispering grew much louder, and more intense.

In the next moment, Raven was forced to listen to an unnerving shriek, and a brief struggle, as the creature's cries ascended to high-pitched shrieks, mingled with absolute terror. After a time, the creature's struggles ceased, its cries melting into mingled groans of content and misery as a gurgling, swallowing sound filled the air. She thought of her friends and wondered where they were. It was no use calling out for them, or trying to break free, as any movement would, no doubt, attract the same fate as the dying not far from her.

The stench permeating her senses threatened to overwhelm her completely, causing her head to swim and dance. She thought about her decision to leave home. Maybe it had been a bad idea. *No, I'd rather be here*, she thought bitterly, hating the decision she had made to enter this accursed forest. *Of course, I*

*should've left! All my "wonderful" parents ever did for me was nothing. No, nothing would have been better than being robbed by my own parents every time I came home,* she silently rebelled.

From within dark thoughts, a snapping sound brought Raven to full alert, reminding her of the danger she was in. The situation seemed hopeless, truly hopeless. The ropes about her hurt, as if she had been bound by Thornberry Vine. She realized then, her captor was not someone, but some . . . thing. She tried to think of all the fowl smelling monsters she had heard of, and could only come up with one creature that made the same sounds now filling the air. These were Whisperers.

*No, Whisperers are not real -- they are not real,* she argued with her thoughts. At the notion, she felt a chill spread through her chest, as if her blood had turned to icy water. The sounds of whispering, amidst the unmistakable sounds of feeding, made her begin to believe such a dark legend. The feeding of this creature, whatever it truly was, reminded Raven of an invention Kaldec had created to catch the melt-off from the peeks through an arm-thick metal pipe that funneled the drainage into a massive water tank built high above the edge of Thornridge, her home-town.

Yes, it had to be a Whisperer, for it fed upon the soul of its victims, saving other captives alive for later nourishment. She knew from the tales, because of an insatiable appetite, it's constant feeding would never truly fill its eternal death-hunger. She had to get away, or suffer the same fate!

Raven ever so slowly began to work her fingers lose, tearing away from the ropes which bound her, all the while thinking of the promise of sharing in the same fate as the dying nearby. It was painful, working her hands lose. She could feel the skin on the backs of her hands and fingers being ripped off in places, causing her to bleed. Painfully, slowly, she continued to work her arms lose, and as she did, she felt moisture build up between her skin and the bonds that held her, making movement more easy. Every time the Whisperer quieted, she froze. When

the feeding began again, she continued to slowly work free of the ropes.

Through her tears, Raven managed to worm her hands steadily upward past her stomach, all the while listening to the sounds of a feasting that slowly became strained, mixed with frustrated grunts and growing whispers. It was almost finished with its meal! Hopefully it would be satisfied and save her for later, giving her more time. If she could just free her wings, she could attempt to fly away. The thought was of no comfort when she wondered if this horror could fly.

Her hands and fingers felt as though they were being slowly scraped away as she worked the tips her fingers ever so slowly up the center of her chest. Once in this position, she then inched them outward in hopes of getting her arms into the open. After what seemed forever, Raven managed to slowly work her hands through the ropes at each shoulder.

Exposing her arms was beyond unnerving, but she finally managed it. At a snails pace, Raven lifted her hands, taking hold of the bonds over her mouth and pulling them apart with what little strength remained in her limbs. Instantly she could breath easier, though the stench in the air was heavy, causing her to gag.

Recalling how she freed herself from her bedroom, Raven quickly whispered the words to the one spell that would call the insects in the area to help free her more quickly. After finishing the spell, Raven whispered the command for all insects remove the ropes which held her bound.

To her horror, Raven heard the Whisperer rush toward her. It had noticed her, meaning she had failed in her attempt to escape. Raven knew she was going to die.

With irresistible strength, she felt herself picked up off the ground in a powerful grip. Screaming in terror, Raven braced herself for the inevitable. Yet, to her amazement, it did not kill her. Instead, she felt her bonds suddenly being torn from her body, forcing her to cry out in pain as the ropes were ripped from her face and head, threatening to tear out half her hair in the process.

As the ropes wrenched loose from her face, Raven's heart chilled as if she

had suddenly come upon a Werewolf. The shock of such an encounter would not have frightened her any less as she found herself in the clutches of a massive spider, struggling in the attempt to free her from its own webbing. In the same instant, Raven beheld a blanket of movement as a mass of insects swarmed up the great spider in the attempt to get to her. Gripped within four of its eight massive legs, the great arachnid tore and pulled at its webbing. In shock and panic, Raven screamed as she felt her wings beginning to stretch.

"No, stop!" Raven cried out, feeling the feathers of her wings threaten to come free. Instantly the large spider froze and dropped her. Striking the ground hard, Raven coughed. After a few moments, she staggered to her knees, tears streaming her filthy face as she looked up into the many eyes of the monster looming over her.

The small insects had frozen in place as well, all facing her way, their attention riveted upon her, waiting attentively as she knelt, bleeding from the many abrasions now covering the exposed areas of her entire body. With its two foremost legs raised over her, the large spider held still, waiting for her next command.

Suddenly, Raven was grateful to know the one spell she had been taught. At the completion of her training, she had been given the choice to pick one of ten spells as a graduation gift. Of the ten, she had the chosen Insect Subservience.

Even though Raven knelt in horror before this massive hunter, this instinctive killer, nearly overwhelmed by the smell of death and decay about her, she felt a sense of relief. Reaching up, she rested a shaking hand on the closest leg of the spider. The contact caused it to flinch and quiver, though it did not attack. Startled, she quickly she withdrew her hand. Regaining her composure to some degree, she wiped the tears from her face. In a shaky voice, she forced herself to laugh, though it was not humor she felt.

"Well, I am glad you are not what I thought you were. This will make it easier to endure," she weakly chuckled. In response, the giant spider shifted over

Raven, waiting as she had commanded, as did all the other natural insects blanketing the great spider and the ground about her.

"Okay, you," she pointed at the giant spider, "carefully release your webs from my legs and lower body. The rest of you, free my wings." In one mass movement, Raven was swarmed by a host of insects which gnawed and chewed at her bonds, many becoming permanently stuck to the finger-thick webbing. The giant spider proceeded to carefully strip its webbing from her legs and hips with its powerful legs, quickly working every strand loose, tearing the webbing free from her body. It was painful still, but Raven had no choice but to let it finish, or wait for the next rainfall to dissolve the webbing. That, she was not willing to do.

After a long wait, the last of the strands fell to the earth about her, releasing her from captivity. As she felt the last thick strand release, she looked about her at a number of victims; quarry fallen prey to this elite hunter turned rescuer.

"All of you, but you," she pointed at the spider, "can leave." Instantly the swarm of tiny creatures began to disperse. Turning to the still hovering spider, Raven shuddered, apprehensive and nervous of it. She knew this spell was only powerful enough to effect common insects. Simply put, it should not have worked on this brute. With no time to ponder the whys' and hows' of it all, she looked about the area, wondering which way led back to the edge of the forest. She felt sick, and needed to get back to the edge of the trees. How long she had been unconscious, she had no idea. One thing she had to do was to get back and rejoin her friends. It was possible they had not yet come to the forest. Raven was no survivalist, and so she began to fear escaping the spider only to fall victim to weakness and dehydration. Pointing at the huge spider, she commanded it.

"Take me back to where you found me." Without hesitation, Raven found herself being swept off her feet, taken up into the great spider's lengthy forelegs and carried out of the area.

"On top! I want to ride on top," she stated firmly, gaining more and more confidence in the situation. After being lifted and set upon its back, above and

behind its many eyes, she felt more and more sick to her stomach as the great arachnid bore her through the forest.

As the huge spider crept out from its lair, Raven had enough presence of mind to unshoulder her pack and open it. Retrieving the sack of crystals, she opened it and grabbed one. Tossing it to the side, she made sure it landed in an open spot, easy to see. Later she would return to the spider's lair to search the victims. There might be valuables on the deceased, and she was not going to pass up the opportunity to find something that might prove useful in helping her in the future. Nearly losing her balance, Raven steadied herself as she was born upon the leathery back of the giant spider.

Exiting the stench of its lair, Raven found herself fortunate to be alive. As the great arachnid moved on, it suddenly stopped and shuddered, its eerie whispers beginning to fill the air once again. Her spell was wearing off. Soon, the spider would be free of the magic that held it bound to her service. She knew what would befall her should she not keep control of this monster. Placing a hand about the nearest of its many eyes, she cast the spell again, quickly binding it once again into submission.

Within a moment, the spider relaxed and continued on its way as Raven continued to drop crystal after crystal. As the spider crept back toward the area it took her from, she hoped beyond hope to be reunited with her three friends.

"We've waited more than a day," Artemis calmly stated, keeping his voice even and gentle. He did not want to upset Ogrin, who paced the edge of the tree line, obviously worried about his new friend. Krisha gave Artemis a worried glance, looked into the dense tangle of the forest, then over to Ogrin, who stopped and grumbled despairingly under his breath.

Artemis secretly motioned to the Dwarf, silently queuing Krisha to say something that might help. Clearing her throat, she grimaced at Artemis, her worry intensifying.

"You can calm him. He is devoted to you," he whispered. With a sigh, she stood and slowly walked over to the Dwarf, forcing herself to appear calm. She didn't really know Raven well enough to trust her, or to miss her company all that deeply. She did like her, but if Raven wanted to leave, that was her choice. Stopping beside her friend, Krisha placed a hand upon Ogrin's shoulder, instantly realizing he was about to come unleashed. With a heavy sigh, the Dwarf looked up at her, like a child who looks to his mother to make things right.

"Og thinks Raven is in trouble," he said in a tone of voice that almost brought Krisha to tears. For a moment, Krisha said nothing, battling sudden emotion. If she let go her composure, she knew it would upset him. She knew how Ogrin would react. Forcing a pleasant smile, she looked to the trees.

"Why do you think she's in trouble, Ogrin?" The Dwarf snorted, pointing into the shadows with the head of his battle hammer.

"Because Og thinks she is not happy, and that makes Og unhappy." When Krisha looked back at Ogrin, she nodded, caressing his shoulder.

"What should we do, Ogrin?" The stout Dwarf raised a hand to his chin, then began running his hand down the entire length of his thick braided beard over and over, suddenly lost in thought. When he did this, she knew he was not to be interrupted.

Artemis watched in silence, knowing the situation was about to get interesting should Ogrin call their next move. He'd witnessed the Dwarf make up his mind before. Once he make a decision, that was that. It was an understatement that Ogrin could not easily be swayed to change his mind. Simply put, Ogrin was simple minded, lacking the wisdom to make wise choices in most situations. Hearing Krisha give Ogrin the choice of their next move was the indication that she also was at a loss as to what they should do. Before Ogrin could decide, Artemis walked over, holding up a hand to catch the thinking Dwarf's attention; distract him from fixing his mind upon an action.

"I have an idea," he stated, successfully catching the attention of the Dwarf. To his relief, Ogrin turned to Artemis, a sure sign that he had not come to any conclusion as of yet. The stout Dwarf put up his battle hammer, securing it to his side, then folded his muscular arms across his broad chest.

"Og wants to help Raven," he stated as a matter-of-fact." Artemis smiled, nodding, trying desperately to think of an idea, but could think of nothing to say. Quickly, he picked up a stick and knelt down, motioning Ogrin close. As the Dwarf neared, Artemis began clearing away all the leaves and clumps of grass in front of him down to the soil. The Dwarf knelt opposite him, suddenly interested in what he was planning.

Krisha stared into the forest, feeling helpless. She knew all too well the things which inhabited this grand forest, and it made her nervous. She shuddered, spying out every hiding place and shadowy area. She wanted to leave, but this would not finish her quest. She knew what she needed to do, and loyalty to her friends was an uttermost priority. If she failed in this one thing, she would fail her mission. Biting her lip, she thought of home. She did not wish to go back. She never wanted to go back, ever.

Turning her attention to the two, she watched as Ogrin helped Artemis smooth out the exposed circle of dirt. When a large patch of dirt was prepared, the Dwarf looked up at Artemis, eagerly waiting for him to reveal the plan that would

save Raven.

Artemis reached out and grabbed a long stick, then slowly adjusted it, placing a hand to his chin as if suddenly deep in thought. Krisha noticed he was mimicking how the Dwarf would ready himself to speak. This was wise, for Ogrin waited, also raising a hand to his chin, watching their leader. After a long and calculated pause, Artemis lowered the point of the stick to the dirt, looked into the forest and sighed loudly. In a simple stroke, he made a line as Ogrin watched on, eagerly watching the line being drawn.

"Ogrin, this is the forest's edge." Artemis poked the stick into the soil three times. "These dots are us." Ogrin nodded, seeming to comprehend what Artemis was getting at.

"The forest," the Dwarf accused, waving a hand into its thickness as he looked at the three dots. Artemis nodded in agreement and began sketching the forest, making small marks here and there which represented the trees. Krisha knelt by the stocky Dwarf, also nodding, feeding into whatever Artemis was getting at. Ogrin looked up at her and grinned.

"Og and Artemis are making a plan," he stated triumphantly. Krisha smiled at Ogrin, then turned her attention back to what Artemis was doing, hoping he could satisfy Ogrin. Slowly, he finished his landmarks. He then sighed once again and spoke.

"Okay, we'll have to go slowly and quietly. We need the element of total surprise, got it?" Ogrin's breathing quieted, his usually noisy demeanor changing as his shoulders relaxed. Artemis and Krisha would have burst out laughing, but this was serious business. Artemis laid the stick down and stood, giving the Dwarf a look of approval. Dramatically, then pointed at Ogrin, who also stood and waited for Artemis's next plan.

"Ogrin, you know you are like a rock, strong and reassuring to me." Artemis lowered his voice to a whisper as he bent to the Dwarf's ear. "We must find Raven, but we must do it without being noticed. Above all, I need you to protect Krisha.

Can you keep her safe?" Ogrin glanced at Krisha, his eyes hardening to stone, his jaw setting with firm resolution.

"No harm will come to Krisha. Krisha is Ogrin's friend," he growled in a low and dangerous tone. Artemis placed a hand on Ogrin's shoulder.

"Good, let's find Raven. We must be careful," he whispered as he picked up the stick and poked it into the heart of the forest. "We must be careful," he repeated. Ogrin nodded as Artemis turned his attention to Krisha. As he neared her, she glanced at the Dwarf, who was now packing their gear in haste.

"I'm sorry Artemis, I wasn't thinking. It won't happen again." In reply, he shook his head and took both of her hands in his, giving her a smile.

"Do you know what I love about you the most?" Taken back by not only the question, but the tone of his voice, she shook her head and looked down at their joined hands. "Krisha, how long have we known each other?" She thought for a moment, feeling a connection between them she could not have described in words.

"Nearly three years," she whispered.

"In all that time, you have never failed to accept every last soul you have met. You have a gift, you know." Not knowing what to say, Krisha felt her face flush as she began to tremble. Looking up, she smiled as tears moistened her eyes, recalling how he had found them – saved their lives. Artemis had found her curled up in a dark ally, alone, friendless, cold, starving. She had run away from a place where many others her age lived. In the time spent traveling with him, she had grown to respect him. Then Artemis had found Ogrin, nearly dead from starvation, cast out from his own people. A few days ago, Ogrin had spotted Raven, and just in time to save her life. In reality, the Dwarf had not spotted her first. Artemis had felt her presence upon the mountain, and had gone to her, letting Ogrin point Raven out to them first. He could see things, feel things untouchable . . . predict the future to some degree. Artemis harbored a rare gift.

Krisha felt a single tear roll down the left side of her face as she looked into

his silver-gray eyes.

"Thank you," she whispered in complete adoration. Artemis wiped away the tear with a gentle hand, his eyes softening as he pulled her into a gentle embrace.

"I see you with my eyes, Krisha. Never doubt yourself. You have much strength in you." As he parted from her, it seemed all the anxiety and fear for Raven parted from her as well. Somehow, he knew everything would work out for the best, and she believed it.

"How do you do that?" she mumbled, not realizing she was speaking her thoughts aloud.

"We all have our gifts," he replied with a warm touch to her cheek. "You make friends easily, and seem to touch the lives of those you meet. You are a Healer." He raised his other hand to the other side of her face, gently tilting her head back. "When we find Raven, I would like to take you three to a place I know." Krisha became instantly curious, and a little nervous. Before she could respond, Artemis continued. "Krisha, this place is special, and is for those who need a permanent home. It is called Sanctuary." Krisha's eyes brightened.

"You spoke of it in passing a few weeks after you found me, but never again. What is Sanctuary, and where is it?" Without taking his eyes from her, Artemis removed one hand from the side of her face and pointed into the forest.

"Deep within Edgewood. It is a place no one goes, unless they are confederate with the mistress of the woods." Krisha fell silent and turned toward the tree line as Ogrin cinched the last strap on his overly-large backpack and hoisted it onto his back without effort.

"Where does she live?" Krisha inquired, wiping her eyes.

"Twilight," he whispered, as if keeping it a secret from the trees. Krisha turned her ear to the forest, as if something had come to her attention.

"Shhh, listen," she whispered. "Something is moving within the tree line, there," she pointed. The three froze like statues, searching the dense tangle of

trees. Krisha saw Ogrin's hand reach for the handle of his battle hammer, ready to pull it out. She motioned toward the Dwarf, warning Artemis.

Artemis scanned and searched the trees, his silver-gray eyes slowly probing the shadows of the thickets and undergrowth. As the three listened, what sounded like the approach of many impacts came to their ears. Ogrin grimaced, and slowly lowered the enormous pack to the ground behind him without taking his eyes from the direction of the disturbance. Pulling his battle hammer free from the leather loop at his hip, he frowned at the trees as if they were at fault for hiding the threat.

As the impacts grew louder and louder, Krisha backed a pace, placed a hand on the Dwarf's shoulder and bent to his ear.

"It could be our new friend, Raven. Stay with me, please. If this turns bad, I'll need you." Ogrin grunted loudly, startling Krisha, but that was his only reply as he grit his teeth and glared at the density and shadows of the forest, his eyes narrowing dangerously in the direction of the disturbance growing closer and closer.

"Shhh," Artemis softly warned as he lowered himself behind a crop of tall grass, motioning for them to do the same. Krisha did likewise, hoping Ogrin would take her example and hide as well. To her relief, he came with her and bent slightly as some of the taller grasses skewered his thick beard. It would have made them laugh to see the very intense and serious face of a frowning Dwarf impaled upon the vegetation, but this was not the time for humor.

The snapping of leaves and bracken grew louder as the three waited in silent anticipation at whatever it was approaching. As they waited, a whispering began to fill the air, like the many voices of spirits from the unseen world. After a moment, Artemis lowered into a crouch, as if he were about to spring. Krisha watched him as he quickly pulled a wand from his right sleeve, and threw his companions a concerned look.

"Arachnid, big one," he whispered and turned his attention back to the trees as a patch of the heavier vegetation shook, then was forced aside by two immense

legs. Krisha gasped, paling in fear as a cluster of bulbous eyes moved forwards from the obscurity of the shadows. Ogrin cursed under his breath, then suddenly growled like an angry bear. Grasping the handle of his battle hammer, he prepared to charge. Any threat, whether great or small usually sent him into a rage like a miniature tornado, to pound and smash. Once his adrenaline flowed, there was no stopping him, unless, of course, he was knocked unconscious, or offered a stout drink of kohakk to quench his insatiable drinking appetite.

The great spider emerged from the trees, stalking out into the open as the three reluctantly prepared for what seemed an inevitable confrontation. Yet, to their surprise, they beheld Raven, riding the great spider out of the thickness of the forest, holding an empty sack in her right hand, and a crystal in her left. The hardened features of Ogrin's face instantly melted away as he secretly pointed at his new friend.

"Stop," Raven commanded. As the spider froze, she scanned the tree line where the grasslands met the forest's edge. Patting the spider, she frowned. She didn't feel well, and her stomach felt like it was eating at her insides in the attempt to get some food in it. She unsteadily made her way off her captor's back and onto the ground, aided by one of its arm-thick legs. Once down, she leaned into the massive spider and began to weep.

"I thought I heard them," she stated through sudden tears. The spider shuddered, instantly sobering Raven, and bringing her attention to a more important matter. Once again, the great spider was breaking loose from the control of the spell. Stepping back, Raven spoke the words to the only spell she knew, quickly subduing it to her will once again. To her relief, it relaxed.

"Well, I suppose you will need to go back into the forest. Here is where we part company," she whispered, rubbing the back of her swollen shoulder. The wound was warm and tender to the touch. "Go now, go back into the forest. Go

on," she commanded the monstrous spider. Raven watched as it turned and crept steadily back into the trees, vanishing noisily into the shadows of Edgewood. Though she had always been infatuated with the underlife of the world, she was truly grateful to see it gone.

After finding herself alone, she sighed and set her back against the nearest tree for support. She was too tired to walk. She leaned her back against the tree and wiped her eyes, feeling unbalanced and sick. Still, she was alive, fortunate to yet draw breath, and she knew it. But what would happen now? She was much too weak to fly. She could not go back home . . . she would rather go live with the spider.

"You did well, Raven," a familiar voice broke the still of the morning. Startled, by his sudden words, she looked around, the silence of her despairing thoughts suddenly melting away. To her relief and joy, Artemis, Krisha and Ogrin stood up from where they were hiding and approached, all of them smiling her way. Krisha looked on in wonder at Raven.

"Wow, how did you do that?" she asked. Still gripping his weapon tight in both hands, Ogrin nodded and threw Krisha a grin.

"We should smash it!" Raven half laughed and wept at the tenacity of the Dwarf, a flood of relief filling her as her emotions overtook her. Placing a hand upon the tree her back, she abruptly sat down, exhausted and feeling sick.

Artemis came to her, knelt down and ran a hand over Raven's matted hair, carefully removing leaves and a few strands of thick webbing, all the while keeping a lookout for danger. After a long moment of silence, she looked up at Artemis who threw her a wink. Never before had she been the recipient of such sympathy and acceptance by anyone, and it felt good. Reigning in her emotions, she grit her teeth.

"I feel so lost," she whispered. Artemis pulled her into a gentle embrace.

"I understand that feeling, truly. We are here for you. I will not abandon you." His words stung her to the heart, causing her to break down. She threw her

arms about his neck and squeezed.

"I didn't know what to do. I thought I would never see you . . . all of you again." A fit of trembling overtook her as Krisha gently stroked Raven's head in silence, her eyes glittering with emotion as well. The stout Dwarf challenged the density of the forest with a hardened look, as if daring it to throw something at him from the shadows.

"We should smash the bug!" he growled angrily, then gave a quick peek at Krisha, to see if she approved. Krisha knew better than to acknowledge Ogrin. If she did, she knew he would instantly charge after the spider. If that happened, Ogrin would kill it, or die; there was no in-between.

"Let's get a fire built while there is still daylight," Artemis stated, then scooped Raven up into his arms. After exiting the forest, Artemis gently lowered Raven to the ground and turned to Krisha.

"Krisha, will you see that this lucky girl is washed and ready for a meal? I dare say, she must be hungry." Krisha smiled at Raven as Artemis steadied her. Ogrin began putting together a campfire.

In no time, the smell of wood-smoke began to permeate the area. This concerned Raven, but she said nothing. That warning in her gut was gone, so maybe she had been wrong about what might happen. Maybe she was not being looked for after all.

Feeling more weak than ever, Raven accepted Krisha's help as she knelt by a shallow pond, fed by a gently flowing stream that wound down through numerous crops of Arrowhead clusters of grass lining the bank. Krisha began picking out the webbing from her hair. After a few moments, Raven began to drink.

"Easy, my friend," Krisha stated. "Only drink a little bit at a time, or you will be sick." Doing as she was instructed, Raven doubted how she could feel any more ill than she now was. Krisha began untying Raven's dress from the back. Slipping out of her clothes, Raven moved down into the water. Shivering, she

lowered herself until she was up to her chin. Pulling her wings fully into the water, she felt her teeth begin to chatter.

"It's cold. This water is the runoff from Ferryl Mountain." Krisha looked toward the mountain, and then noticed the two puncture holes on Raven's shoulder. Swallowing hard, she stood tall and peered about the area, not surprised to see Ogrin close at hand with his back turned toward them. Producing a small towel and soap, she wrapped the soap in the towel and tossed it to Raven.

"Here, catch." Raven turned and raised her hands out of the water just in time to catch it. Smelling it, she perked up and threw Krisha a brief grin.

"Thank you!" she marveled, as if she had just gotten her very first birthday present. Soon after, Raven began scrubbing herself, starting with her hair. As she tended to her hair, she noticed the concerned look on Krisha's face.

"Krisha, what's the matter?" she asked.

"How are you feeling?" Krisha returned, not answering Raven's question. Raven shrugged.

"Sick, hungry, happy to be alive." Krisha threw her a sympathetic smile.

"How did you do it? I've never seen someone do what I saw you do back there." Raven sighed, suddenly missing the massive spider for some strange reason. She continued to scrub the filth from her body.

"That is the order of my training. I am a Locust Magician. I only know one spell called Insect Subservience, which compels insects to do what I want." Krisha looked confused.

"That's what I thought. But Raven, that spell, if I am not mistaken, only works on common insects, not the giant ones. Am I wrong on that point of information?" For a moment, Raven contemplated the question, then shrugged, feeling the soap stinging and biting at all the wounds and abrasions on her body.

"Ow, that hurts," she grimaced. "I don't know what to say, Krisha, other than you are right. Come to think of it - that really stings - why did my spell work?" Krisha shrugged, produced a second square of soap, and began washing

Raven's dress.

"Well, you are making me curious," Krisha said as she submersed the dress. Repeating it three times.

"I'm not that important, Krisha," Raven said, then submersed herself. In wonder, Krisha watched Raven work her hair beneath the water.

"No, there is something about you my friend. I don't know what it is, but you are special. I can feel it." Coming up out of the water, Raven looked at Krisha, throwing her a smile.

"Thank you for helping me."

"You're welcome, Raven. I am sure we are going to be good friends." Raven suddenly grinned and nodded.

"I've never had a friend, Krisha. I like you very much. Honestly, I hope you are what I'm beginning to feel you are." Krisha threw her a smile.

"I'm not so complicated. I'm just me," she replied.

After bathing, Krisha wrapped Raven in a blanket, and led her back to camp as she carried her dress. Once back, Ogrin quickly assembled a rack of branches, built close to the fire.

"Raven's dress can dry now," he stated, rather proud of himself. Raven smirked, then threw Ogrin a thin smile.

"Thank you, sir. You are a gentleman." Blushing, the Dwarf waved her away, turned and walked back to the forest's edge in search of more wood. Krisha draped the dress over the branches, then sat by Raven, who shivered by the fire. As steam ascended from her clothes, Raven took the first bite of a meal, which consisted of scrambled eggs, bacon and bread sticks, compliments of Artemis, the chef. Surprised, she looked at the bread, finished it off, and glanced at the other bread sticks cooking over the fire.

"That was delicious Artemis," she complimented.

"Thank you," he modestly returned, then picked out the largest one from the

pan, and added it to her plate. Raven picked it up, blew on it a few times, then began devouring it. The first one she ate had made her hungry for more. After scarfing it down, Krisha handed her a cup of water.

"Thank you," Raven said. Krisha through Raven a quick grin.

As she took the water, Raven became curious and began watching Artemis as he carefully built up the fire. He was so handsome, she dared not look at him if he should glance at her, even for a moment.

Krisha was kind and attentive to her, as was Ogrin to Krisha. She'd never been subject to such kindness in all her life. It was pleasantly odd that others would be so quick to help out a stranger, who, even though she never had, would have taken everything from them. Not now. She saw a connection between them she envied.

*"No, I do not envy what they have"*, she reflected silently, *"I seem to be a part of it."* Smiling, she emptied her cup and then stood, wrapping the blanket more tightly about her thin frame.

"What is that bread called?" She inquired as Krisha turned her dress over and adjusted it carefully so it would dry quickly.

"Ump's Delight." Artemis answered. As he caught Raven's eye, she averted her stare, feigning interest in an insect creeping over the surface of a thick piece of wood Ogrin was about to place into the fire. Quickly, she snatched the bug from the wood, saving it from the flames. Opening her hand, she watched it in fascination as it slowly spread its legs out, testing the surface of her delicate hand and slowly raised its long antennae. The little beast was thin, and half the length of her smallest finger. Its unusually soft body seemed vulnerable to the slightest touch.

"This is the Kosh Beetle, and is one of the most delicate and fragile of all the insects in this region. You would think it easy prey for spiders and birds, but it thrives safely in its habitat, instinctively fearless of being hunted. Such a delicate little creature, and harmless . . . unless you eat it." Ogrin grimaced, giving Raven a

disturbed look.

"Og doesn't eat bugs," he grumbled in open disgust. A few chuckles broke out among them, quickly joined by the Dwarf, who, after looking rather confused for a moment, joined them in their jovial socializing. By the look on his face, it was obvious he had no idea what everyone was so happy about. Krisha hugged Og, who blushed and wrapped a short, stocky arm about her neck like a child who craves the touch of a parent. Og's response to Krisha's embrace startled Raven, and intrigued her. She had seen two others hug before, but had only been hugged once, and not by her mother or father.

When Artemis had found her, he'd pulled her close, sheltering her lovingly to himself as Krisha stroked her filthy hair. It had felt good, and she secretly craved more. She watched Krisha spear all her fingers through Ogrin's thick curly hair as she squeezed him tight. The scene threw Raven into a daydream of her mother doing the same, but only to restrict her movement as her father frisked her for anything of value.

A sudden fear began to rise up within Raven's heart as she thought back on that scene, so often repeated. She could feel it in her mind, hissing like a coiled serpent, ready to strike. Coming to her senses, she abruptly stood, her attention drawn to the Ferryl Mountains, fear instantly sobering her. That feeling was back, and it was gnawing at her. The three noticed her sudden behavior, and looked to the mountains as well. Artemis glanced at Krisha, concerned, then turned his attention back to Raven.

"What's the matter?" Quickly, Raven retrieved her now dry apparel and slipped the dress over her head. She then pulled the blanket down and out of the dress, eyeing the mountains and sky with growing apprehension.

"Put the fire out! No smoke . . . we need to get out of sight! Hurry!" Instantly, Ogrin began packing up the gear - unwashed - as Artemis and Krisha began scooping dirt into a pile next to the fire with all haste. With a speed that surprised Raven, Ogrin shouldered the pack in no time and leapt to the cooking

pit. In one motion, he pushed the pile of dirt over the entirety of the fire, extinguishing it instantly, as the others gathered up all the wood, including the branches which had held Raven's dress.

Quickly, the three of them were waiting within the cover of the trees, watching Ogrin meticulously cover up the signs of the camp. Raven watched him comb over the area as he quickly made his way to the trees of Edgewood. With one last adjustment of the hedge, the Dwarf joined them.

"Og is not happy with the trail he left for others to see." He then brightened, beaming a grin up at Krisha. "Og made Goblin feet on the ground to trick the eyes." Raven couldn't help but smile as she scanned the sky, expecting to see others of her race suddenly appear on the horizon. She knew her parents better than to just let her go. Of course they would send someone to look for her. She knew if they found her, the safety of her new friends would be jeopardized. Knowing her people, Raven feared for their lives.

Not only was her home secreted within the Ferryl Mountains, but trespassers often vanished, never to be seen again. Some of the things her father had accumulated over the years were no doubt taken from those who found themselves caught within the boundaries of the Karritch.

Nervously, Raven watched the sky through a cluster of bushes as the others crouched in silence, watching her and listening. Slowly, she looked back at them, spotting one of her crystals over Artemis's left shoulder. This gave her an idea.

"Follow me," she whispered as she stood and crept towards the beautiful crystal treasure. Retrieving her bag, she picked it up and placed it carefully into the sack, then headed silently into the forest in the direction of the next crystal. Slowly, she led the others into the shadows of Edgewood with caution, mindful of where the trail of crystals was leading them.

As the bag filled up, she stopped, noticing the first of the thick strands of ghost-like webbing, stretched between a number of trees, some trailing in a faint breeze. They had arrived at the border of the lair. She still felt a little sick, but not

like before. Turning to her companions, she held a hand up as they drew weapons.

"Wait here. I'm going to try and charm it again. I have an idea." Krisha grabbed her arm as Raven turned away, stopping her.

"What are you going to do?" Raven turned back and looked up at Krisha, who instantly let go her arm.

"You saved my life. I'm returning the favor." Artemis glanced back over his shoulder as Ogrin looked to Raven, seemingly happy to be there. Krisha looked thoroughly confused.

"What do you mean? Are we in danger here if we are caught by your people? This is not Karritch territory is it?" Raven shook her head.

"No," she whispered, drawing close to Krisha. "If they find me, they will most likely kill all of you." Krisha's eyes widened in disbelief.

"So, what are you going to do?" Krisha's question provoked a cynical chuckled from Raven.

"Throw them off my trail. Now wait here while I go give my eight-legged friend a big hug – well, unless it gives me a kiss first. If I don't make it, leave . . . forget me. No matter what happens, my plan will work out the same, fail or succeed. I now know what friends do for each other; you all showed me that." At her words, Raven felt a strange and pleasant feeling well up within her chest. Krisha instantly threw both arms around her, hugging her tight.

"That's what we do for each other. Please, please be careful." As the two parted, Ogrin gave Krisha a look, as if agreeing. Artemis threw her a slight smile, but Raven noticed he was tense. He didn't say anything; just looked into her eyes deeply, like he had before. Again, she felt as though he held her with his eyes. After a few moments, he blinked and shook his head.

"Keep one eye on the ground, and one in the trees and you will be okay. Hurry back to us." Raven nodded, turned and crept into the spider's lair, carefully avoiding contact with the thick webbing that steadily became more common as she picked her way past the first cocooned victim.

Disgusted by the growing stench of the corpses steadily dotting the thick woods before her, she kept on, ignoring a rising fear in her heart. Artemis's last words hung in her mind. With growing apprehension, Raven kept a vigilant eye out all around her, especially up into the trees, where shadowy hollows proved excellent places for the spider to lie in wait for those unlucky enough to pass beneath.

Slowly, Raven passed through the trees, making her way into the center of the lair as she avoided contact with the shredded tapestries of white which seemed to reach down, threatening death's kiss upon her. Paying close attention to the areas above, Raven soon caught sight of the spider before it noticed her presence. As she spotted it sitting in the hollow of a perch above, she began to tremble. Her plan was simple: Spellbind the beast and have it cocoon her within a tight weave of its webbing, making sure it left the feather of her wings protruding from the cocoon. Yes that would do nicely.

"Of course, Raven whispered, "I won't be in the webs. I'll be on my way with my companions, safe and forgotten. This will leave a dead end for my trackers." Looking back the way she had come, Raven grit her teeth nervously and wrapped her arms about herself as if she was suddenly cold. The wound of the spider's bite hurt and throbbed in unison with the beat of her heart, but not like before. The bread Artemis had given her had something in it; something more than wholesome. Eating it had taken away the dizziness and settled her stomach.

The sudden shift of the great spider startled Raven. She stepped back involuntarily before she realized she had even moved. Her foot brushed up against a single span of web, causing the spider to tense. A whispering began to instantly fill the air as the spider spread its legs out, gripping a number of thick branches. It's posture preceded a lung, that she knew.

Raven froze, eyeing the massive arachnid in fear, waiting for an attack that did not come. Slowly she looked down to see the back of her heel adhered to a single strand of thick webbing. The spider knew very well the exact location of the

spot she stood in. Raising her hands, Raven began casting, but stopped as a voice broke through the trees behind her.

"Come away from the area Raven. This place is death." Her blood chilled as she looked back to see a familiar face.

"Krane," she whispered, suddenly afraid. "How did you find me?" The stern-faced Karritch Gleighdor carefully picked his way through the webs, making his way to where she stood. Raven knew she was in trouble, and not just with her parents. As Krane stopped, not two strides from her, she turned her attention back to the spider, hearing that whispering intensify. Krane seemed oblivious to it, yet she had to be sure.

"Do you hear that noise?" Krane looked at her, suddenly agitated.

"I knew there was always something wrong with you. You, with your inflated imagination and lies. Don't mess with me! I know what danger lurks in this place. You, Raven, are caught between two – it and myself!" Krane growled in sudden anger, moved in on her and struck her sharply across the face, knocking her to the ground. Raven's head instantly spun from the impact.

Krane's ignorance and pride abruptly threw them into events which proceeded in a blur of violence as the spider leapt down to engage Krane. Yet Krane was not one to be taken without a fight, and the massive arachnid, which at first had the advantage, was soon fighting against an equal.

Scrambling out from under the thorax of the great spider, Raven leapt to her feet and ran, quickly distancing herself from the fray as a fight to the death raged on behind. Even though she did not wish Krane to win, she didn't wish him to lose either, suspecting her spell might not work on the now enraged and wounded spider. Not knowing what else to do, she fled back toward friends with all the speed her legs could muster.

As Raven ran back, she heard Krane cry out in agony, which spurred her on in great fear and panic. Her studies had educated her enough to know that insects of this size needed to feed often. Even spiders which normally could go without

feeding for long periods of time were different than those of the giant breeds.

As she fled the scene, Raven looked back, terrified she would see it leaping and bounding along after her. The sounds of the fight had faded away as she made her way back. She wasn't sure if it was over, or if the forest's density had muffled the sounds of the fight. One thing she did know; she needed her companions now. Her plan had failed, well, maybe. If Krane was dead, and if he had come alone, she would be free.

"No Raven," she began to argue, "they would send more to see why Krane never returned." She had no love for Krane. He had always been extremely heavy handed with everyone. She feared and hated him more than her thieving parents. If the spider got him, it would not thwart her plan, it would help.

Halfway back, Raven was startled to hear something coming up behind her, crashing recklessly through the forest. Quickly, she hid herself between two trees and waited, her heart pumping so hard, she knew it would give her away. Exerting all her effects to calm down, she peeked back the way she had come, waiting and watching, her anxiety relentlessly torturing her. To her disappointment and relief, Krane stumbled back through the underbrush into view and fell to his hands and knees a short distance from where she hid, panting hard, his breathing coming in irregular gasps. He must have been bitten. Still, no matter what happened to him, she dared not show herself.

"I don't want to go back," she darkly whispered to herself as she raised a hand to a bruise that throbbed to the beating of her heart. "I won't be beaten and caged like a criminal." If she went back, no doubt, more of the same treatment would be in store for her, and by more than just Krane and her father.

She saw Krane collapse. Good, she could get away from him now. Carefully, she backed away from the trees and turned to leave, until a whispering from behind stopped Raven dead in her tracks. She turned to see Krane attempt to stand and fail. With eyes widened in apprehension, she spotted the great spider racing toward Krane, leaping over a fallen tree and landing before him, its two

front legs raising up. She knew it was going to finish him, and he deserved it. Today was not the only time he had struck her. He was mean, ruthless and deserved to be abandoned.

Then an idea came to mind.

Growling in frustration, she recalled the kindness of her three friends; total strangers who had befriended and taken her in. Their kindness had brought to life something within her, something she wanted now more than anything. To let Krane die would jeopardize her freedom, as much as she hated to admit it.

"Fine!" She yelled at no one in particular, "but he doesn't deserve this!" Leaping out from where she hid, she cast the spell of charming, fearing it might not work, then waited, her heart pounding in her chest so hard she became light headed.

Within a moment's time, the whispering ceased, but the spider's intentions were yet bent upon Krane, who had wounded it several times. As Krane manage to roll away from its attack, Raven ran between the two, faced the massive spider, and held up both hands.

"Stop, stop! Go, go!" she yelled at the spider, half expecting it to attack her. To her relief, it did as she commanded and stalked back towards its lair whispering what Raven thought to be curses and death-threats against Krane.

When they were alone, Raven looked down at Krane, who had managed to get himself into kneeling position, a look of disbelief etched across his weathered face. Through his gasps, he managed to speak.

"I . . . don't believe it! Thank . . . you." Raven suddenly felt confidence well up within her. Taking a deep breath, she let it out as she knelt down beside Krane, studying him.

"You owe me, Krane. You owe me." Looking at her for a moment, he choked, as if he were about to pass out. Nodding, he rested himself down by a nearby tree with Raven's assistance. Sighing, he relaxed as best he could and nodded, grimacing in pain.

"I . . . owe . . . you," he whispered with great effort. To hear him say that caused Raven's heart to leapt with excitement. He had admitted it! Now she could be free! After a few moments, Raven became nervous. That feeling again beginning to urge her to leave the area. She assumed it meant the spell was wearing off, which meant the spider would no doubt return. Looking at Krane, she bit her lip.

"Krane, my spell won't hold the spider for long. As it departed, it vowed to return and kill you. It will come back for you, and soon." Krane let out a quivering sigh and tried to stand. Halfway up, he faltered, dropping to his hands and knees.

"Poison," he whispered through clenched teeth, and tried again to stand. Raven quickly grabbed his hand and pulled Krane's arm over her shoulder, supporting him as best she could. It was enough, and soon they began to make their way back toward the edge of the forest, the right side of her face throbbing more and more. It didn't matter now, not anymore. Krane owed her, and she would have gladly traded a dozen such strikes for the debt she would now collect from him.

"Do you need some assistance?" Artemis called out as he stepped into view from behind a Thornberry bush. Raven stopped and gladly lowered Krane to the ground. He was heavy. Though she hadn't complained, Raven had been about to collapse under his increasing weight. As she made him comfortable, and not out of any love for the man, Raven noticed Krane's hand weakly slide to the hilt of the dagger at his side.

"No Krane, these are my friends. You need not fear them, and you need help," she whispered. Rising up, she turned to Artemis.

"He's been poisoned . . . same spider," she stated, that feeling of impending danger tightening up her insides again. Glancing over her shoulder, she shivered.

"We need to move out of the forest. It's coming back. It's wounded and angry. The duration of my spell wore off quickly this time, and I fear it will not work again. Wounded rage has a impact upon insects that quickly makes them

immune to spells meant to control them.” Artemis jumped to the other side of Krane as Raven quickly pulled Krane's arm over her shoulder again. This time the going was easier and more swift, and they reached the open sea of grass that bordered Edgewood.

Not long after entering the knee-deep lush grasses, Ogrin had a fire burning high once again. Not long after the first fire was built, two more burned high, set in a triangular pattern and spaced apart far enough to allow warmth at all angles. Ogrin pointed to the center of the three fires.

"Bugs hate fire. If the big bug comes out, it will not be able to bite us. It will get burned." Krisha moved into the center.

"Very comfortable arrangements, Ogrin. Thank you." The Dwarf blushed as he headed for Edgewood alone, waving her away.

"Og wants his friends to be safe from the bugs. Og will get more wood now." Ogrin mumbled something else as he pulled the battle hammer from its resting place and twirled it. Raven caught part of his muttering and shook her head.

Artemis helped Krane to the center of the fire triangle and left him with Krisha, who was pulling out the cooking gear, readying the camp. Raven watched Ogrin, confused. She respected Ogrin's bravery, but -

"How are you holding out, Raven?" Startled by Artemis's approach, she abruptly turned on him, then relaxed.

"Oh, hello Artemis, you startled me. I'm doing okay." She lowered her voice and hugged herself, feeling exposed and vulnerable. "Krane needs to leave. I don't like him – I don't trust him." Nodding, Artemis glanced at Krane, who was talking to Krisha in low tones as she mixed water into a powder. Though haggard and pale, Krane seemed interested in what she was cooking.

"We'll send him on his way soon. Raven, acts of kindness, even to an enemy, makes things better. It has for me, and I promise it will for you. Try it, you can be surprised at outcomes unlooked for." Raven smiled and looked to see

where Ogrin was.

"Why isn't Krane comatose? He should not be conscious," Artemis said, as if talking to himself. "It is obvious he is strong and durable, weathered." Raven snorted quietly, throwing him a look filled with less than compassion.

"I heard Ogrin say he wished the spider would attack him. I don't think Ogrin can defeat it." Artemis chuckled.

"You've never seen him in battle. So far, he's been unstoppable." Raven looked surprised.

"He's not very big." Artemis countered her statement.

"He's not very bright, and doesn't know when to stop." Raven snickered.

"I like him very much. He makes me laugh." Artemis looked to the forest.

"He is funny at times. He's also a chore to manage. Luckily we have Krisha. She seems to have charmed him."

"I can see why. She's beautiful, loving, kind," Raven whispered, keeping her voice down. They chatted, making small talk as Krisha fried up a pan full of bread sticks. Raven enjoyed the small talk, which put her at ease. As they walked about the fires, staying easily within a stone's throw, Ogrin came away from the edge of the trees laden with an armload of wood several times, piling it up within the triangle of fires. The feeling of danger subsided more and more each time he returned to the border of the trees for more.

The day stretched on into sunset. One by one the stars began to appear in the firmament, eventually filling the sky with a mass of sparkling wonder. The moon began to rise above the tree line as Ogrin settled in near where Krisha was cooking up a heap of bread sticks, and other various foods.

Finally, Artemis led Raven back into camp, where Krisha and Ogrin were eating. Krane had fallen into an uneasy sleep as beads of perspiration trickled down his face. He did not look so good. As she followed, Raven saw Artemis pick out a large bread stick from the pan. Kneeling by Krane, he shook him awake, which took some doing.

"Here, eat this. It has an ingredient that will counteract most of the poison effects." Krane sat up with difficulty, took the bread and looked at it. Holding it to his nose, he sniffed it, causing Ogrin to snort loudly.

"If it is poisoned, remember I could have bashed you when you were asleep. Eat it birdman!" Krane shot Ogrin a glowering look. Ogrin grinned as he chewed his dinner loudly. To Raven's surprise, Krane chuckled and relaxed as best he could.

"That . . . you could have . . . friend," he managed to reply through clenched teeth. Ogrin nodded in total agreement, then looked up at Krisha.

"See, Og can make new friends. Og knows how." Krisha, reached over and patted Ogrin on the top of the head, but said nothing.

Krane took a bite, and then quickly devoured the entire bread stick. As he chewed, he glanced over at the pile of food, obviously craving more. When he swallowed, he glanced up at Artemis.

"Thank you . . . thank you," he forced himself to say. Krane's words threw Raven completely off guard. She had never heard Krane say anything with any hint of courtesy prior to this evening. Maybe the spider's venom had not yet released his senses. Krane must have discerned her expression, for he gave her a knowing look, then coughed. Krisha handed him another bread stick, then some water.

After all had finished their dinner, and after a short rest, Krane watched Krisha with a rare look of admiration as he accepted another bread stick.

"You follow the path of Ump." Krisha shook her head and motioned to Artemis, giving him the rightful credit. Krane's eyebrows raised. "I am indeed surprised that you, of all creatures, would enjoy cooking, seeming it is more in your interest to drink the -"

"Krane, what is your city like?" Artemis quickly interjected, cutting him off before he could finish his sentence. Krane stared blankly at Artemis for a moment, before accepting two more Ump's Delight from Krisha. Raven noticed the color in

his face was returning, and rather quickly. His shoulders no longer slumped.

Raven felt rather nervous to see Krane's strength returning. Would he keep his word, or would he use Artemis to be healed and then betray his promise? She didn't trust Krane in the least. She hoped he was the type that followed some form of honor. The thought crossed her mind to kill him now, while she still had the chance. No, not that. Never had she crossed that line, and she was not about to do such an act now, especially in front of her friends. Hope filled her . . . hope to be set free.

As she came out of her thoughts, she found Krane staring at her, and feared he had read her facial expressions. After catching his eye, she stared back at him, unwilling to look away. If she was strong enough to be independent and go off on her own, and yet could not hold his stare - a simple thing really, yet not so easy - he might judge her incapable of being free. Then, a thought occurred to her.

"It bit me too, Krane. Tied me up." Krane raised an eyebrow.

"And these three rescued you?" Raven shook her head, despising their social intercourse.

"No, I escaped its webbing and rode it back out here to meet them, as planned." Krane looked over at Artemis, who had just settled down comfortably by the fire closest to the forest's edge. Artemis soberly nodded and began eating something. Ogrin noisily puffed up, pride filling his face, and rested a hand on the shaft of his battle hammer. The commotion he made drew Krane's attention. In a deep voice, the Dwarf spoke.

"Og saw his friend riding the giant bug. Og would have smashed it, but Og's friend wanted to ride it." Krisha placed a hand over her mouth and pretended to cough as her eyes lit up with amusement. Krane frowned and looked at the steaming hot bread stick he held in his fingers.

Ogrin nodded once, arose and stalked over to the woodpile and began stoking up each fire with fresh wood. Artemis arose and began mixing up more dough-batter to make more food as Krisha refilled Krane's mug, this time with

some light ale. She glanced at Raven, who was still watching Krane without blinking. Biting her lower lip, Raven continued their discussion.

"I have to tell you something Krane." Krane waited for her to continue as he sipped the contents of his mug. Pleased with the taste, he drank half of it in one breath. After wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve, he looked at Raven.

"What." Raven motioned to Artemis, drawing Krane's attention to him.

"He is a healer. If you know anything about the healing path, then you will know he never takes another by force. When I awoke from nearly freezing to death, I could have simply departed. I chose to stay with them." The look on Krane's face was that of surprise. He looked at Artemis for a few moments, then quickly finished the contents of his mug and laid down for the night, his back turned to her. She watched him anxiously for nearly an hour before Krane spoke again . . . quietly . . . resolutely . . . one last time.

"Good night little crow. You are out of the nest." His words almost made Raven leap for joy, but she held her excitement inside, barely. She caught a secret wink from Artemis and grinned ear to ear at him. Quickly he picked up the largest bread stick and tossed it to her. Snatching it out of the air, Raven began nibbling on it, her mind reeling with excitement.

Raven could not find sleep that night. Artemis settled down beside her all night, making her feel safe.

After Krane had taken to the sky, Raven turned and beamed a smile at the three. Krisha returned her happiness with a quick grin as Ogrin grunted and began packing things up. Artemis watched Krane vanish on the horizon, then turned his attention to Raven.

"Well played Raven. You have wisdom in the affairs of your people. You should be an ambassador. I'm sure your people would benefit from you."

"Thank you," she replied with a grin. "Thank you all for-" She stopped, not knowing what else to say. Krisha walked up and threw her arms about Raven's neck.

"I'm glad you are going with us." Artemis walked over, waving Ogrin to join them.

"Indeed, we need you specifically, Raven. It seems you have skills that are invaluable for what Krisha, Ogrin and I do." As the three formed a circle, they sat down facing each other, all eyes remaining on Artemis, who continued. "I know of an ancient structure, one that we will pass not far from our path as we travel into the center of Edgewood. It may be full of traps and other dangers, but then it may not. I would like to explore it on our way. It would not take long, and we are not on a rushed schedule. What do you think?" he asked. Og instantly brightened up.

Og wants to go into it!" He nearly bellowed. Artemis looked at Krisha and Raven. Krisha shrugged.

"I would go if you wish, though I do not like closed in places. Raven become instantly curious.

What do you need me for?" Artemis answered her as if expecting the question.

"The Karritch Gleighdor are naturally stealthy and have skills which prove useful. Should we need to avoid the snares and pitfalls, which the long since inhabitants of this sunken structure might have left behind, you would be invaluable. I believe it to be the entrance chamber to a sunken city, lost and buried

in the passing of centuries.”

"Who lived there?" Ogrin asked with a glance to the forest. "What happened to them, the spider?" As Artemis continued talking, Raven watched him, recalling him cutting off Krane in mid-sentence the night before. Krane was driving at a point; almost as if attempting to reveal something about him. What was it? Shrugging at Ogrin, Artemis shook his head.

"And so, I don't know, Ogrin. I would like to find the answers to your questions myself." He looked at Krisha. "It could be dangerous. You do not have to go in if you feel uncomfortable." Krisha sighed, averting her eyes from his.

"I would be very reluctant to have my friends go in, and I not support them. No, I'll go in with you. Count me in." Raven bit her lip, relieved. Ogrin's posture reminded Raven of a wolf about to pounce on something. Artemis stood and clasped his hands together.

"Okay, I'll take us there, but we need not take any unnecessary chances. We can leave at any time. My main concern is to keep us safe. Ogrin, is everything ready for travel?" The Dwarf shook his head, jumped up and retreated quickly to his half-full pack. Excited, he quickly began gathering up everything. Krisha stood and helped Raven to her feet.

"I'm going to help him pack." Smiling, Krisha gripped her hands tight, then let go. Raven watched her walk over to Ogrin, then turned her attention to Artemis, who was eyeing them and quietly chuckling. His face was perfectly sculpted, and his mouth – with great effort, she looked away. She feared he might catch her staring.

He was different, that much was obvious. Last night, Artemis cut Krane off in mid sentence, changing the subject. She could not stop thinking about it. Another thing began to gnaw at her. Artemis not only attracted her attention, but his very presence seemed to challenge her will to keep her thoughts private. Even now, Raven wanted to confess everything to him in hopes of gaining his favor. It was ludicrous. No, she would keep her musings to herself. As he turned and

looked at her, to her mortification, she heard herself say.

"Artemis, what is it with you?" At her words, Raven felt the blood rush from her face as she paled. "Why did I say that?" She silently chided herself, mortified.

"What do you mean, Raven?" He stated curiously, a slight smile playing across his lips.

"I - I didn't mean . . . I shouldn't have said that," she stammered. "Forgive me." He shook his head

"It's okay. I'm used to it." Raven could not believe herself. She just gave a whole new meaning to letting the cat out of the bag. She silently chided herself for being a fool. But what was said, was said. There was no going back now. Now he was staring at her, making her pale even more. Clearing her throat, she pointed into the forest in the attempt to change the subject.

"We should get going, Artemis," she stated matter-of-fact, pretending to scan the forest's edge.

"Do not make yourself uneasy, Raven. What's on your mind?" Reluctantly, she faced him, though she refused to look up at him. At least she could keep that much of her will power to herself.

"Artemis, Krane made reference to something about you last night, when you cut him off. What was he talking about?" Raising an eyebrow, Artemis nodded.

"Og is ready to go!" The Dwarf stated resolutely. Raven glanced over at him as Artemis offered an arm to her. She took it as the Dwarf and Krisha began leading them up to the border of the trees. As they entered the forest, Artemis spoke to Raven in a lowered voice.

"Caught that, did you?" Raven nodded, still refusing to look at him.

"Yes. What was that all about?" Artemis sighed.

"Well, we are a team, and a team does not deceive, nor lie to each other. I am Ardenoth," he stated casually, and then said nothing more as he waited for a reply.

"Is that your race . . . what you are?" Nodding, he placed his other hand over Raven's, supporting her as she lost control of her footing for a moment. She was so distracted. She needed to pay attention to where she was walking.

"Yes, there are many who shun my kind as much as Sand Vipers. Raven, what do you know of monsters?" She threw him a confused glance.

"Monsters?" She had no clue as to why he was changing the subject. "Why would people shun your kind, and why do you speak of monsters?" Smiling, he stopped, letting the other two put a little distance between he and Raven before continuing.

"You know, like zombies and ghouls, witches and evil warlocks. That sort of thing." Shrugging, Raven thought of some of the tales she'd heard growing up.

"Well, I know a legend about a man who was bitten by a wolf-like creature and became a wolf-like creature himself, but I don't know if that's true. It was just a fascinating story I heard growing up." Artemis laughed softly.

"The story you heard is true." A chill cascaded down the sides of Raven's face at his words. Looking behind, she pressed up against Artemis and tucked her wings in tight, but to no great comfort. Artemis continued.

"There are large bats that can spread that very disease. I've seen a few things in my travels, and I will be the first to admit, there are many things I am ignorant of." The chill she felt spread to her brow. Looking up at him, Raven shook her head, then nervously glanced out into the shadows of the forest.

"Artemis, why are we talking about monsters, here, in this place? It's giving me the creeps." Sighing, Artemis took her by the shoulders, gently turning her to face him.

"Raven, I'm a Blood-Born Vampire." Despair began to grip her as he spoke.

"Artemis, I -" she began to plead, but he gently cut her off, smiling down at her.

"I'm not bitten and infected, like the monsters we've been speaking of. I'm not the kind which insatiably crave the blood of the living, and drink it to satisfy

some unimaginable thirst. I am what I am from my mother's womb . . . from my birth, Raven." Artemis waited for her reaction. Even though she did not understand everything he was telling her, it instantly made sense why she had been so attracted to him. He didn't seem threatening at all. In fact, he was quite the opposite.

"Oh," was all she could manage to say. He chuckled, smiling down at her affectionately. Turning, he resumed walking behind Krisha and Ogrin. Catching up to him, she motioned ahead of them.

"Are they vampire as well?"

"No, one is Human, one is Kithrin Dwarf. You are Karritch Gleighdor. I am Ardenoth. We are all very much different races, each of us, and are unlike the other three we travel with." After a few moments of silence, Artemis frankly stated, "Raven, please do not fear me because of what I am. I don't fear you. I don't fear Krisha, or Ogrin. What's the difference?" It made sense what he was saying. The feeling of despair slowly melted away into curiosity. She smiled, more to herself than at him. Slowly looking up at him, she threw him a look that made him chuckle.

"Alright, I trust you. You could have - well, that doesn't matter now does it?" Artemis shook his head and winked at her, causing her to blush and look away.

"No, if I wanted to, I could be traveling alone with a satisfied belly full of blood." Raven laughed aloud, catching a quick glance from the two up ahead. Stopping, they both turned and stared at Raven and her friendly Vampire. Cringing, she quieted.

"Sorry." Shrugging, Artemis waved for the two to continue on.

"It warms my heart to hear you laugh. Raven, you have an unconquerable spirit, and that is a rare quality among the races. Don't ever let another put out the flame of your spirit. It is worth more than all the gold in the world." Blushing, Raven dared not look at Artemis. Just hearing his words brought tears to her eyes.

She felt valued, lifted, and was suddenly overjoyed at crossing paths with this . . . monster.

Raven felt excited. A Vampire, a real Vampire, and he had no wish to drink her blood! In fact, he was quite the opposite of what the tales had always whispered. Nameless fears, people vanishing only to reappear as shells of their former selves. She almost laughed again as they picked carefully through the trees, Ogrin at Krisha's right, hand on the shaft of his battle hammer – her loyal protector, ready to shield her from all danger.

As they began to spot the first shreds of the great spider's webbing, Ogrin halted, peering anxiously into the shadows beyond.

"We have a choice," Artemis whispered, drawing their attention. "We can dispatch the spider, or move on and let it be." Turning to them, he waited for their vote in silence.

"Where we are headed, does the spider bar our path?" Krisha asked, her voice trembling slightly. It was obvious she did not like the thought of confronting it. Ogrin gave her a sympathetic glance, reached up and patted her arm in an attempt to comfort and reassure her. It seemed to help, until he opened his mouth.

"Og will avenge Krisha if the bug sucks her juices." Krisha shivered and threw Ogrin a rueful look, swallowing hard.

"Thank you so much Ogrin," she stated flatly, her voice quavering even more. Smiling grimly, Ogrin nodded, then looked at the ground, at Krisha, then back down at the ground.

"Og would have to be squished first, so he could not help." Raising a finger, his eyes glittered dark, burning with resolution. "Artemis would avenge us too." Glancing over at Raven, the Dwarf gave her a knowing look. "Bugs like her." Giving Ogrin a flat look, Artemis shook his head, then turned to Raven.

"There might be treasure on the victims within the spider's nest. It has been here for a long, long time, and I'm sure some of the victims were those from long ago who failed to pass through. One concern: This spider is old, very old. From

the size of it, it is no less than three hundred seasons. If we kill it, we would be ridding the forest of one of its natural inhabitants, and a rare one at that. I do not wish to undo centuries of life, no matter how foul I perceive it." At his words, Krishna perked up.

"It is a natural creature of this great forest. Maybe there is some other way?" Raven thought of the treasures which might lie within each cocoon upon the unfortunate. A greed she could not resist welled up within her. She didn't wish to openly contend with Krishna's decision, but . . .

"I can coax it away," she stated, sounding more confident than she felt. It was wounded, so she was not entirely sure. The three looked at her solemnly, but said nothing. "Really, there would be no danger at all. I can charm it, and you three take what you find out of the area. We can meet at a designated spot. I'm not sure how long the charm will hold, but I'm sure it would give you all enough time to get in, get the treasure, if there is any, and get out. We could meet at the forest's edge. We all know which way that is." She looked at each of them, Artemis last of all. After a moment of silence, she continued.

"If it remains in the area while you cut the cocoons open, each cut would send vibrations along the strands, giving your exact location away as every entangled prey does. If I charm it and remain in the area, while it is under my charm spell, it might become confused as I command it to ignore the very thing it instinctively reacts to. Thus, it must not remain in the area. I will take it away from here." Artemis looked on Raven with a sudden light in his eyes.

"Wise counsel, Raven," he stated thoughtfully. "Are you up to it? How are you feeling?" Raven shrugged.

"Yes, and better than when I left home." An uneasy feeling crept over her as the three spoke.

"I am going to go scout out the area a bit. You three, stay here." Without waiting for an answer, Artemis walked away, quickly vanishing into the thickness of the forest. Ogrin lowered his heavy pack to the ground with one arm and

readied his weapon.

After Artemis had gone, Krisha reached within a small pouch at her waist and pulled out a vial made of crystal, filled with yellowish-clear liquid. She handed it to Raven.

Here, keep this ready, just in case. Drink just a sip it if things go badly." Raven took the vial and raised it up, suddenly curious. Krisha pointed at it.

"Smell it. You'll see what it does, though the effects will only give you a mental image of it." Carefully, Raven unstopped the cork from the end of the vial. Instantly, a honey fragrance filled the air. The smell brought to her a vivid mental image of springtime in the Ferryl Gardens within the Ettenbow Valley. As usual, the garden was filled with swarming bees and butterflies in all their varieties and magnificent colors. She saw other flying insects, busy with their springtime labors. A vivid daydream of walking within the garden without a care in the world swept her into another daydream of equal delight.

"Raven, Raven." A hand rested gently upon her arm, bringing her slowly out of the beginning of a third, even more splendid half-dream. "Raven, put the cork back on the potion. Seal it up." Shaking her head, as if coming out of a sound sleep, she lazily complied. Once the vial was sealed, the fragrance was slowly overcome by the musky scent of the forest. Blinking, Raven shook her head in the attempt to get the effects out of her mind.

"What is this?" she asked in lazy wonder.

"Dreamscape. Drink it and you will be taken to your favorite place. Only take a sip, or you will be in danger of being locked in that place forever against your will, and your body will fade away forever. You will become a haunt within your dreams . . . dreams which will never give you the full pleasure of actually being there. Only a sip now, okay?" Nodding happily, Raven tucked the potion carefully away.

"What would be the purpose of using this potion, Krisha?"

"Raven, while you are in Dreamscape, you are safe from the physical world,

yet only for a time. Once you take a sip, close the potion and put it away quickly, lest you drop it." Raven looked at the vial in wonder.

"Thank you, but I doubt I will need such a thing. I hope I won't." Ogrin grunted, but said nothing. It was plainly written on his face that he cared little for such things.

"And where would you go, if you could slip away, Ogrin?" Raven inquired. The Dwarf adjusted his pack to lean against a tree without it falling over and walked away, calling back his answer.

"Kornwalch Pub," he grumped, then looked back, eyes brightening. His face then melted into a rather distressed look. "They threw Og out. Now Og drinks more water." He grimaced her way. "But Og picks up some strong spirits when he can." Raven laughed.

"Ogrin, how do you keep spirits?" Krisha covered her mouth, hiding sudden amusement.

"In my backpack. I have some," he proudly announced.

"Ogrin, you keep spirits in your backpack?" Raven gave him a pretended look of astonishment, then looked at Krisha. "Are you hearing this, Krisha?" She then quickly added, "That must be some backpack." Ogrin quickly shook his head.

"It is big enough, and Og carefully packs them down deep, so they don't break." Ogrin seemed proud of himself. "I check them every day." Raven pretended confusion, scratching her nose to hide a sudden smile.

"Does Artemis know you carry spirits in the bottom of your pack?" Ogrin shook his head.

"He would make Og pour them out," the Dwarf replied, looking around as if Artemis might return and hear him.

"I won't tell, Ogrin," she stated in all seriousness, causing Ogrin to sigh in relief.

"Good. Og likes you." Both girls looked at each other, smiling mischievously as Ogrin began exploring nearby.

"You know, Raven, once he catches on to you, he'll never believe anything you say. He's just that way." Raven nodded.

"I really like him. It's good to have him with us. If something happened, I'm sure we would be protected as well as any capable bodyguard could."

"This is true. But his rage is disturbing, Raven. Be aware of that. Once he begins, he can hardly be calmed down. Just don't get in his way if you see his eyes grow dark. When that happens, back off." Raven looked at Ogrin, who was softly calling for the spider to come out as if calling for a cat.

Artemis returned at dusk. Upon his arrival, he moved them out a stone's throw beyond the first shreds of webbing.

"We'll rest here. We have to be careful. There are other things on the prowl tonight. No fire, no talking, unless we whisper. Just rest while I keep watch." Artemis set his back against a large tree and looked up into the deep shadows in the bows above. Instantly he jumped up, catching the lowest branch and swung himself up. He then pointed.

"Up, up," he whispered. Ogrin opened the large backpack and pulled out some rope. Quickly he tied one end to the pack and put the other end in his mouth and began to ascend. Artemis handed Raven a bit of rope to do the same. Soon, Krisha and Raven were making their way up the branches. It was easy going for the others, but her wings were making it difficult to climb. Still, with some effort, she managed. After they were all up, Ogrin pulled the heavy pack up into the tree and secured it. Artemis helped Ogrin while the girls peered out from the shelter of their new campsite in silence. Krisha looked worried.

As they settled in, Artemis made a sleeping motion with his hands and pointed to them all. Cutting a few short lengths of rope, he secured each of them about the waist and tied the other end to the branch above them, whispering to each of them to be silent until he told them otherwise.

Raven blushed as Artemis tied the last rope about her waist. Artemis noticed

and raked his fingers through her hair and gave her a quick half-grin. His touch made her freeze in place. She looked up at him and forced a nervous smile. To her reaction, he held his hand up, showing her a twig he had removed from her hair. She nervously smiled and took the dead bracken.

"Thank you," she mouthed.

"You're welcome," he replied without sound. Throwing her a charming smile, he then made his way nimbly to the nearest empty branch below the three, where he began a silent watch. Raven observed him for a while, then made herself as comfortable as possible and laid her head down on crossed arms. Her thoughts turned to Allanna. She was real, Raven knew she was. But pursuing a dream . . . what would her friends think if she told them she knew her imaginary friend was a living person, and that they should help find her? No, there would be time to think of another plan later. Right now, she needed to let things be. She was tired and needed to sleep.

Raven dreamed her parents caught her in a net and dragged her back home. She kicked and screamed, defying them every step of the way. Once back in the house, her father beat her severely with a stick, then cruelly broke one of her wings. Pinning her head to the floor, he held down her head with one hand. She could see her window through flowing tears; a mockery of freedom.

"You will never go outside again until you can learn to behave!" he growled hatefully. Suddenly her hair was being cut off unevenly by her mother. She screamed and struggled in vain. Lifting his hand from her head, Raven's father punched her in the side of the head with all the force he could. Instantly, the room went dark.

Slowly opening her eyes, Raven wept in silence. Thinking back, she could not remember being more happy than being here with her friends. Sitting up, she put her back against the tree, carefully adjusting her wings on either side of the main trunk. Wiping her eyes dry, Raven fought back depression, then noticed Artemis watching her. She threw him a fragile smile, then averted her eyes, pretending to smooth the feathers of her left wing. She was grateful that hideous dream was over.

"Raven, how are you this morning?" She nearly fell out of the tree. She hadn't seen or heard him move over by her! Grabbing a branch in each hand, she looked down, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Fine, fine, thank you," she stated, her hands gripping tight. Artemis reached out and steadied her, then let go, throwing her a confident look.

"I didn't mean to startle you. My apologies." She didn't know what to say. As he looked at her, his expression became grave and serious.

"You know, you never have to go back. That part of your life is over." She slowly looked up at him, feeling devastated, yet filled with a sudden, growing hope. Timidly, she nodded.

"Thank you, sir," she whispered, then sniffed.

"You are most welcome. It's okay now. I know what it is you dreamed young lady. I must say, you have some legitimate fears. We are heading deep into Edgewood Forest; a place where your people very rarely travel. So, you should be safe . . . well, that is unless you fall victim to the predators which stalk this place." She didn't like the sound of that.

"You mean, like the spider?" Artemis nodded.

"Worse." Raven thought for a moment, imagining dragons and giants. She looked around, noticing Krisha and Ogrin still sleeping.

"Artemis, how do you see my dreams?" He settled down beside her.

"I am a Dreamweaver, among other skills. I want you to know, I do not meddle with the dreams of others, for the most part. But being here, in this place, I needed to know your fears. I need to know more about you." He looked about, scanning the area. "This place can be strange," he whispered. "It can play your fears and phobias against you. This is why I watched your nightmare. It is better that I know what you fear . . . I can help and support you better by knowing." The Vampire reached up and affectionately smoothed her hair back.

Balancing herself mentally, she rejected the urge to give in to him. She loved his attention. She was also very grateful not to have dreamt how much she liked him. Closing her eyes, Raven tilted her head to one side . . . then suddenly came to her senses with a start. He withdrew his touch and smiled, shaking his head.

"I have that effect on females. Raven, I have never taken advantage of anyone. I have . . . never . . ." He stopped in mid sentence, shook his head, then looked at Raven, smiling. "I hate to say it this way, it's so uncivilized and barbaric. I have never drank the blood of any person." Instantly becoming nervous, she took his hand in the hopes he would not stop talking to her. She loved the time he focused on her. It was new to her, and she craved it. He made her happy.

"Thank you sir." Gently tightening his grip on her hand, he squinted at her affectionately.

"You are quite welcome, miss." She could not help but grin. Somehow, he managed to lift her spirits, even within this closed and stuffy forest full of monsters.

"Wow, you really do have a way of capturing the senses. But, I want you to know, I am in control of my actions . . . and, Vampire or no, I will remain myself, sir," she awkwardly told him. Artemis's eyes widened in mild surprise.

"I hope so. I hope so." Raven bit her lip, feeling suddenly curious.

"I bet all the ladies just swoon over you," she whispered, a tinge of sarcasm laced into her voice. He shook his head.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes sir," she replied, not daring to deny him.

"How old are you? I'm not too familiar with the Gleighdor species, especially the Karritch breed."

"Well," she said, drawing out the word, "I am not yet sixteen. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," he replied, keeping his voice down. Reaching up, she hooked the left side of her hair and tucked it back behind her ear.

"Anything else you wish to know about me?" Nodding, Artemis glanced over at Krisha and Ogrin. Scanning the ground below them, he became quiet, intent on something. After a bit, he relaxed.

"Do you have siblings?"

"No, I am an only child."

"I see. So, then you are a one-of-a-kind."

"What do you mean by that?" she inquired. Artemis slowly cracked his knuckles.

"I have never, in all my life, met someone that could do what you do, and without proper and lengthy training. I just figured, well, if you had brothers or

sisters, they might be gifted like you. Raven, it is an extraordinary thing you did with that spider. You should not have been able to do it. Does that mean anything to you?" She thought about it.

"I didn't think of it that way, but you are right. What do you think it means?"

"That you have a gift. I dare surmise, Raven, you are gifted in other areas of your life as well. For instance, the feelings you received of impending danger. That is foresight; a strong instinct far less than few have." Raven recalled her years in Guild`House, and how she could evade Shaed, Professor Maven's Manitis familiar, and how Krane was so easy to navigate without drawing his attention. Ever since she could remember, Raven felt where to move, and when. She never really thought about it until this conversation.

"Thank you, sir. Question: Why are you giving me so much attention? Don't get me wrong, I like it, but I'm nothing special. Is it because I'm new and have wings, or do you need me for something special I can do?" Holding up a hand between them, Artemis stopped her.

"Are the Karritch naturally suspicious of everything?" Not waiting for an answer, Artemis sighed. "I just want to make sure you're alright."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

Yes, the Karritch are suspicious. I suspect everything and everyone all the time."

"I see. Do you think it is because of your upbringing? I would be, if . . . I should not speak to you in such a manner. Forgive me, please." Raven had never been apologized to. She had always been the one to beg forgiveness, even when she knew it wasn't her fault. His apology to her began to etch an affection in her heart for him. Still, she was not going to be controlled by his charms . . . even if she craved the feeling.

"No one has ever apologized to me before," she half stated to herself.

"Well," the Vampire whispered, "no one knew your value, until now."

For the next two hours, they both talked. He inquired about many things from her life. She told him everything he wanted to know. She loved the attention. She loved his mannerisms. She loved it when he took her by the hand when it became difficult to get through parts of her life. He made it worth telling. Little did she know it, but in those two hours her heart opened up to the idea that all people weren't selfish, which was something she had never before considered.

When Artemis descended the tree to make ready for the day, her chest felt hollow and empty, but only for a little while. She liked him very much. In all her life, she never thought a Vampire would take hold of her heart. She thought about it for a while, then realized it was, no doubt, the natural course of socializing with one of his race.

Such are the effects of the Ardenoth.

Krisha woke up before Ogrin. The Dwarf was sleeping with his back to the tree, facing her.

"Good morning Raven, good morning Artemis", she said, then yawned and stretched as best she could. "When will we be breaking camp?" Turning his attention to her, Artemis instantly took her in, harboring a look of total admiration, causing her to look away.

"In two hours." He looked at Raven, throwing her a smile. "Unless a dragon eats us." Krisha snickered.

"Have you ever seen a dragon?" Krisha pressed as she began to tend to her long hair. Both Raven and Artemis shook their heads.

"No, they stated in unison . . . then laughed. Artemis held up a finger.

"They do exist here, I've heard." Krisha grimaced.

"I hope we don't find out."

"I agree," he stated. Krisha carefully climbed down.

"Time for breakfast. Whose hungry?" Instantly, Ogrin sat forward, grasping a nearby branch.

"Og is!" He practically bellowed, then began lowering his pack to the ground with great eagerness, suddenly focused and overly enthusiastic. Once down, he planted his feet and looked up at Krisha.

"Og dreamed of eating dragon meat with giants. Og hopes not to see a dragon. Dragons are dangerous." He snorted rebelliously and placed a strong hand on head of his hammer, suddenly suspicious. Krisha approached the stout Dwarf and ruffled his thick, black hair.

"Ogrin, I hope we do not encounter a dragon either. I don't think it would go well for the beast." Obviously charmed, Ogrin grimaced fiercely, arm muscles bulging as he slipped into daydream, no doubt slaying the dragon and saving Krisha. He stood still as stone, breathing deeply again and again and again. Then, after the third time Krisha waved her hand over Ogrin's face, he started, quickly

drawing his battle hammer. Krisha retreated a step, just to be safe. She looked over at Artemis with a worried expression.

"Artemis . . . "

"I see, I see, Krisha. Just back away and let it play out." Krisha did as he suggested. Raven looked on from three branches up, noticing the Dwarf's eyes, which had shifted to solid black (a notable trait of all dwarven-kind).

Artemis jumped down, landing with precise agility and perfect grace. Looking over at Krisha, he tapped the temple of his head.

"Beware what thoughts you slip into his mind, especially when he is not fully awake. Ogrin is stout, swift to do battle. Especially when his intent is to save the one he has chosen to shield. I don't think he is fully awake yet. Just be clear of him until he comes out of it." Krisha shook her head.

"I'm sorry, it won't happen again." Artemis walked over beside Krisha, keeping an eye on the Dwarf.

"No harm done. Forget about it." Artemis gave her a look and a shrug.

"Dwarves really are amazing creatures. When I found him, he was in dire straights . . . cold, hungry, alone . . . desperate. His own people had shunned him. A very sad story, actually. He's been a benefit to us all. He's stout, quick to defend, comes our aid without fear, and is a superior bodyguard for you, Krisha." Krisha watched Ogrin in admiration.

"I do like him very much. Nothing would be the same without him," she stated sentimentally.

Soon, Ogrin's eyes cleared, and he slipped out of his daydream with a jerk. Krisha kneeled quickly and began pulling herbs and seasonings out from the pack as Artemis began to softly whistle a Dwarfven battle tune. Ogrin joined in, humming in his almost baritone voice.

Raven lowered her own pack to the ground. She then slipped from the tree, tucking in her wings in tight. Halfway into the fall, and just past the lowest hanging branch, she extended her wings, cupping them, lighting upon the forest

floor. It was a tricky maneuver, but she was always one to take such a challenge. Untying the knot, she removed the end from her pack and pulled the rope down off the branch. She then coiled it up, tied it with the two ends and handed it back to Artemis.

“Keep it,” he said. “It may come in handy.”

“Thank you sir,” she said, then placed it into her pack.

Ogrin looked about triumphantly for a while, until he spied a number of eggs being retrieved from Artemis's sack. Licking his lips hungrily, he quickly began the preparation for a small fire. Quickly and deftly, Ogrin worked his flint rocks. Within no time, small flames began to rise, aided by soft puffs of air, which he blew into the base of the fire. Raven was genuinely impressed. She made it a mental note to ask him to teach her to make a fire.

When the flames of the fire died down, leaving a bed of coals, Artemis surrendered some eggs over to Krisha, who had greased and placed her prized skillet over the coals. Once finished, she knelt down by the fire and looked at Ogrin, throwing him that grin.

"Good morning sir." Ogrin blushed and nodded.

"Pretty lady." Now it was Krisha's turn to blush. Placing a hand on his stout shoulder, she looked at the coals.

"I think this is the perfect fire, Ogrin. Thank you." she stated. Ogrin nodded in agreement.

"Eggs are good!" He loudly, abruptly professed, then stood and stalked back over to his pack and began meticulously sorting it out. Krisha placed the frying pan on the coals and watched him while the skillet warmed. Turning her attention to the fire, Krisha retrieved various types of herbs and spices from her pack and began cooking. Ogrin positioned himself on the opposite side of the fire, as he did every time she began cooking, watching on with a hungry eye, and also watching her back. He caught her attention and instantly grinned, his eyes shifting from her to the skillet, then back to her again.

"Og likes eggs," he exclaimed, "very much," he quickly added, licking his lips. Krisha laughed and began cracking all eight eggs into the skillet.

"Well Ogrin, you have come to the right place," she said, discarding the empty shells into the glowing bed of coals. "We aim to please our customers." Ogrin looked at her confused.

"What is customer?" Krisha smirked, leaned over the skillet and ruffled his hair playfully, but did not answer his question. The stout Dwarf didn't care, and watched the clear part of each egg turn milk-white as they hit the pan. Amused, Artemis looked over at Raven and raised his eyebrows a few times. She smiled back, then quickly began grooming her long black feathers, which always took a bit of time.

Ogrin abruptly let out a bellow, startling Raven greatly. Instantly she raised her wings and jumped, thrusting her wings down with all her might. In one motion she ascended up into the large tree she was under and caught the third branch up with one hand. Hanging by a single hand, her eyes darted about the area in search of an attacker. At the same time, Artemis jumped up, brandishing two daggers and cursing under his breath. Krisha quickly glanced behind, then back at Ogrin, who pointed at himself triumphantly.

"Og knows what customer is! He knows! Customer is one who pays for eggs!" Ogrin looked up at Krisha for approval, nodding and grinning at her with great enthusiasm. Krisha let out an exasperated breath and shook her head, then went back to cooking.

Artemis's daggers vanished. He glanced over at Raven, and missed her. It was a moment before he spotted her hanging by one hand in the tree. Not being able to keep it in, the Vampire burst out laughing. Krisha clasped a hand over her mouth, failing to hide a wide grin as Ogrin looked at each of them soberly and harrumphed', chiding them as he shook a very serious finger at the three.

"Og knows customer. It is Og . . . eating eggs with friends." Artemis walked over, directly under Raven and raised his arms.

"Let go, and I will catch you." Looking down at him, Raven smirked, thinking aloud.

"You think you are being helpful, do you?" She could make this jump without a problem. But as she looked down at Artemis, he raised his eyebrows twice at her. This was better than jumping. Nodding, Raven tucked her wings down tight against her sides. She looked on both sides to make sure her wings would not be injured when she let go the branch.

"Artemis, I trust you." He nodded and waited, his gaze fixed on her.

"I would never fail you, young lady." He was the only one who had ever called her a lady, and it flattered her thoroughly. Looking up at the branch she was hanging from, Raven slowly let go one finger at a time, ending with her pointing finger. She was drawing it out as long as she could. "He is gorgeous", she thought, just as she began to fall. She fell straight down. As she passed the lowest branch, she extended her wings out to each side, cupping them to catch as much air as possible. She extended her arms out to each side, making her an easy catch for him. As she finished the fall, and as he received her, she wished everything would slow down. She gripped his forearms as he caught her, breaking her fall, then slowly lowered her to the ground. She steadied herself and folded her wings back.

"That was a perfect fall, Raven. But I suppose you have had a lot of practice with landings." Raven's face felt warm. She then realized she was still holding his arms. She didn't want to let go. In fact, she wanted to kiss him. Slowly, she let go and composed herself.

"Thank you sir. You know, for a blood-sucking creature of the night, you are nice," she stated before thinking about it. Blushing heavily, she bit her lip and pulled her long, black, wavy hair back and out of her face. "I'm sorry," she whispered hoarsely, "I - I didn't mean anything by - "

"Raven, you are beautiful. I am truly blessed to have you here with me. Just be yourself . . . you are perfect the way you are. Never apologize to me for what

you say again. I love talking with you." He reached up a hand and smoothed back some hair she had missed. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head into his hand.

"But you have no wings," she jested, trying to break free of a feeling that began to take control of her senses; to drown her in him. She opened her eyes and glanced over at the other two. "I am only . . ." She trailed off, abandoning her thoughts. Turning back to Artemis, all she could do was shrug. Pulling her to him, the Vampire gave her a warm embrace, then released her, smiling. Turning to the fire, he sniffed.

"Shall we eat some food?" Raven smiled briefly.

"Sure, that would be great," she stated, feeling mentally off balance. Her head was starting to swim and her senses cloud up, as if she was suddenly in a thick fog. She touched the part of her hair where he had and smiled, thrilled by his attention. She realized there were too many thoughts buzzing around in her brain. Maybe she should focus on eating breakfast first. Then, when they camped tonight, maybe they could talk again.

Soon the plates were cleaned and put away. It seemed Artemis had whatever was needed. All anyone had to do was state a need, and he would open his sack and retrieve it. Raven became curious and approached the Vampire, who was putting away the last of the utensils. As she came up, he looked up, throwing her a short grin. Raven pointed at his sack.

"How do you carry plates in your sack without breaking them?" Artemis's smile broadened.

"Now, that would be nigh impossible. I'll tell you by asking you a question." Raven nodded.

"Okay, sure."

"Raven, how did you control the spider?"

"Magic," she replied, then looked at the sack, wonder and delight dawning within her mind. "So, that is a magic sack?" He nodded.

"Yes it is. I found it a long time ago in a treasure shop. It cost too much, but

I needed it badly. Would you like to take a look inside?"

"Sure!" she said without hesitation, and with all enthusiasm. He positioned the sack to give her the best view as she looked into it. What she saw within baffled and excited her incredibly. Inside were ropes, boards, rations, kegs, and a myriad of items, all small . . . toy-like.

"Toys?" Artemis shook his head.

"Not toys. Reach in a hand and focus your mind on what you want from within. Go ahead." Raven excitedly reached in and thought of a hand-held mirror. As she did, something touched her palm. Slowly, she wrapped her fingers about it and pulled her hand out. In wonder, she gazed at a small mirror. She chuckled.

"Wow, I like your sack very much."

"Very handy," he replied. "Now, just drop the mirror back into the sack." Raven let go the mirror, then looked in to see it back down amidst the other toy-like items.

"Thank you," she said in wonder. Artemis seemed amused at the look on her face.

"You are very welcome. Maybe, with a great deal of luck, we can get you one." Pointing at her wings, he nodded. "It would keep your flying light." She nodded absently, still gazing into the enchanted sack. Everything seemed so unreal, as if she were looking at mere childrens' toys.

"Artemis, I want one of these." He laughed, knelt down beside her, and whispered.

"If I die, you can have mine, okay?" Nodding, she agreed, then suddenly shook her head, looking up at him.

"Then it will never be mine. Don't say such things. This sack will never be mine, ever." Artemis's eye flashed silver for a moment.

"I hope not," he resolutely stated. "I hope not." She stood, giving him a disturbed look, turned and walked back over to her pack.

"Raven, put your things with mine, if you like." She gladly accepted the

invitation.

After breakfast they continued deeper into the woods, Artemis leading the way. Of all that happened in the last few days, Raven felt content . . . happy to travel with friends which had not tried to take what was hers. This was new, and it felt right.

Leading the way, Artemis took them deeper into Edgewood Forest. Like a hound trailing a familiar scent, he seemed to know the way. At times he would stop to study their surroundings, bending low and scanning the ground in front of him. Raven kept her wings tucked in close, determined to keep her feathers. These dense woodlands were fast becoming her nemesis. She felt caged, shut in. If she had to escape a monster, she would be at its mercy, like a pigeon in a thicket. After a short while, she growled.

"Drat this place. I'm going to lose every beautiful feather . . . then half my hair."

"Stop," Artemis stated, turning around. "Raven, stay where you are." Breaking the branch poking her right wing, she began working her hair loose from a tree that did not wish to give it up.

"Okay. I don't think I can go too fast here, uhh!" She cringed at a number of hairs which remained fixed into the rugged bark as she freed herself. Krisha glanced back and winced empathetically. Ogrin pulled two daggers as he turned on her. For a moment, she froze as he stalked back to her.

"Ogrin will clear the drats pretty bird girl." Then the Dwarf averted his eyes and began scanning the immediate area torturing her.

"Thank you Ogrin," she stated nervously as he began slashing down branches all about her. Within a short time Artemis was doing the same. Together, the two cleared a patch of ground about her that allowed her to relax.

"I'll take it from here, Ogrin. Thank you for your help." The stout Dwarf sheathed his daggers and stalked back to Krisha, who beamed a smile at him.

"Hrmp," Ogrin softly snorted as he fell in beside her. He then proceeded to keep a vigilant lookout. Artemis helped Raven by gently working twigs and leaves out of her hair. Catching her eye, he smiled.

"Are you flirting with me, sir?" Artemis laughed quietly.

"What if I was?" Raven reached up and removed a twig out of his collar-

length, black hair.

"I don't know. I guess you would be."

"Would my actions be unwelcome to you?" Suddenly terrified, she looked up at him, her eyes widening. Slowly, Raven shook her head.

"No," she whispered.

"Then, yes, I am flirting with you," he quietly stated. "Raven, this is not the place for you, yet this is our road." She nodded, her senses starting to relax.

"I'd do this again to have you . . . grr, I mean . . . thank you." She shook her head. "You know, you have a way of making me crazy," she whispered, then began picking lichen from her hair. "Is it your race that causes me to crave your touch so intensely?" Quickly, she interjected. "If you don't mind me asking - ouch!"

"My apologies, Raven," he whispered sympathetically. "To answer your question, Yes, it is the nature of my race."

"Interesting." Artemis shook his head slightly, removing more bracken from Raven's hair. She kept looking at him objectively, controlling the growing urge to kiss him.

"Can you shut it off?" He shook his head.

"The only way to do that is to make you afraid of me. I won't do that to a friend." She frowned.

"Is that what I am -- a friend?" She bit her lip, regretting her last words. This kept happening and she was beginning to get annoyed. "Don't answer that. It was a comment that escaped my mouth because of you and your girly', summoning, charmie' thing." Artemis abruptly burst out laughing, then continued in a whisper.

"Raven, do you realize how young you are, compared to me?" Raven shrugged.

"So? I would have been married off to someone my father knows, had I remained at home. It would have been on my seventeenth birthday . . . a little over

a year from now. That is the custom of my people." Artemis frowned. "And," she emphasized, "this man would have been like my father. You know what they say?" Artemis smiled at her, admiration etched into his face.

"What do they say?"

"Birds of a feather, flock together. I know my father's so called friends. They are mean. Truthfully, I'd rather be married to a blood-sucking vampire, than anyone I know. Man, there I go again. I'm going to get used to you, vampire boy." Artemis began working on the top of her hair, being more careful. She looked at him, unblinking for some time.

"What," he whispered as he cleaned her hair.

"Putting aside the feelings you assault me with, you are a gentleman. Will you show me your fangs?" Artemis's eyes widened in disbelief.

"In all my many years, I have never met anyone as tenacious as you. Sure, I'll show you my fangs." Raven grinned.

"Just don't bite me more than twice." He rolled his eyes, then open his mouth, bearing his teeth. There were no fangs. Raven moved closer and peered up into his mouth. "I don't see any - oh, there they are. They just grew, wow, that's incredible." She reached up. "May I?" Still working forest debris out of her hair, he nodded slightly.

"Do not cut yourself on them. If you do, you will regret it. Be careful, please." Raven nodded and touched a fang.

"You are so beautiful," she whispered. Artemis gave her an odd look, then shook his head.

"Thank you young lady. Eventually, we are going to get to a city. When we do, will you grace me with a night on the town?"

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"Of course I am. Raven, does your race have this innate ability to make men crazy and off balance?" Smirking, Raven nodded.

"I sure hope so." She placed a hand on his cheek. "I want to say I love you,

but I know its just that racial thing you do that tempts me to surrender." She poked him in the chest and hardened her demeanor.

"I don't love you. I really don't know you. So, let's just wait until the city and we'll go from there. I insist." Artemis's eyes brightened, a look of wonder filling his countenance. He nodded.

"Please, and thank you."

"Your welcome sir."

Soon, the many pieces of the forest which had been invading her entire soul was back where it was supposed to be. Artemis pulled the magical sack from his belt and opened it.

"Raven, how would you like to slip into my Storing Sack? Inside there is ample room for you to stretch out your wings." She felt suddenly curious.

"Is that what it's called?" He nodded.

"Sure, I'd love to," she stated overly enthused. Pulling the sack from his belt, he opened it. Holding out a supportive arm, he helped her slip inside. As she came close to him, she could not resist putting an arm around his neck and pulling close. Smiling, he tried to ignore her.

"I can't wait for that night on the town," she whispered. "I've never done anything like it." She quickly raised her wings up high and brought both her feet up and over the opening of the Storing Sack as Artemis held it open. Looking down, she cringed and took a deep breath. This was exciting and scary at the same time. She thought about it as she stared down at all the tiny items within. Dropping down would like slipping on a dress, yet the opposite way. Letting go of him, Raven raised her arms up high and dropped inside.

As she entered the opening, she watched in wonder as the entirety of the sack began to expand like a huge pavilion. Either that, or she was shrinking. It was a strange sensation, causing an intense sense of vertigo. Standing upon what appeared to be arm-thick ropes - the woven threads of the sack - she staggered.

Instinctively, her wings extended, helping to correct her balance.

Once situated, she looked up to see Artemis looking down at her. He was huge! This was amazing! All the toy-like items she had looked at before, were now normal sized.

"Or I have shrunk small," she stated aloud.

"Okay, I'm going to shut the sack so we can move on. Relax and enjoy the ride. There is food and water in there, and it's all marked, so help yourself if you need anything." Looking back up, a wide grin spread across Raven's face.

"This is great, Artemis! Thank you." Out the massive opening of the sack, Raven caught his look of amusement.

"You're welcome. Oh, Raven, if you cut this sack from within, the enchantment of the bag will unravel, spilling out all the contents in one moment. Just thought my little bird needed to know that fact." With that, Artemis closed the top.

"I won't," she said, absolutely distracted at being within a giant sack.

As the three outside the sack made their way through the woods, Raven noticed the floor and sides of the magical sack didn't move in the least. The items in the sack were undisturbed as well. She thought it very strange, but fascinating.

A few paces away, a soft glow soon caught her attention. Curiously, Raven made her over the uneven surface towards it. As she neared, Raven stopped and bent down, observing the craft of this enchanted sack. Curiously, she ran a hand over the giant threads, amazed at the magic of this wondrous item. After a few moments, the glow of light captured her full attention. She reached out to pick it up, but noticed the glow was coming from one of the strands of rope and it seemed to glow, as if it were a red-hot coal in a fire.

"Interesting," she mused, then abandoned the phenomenon. There was plenty of other interesting things to explore in here, and she explored to her heart's content.

Raven could hear the large snapping of branches beneath the feet of her companions, and it sounded like the breaking of small trees. Their feet clumping along, made it sound as though giants were walking around outside the sack. At first, she was startled, supposing large ogres were all about them. But there was no cry of alarm from her companions, no battle, or anything like it. She realized she was probably one of the toy-like items in the sack, which made everything outside much larger. It was fascinating!

Walking about, Raven smirked, suddenly understanding how the kingdom of insects survived the giants of their day.

"They hear us coming a league away," she said to herself. "This is how they endure the species so destructive to them – how they survive." Then another thought occurred to her; one that intrigued her. "I would wager a thousand black-gold there are so many undiscovered species and breed of underlife, and simply because they avoid us." As a Locust Magician, that thought opened a new and significant door to so many possibilities. She would remember that.

"I'm in a sack. I'm a toy-sized me." Raven heard Artemis chuckle softly. "You hear everything I say, don't you?" she asked. A quick and soft-spoken response came back.

"Yes. You are definitely an interesting person, Raven. Is curiosity the inherent trait of your race?" Raven ran a hand over a beautifully crafted ivory-wood chest, the size of a large watermelon, pondering his question. Facing the ornate chest, she knelt. Gripping the lid on both sides, savoring every moment as she studied the beauty of its craftsmanship, her eyes widened with delight. Simply lifting the lid would appease her curiosity. Raven gazed in wonder at the intricate sculpting of this box. It must have taken ten years to craft. Looking up, she sighed.

"I suppose so. Many of my people do all they can to gain wealth and position in their social circles. And most are mean." She bit her lip, pondering the

trust Artemis was giving her in allowing her to be inside his special sack. She hesitated, waiting for his reply.

"Raven, I sense a change in your heartbeat. Are you contemplating exploration into my personal belongings?" Raven stiffened, breaking contact with the chest. She sighed, not daring or even wanting to lie to him.

"I love this beautiful box . . . the one that appears to be sculpted ivory. What is it, and what's in it?"

"Open it and see, but remember there could be dire consequences should you choose to." A sour look etched into Raven's face as she stared at the wonder set before her. She suddenly felt more curious than she could resist.

"Why did you have to say that?" She heard Artemis chuckle, obviously amused. Hardening her heart, she stood and walked away. Not three steps from it, she stopped and closed her eyes, fighting the urge to go back. It was no use. Backing up until she was in front of it again, she turned and knelt before the chest once again. Gently, she ran her fingers over the ornate craftsmanship of the chest. Her mouth moved, forming words without sound.

"Why did you have to tell me that?" Running her fingers over every detail on the chest, Raven felt her will to leave it be burn away, like the morning dew that flees before the rising of the sun. She pulled her hair back, biting her lip.

"What do you hold within?" she mouthed, shooting a glance up toward the top of the sack. Resting her hands once again on each side of the chest, she slowly lifted the lid, hoping it wouldn't squeak and give her away. Once the lid was halfway opened, Raven witnessed a mist-like fog swirling lazily about within. Peering down into the mist, she lowered a finger into it. It was cold and dry.

As her finger came into contact with the mist, she had the sudden, distinct feeling to reach in and grasp what was inside the chest. The impression was so pressing, she slowly lowered her hand in, opening her fingers. As she did, Raven felt something touched the palm of her hand. Startled by the sudden touch, her eyes widened, and she began to tremble. Determined to see what it was, she

closed her hand into a fist and pulled. As she withdrew her hand, the mist clung to it, as if it did not wish to let go. As Raven pulled her hand free, the mist, released her, and returned back into place to continue flowing in a circular pattern.

Turning her fist over, Raven slowly opened her fingers in utter, captivated, curiosity. Within her palm lay a beautiful, marble-sized, black orb. It was flawless, smooth, and wonderful! She felt the lightening of her senses increase as she held it, instantly perceiving it was enchanted. Suddenly, she understood the power of the chest, and wondered what else could be gotten from it.

"No, no, no," she silently scolded herself, glancing up, half expecting Artemis to be watching her. "None of that nonsense. It's not mine." The thought came to her that she had to give it back. This was his, not hers. She remembered being frisked and robbed so many times, and she hated it. This wondrous black pearl was not her's for the taking, and that thought danced in her mind, confusing her. She had never cared about what belonged to others.

Raising the pearl over the gray mists, Raven hesitated for only a moment, then dropped it, watching it vanish. No sooner than she gave it back, it popped back out and hit her in the chest, falling to the bottom of the sack. Giving the ornate box an odd look, mingled with too much curiosity, she knelt down and picked it up. Tossing it back into the swirling mist, she quickly shut the chest and held the lid down. For a few moments, she waited, half expecting the lid to force its way open. It did not. Good. Turning away, she looked around at a thousand other items, scanning everything with increasing curiosity . . . until she felt something hit her in the back of the head, followed by a soft thump. Spinning around, she saw the chest was once again open. Looking down, Raven spotted the orb on the floor of ropes. Quickly, she snatched it up.

"Fine," she whispered. "If the chest won't take it, he will. The chest . . . wouldn't . . . take it?" she thought. How strange! What an odd chest. Wondering if there was a tiny person inside it, who kept discarding the pearl, she thought of reaching in and grabbing him, or her. Shaking her head, she closed the lid and

turned away, feeling suddenly hungry.

After locating a rather large supply of rations, she ate one and then drank from a flask marked "Water". She then found a soft chair off to one side of the massive, woven, room. Feeling tired, she sat down, which was a bit difficult, seeming the chair had a back to it. She wasn't used to such furniture, but managed by extending her wings over the sides. Bouncing a little, she smiled. Artemis's furniture was very different from what she was used to . . . but it was springy. She decided she liked it. It just needed some modifications to be perfect. Putting her head back, Raven closed her eyes.

Raven dreamed her friends left her alone, abandoning her forever.

"Well, this is interesting. A mighty good catch indeed!"

Raven dreamed she was far away . . . further than she had ever wished to be.

"I like this!"

As she opened her eyes, Raven lazily blinked, trying to get the sleepiness out of her head . . . then froze in abrupt fear.

"What's inside? Wow!" The voice was not familiar. Had they found civilization? She listened for a while, but she could hear none other than that same voice.

"Now, what else?" The sack began to open, but not before Raven darted behind a pile of blankets, quickly pulling one over the top of her, just as the top of the sack stretched open. Spying up past the edge of the blanket, Raven saw the face of a person, not human, green eyes wide with wonder and amusement.

"Look at all this!" he exclaimed, then laughed manically, his eyes widening even the more. In shot his huge hand and grabbed a chest. Quickly it was gone, and instantly there was a loud thud outside the bag.

"Woa! You sure were a heavy one! Open, open wide! Show me what you have in your mouth, Ha ha ha! Open! Thank you! Wow! The finest clothes, fit for me . . . fit for a king!" Raven's mind raced, riveted upon those eyes, green as green, slender face, pointy ears, green hair.

"No way," she thought, suddenly in great wonder. At first, she thought she was dreaming, or that her companions had been killed, leaving her as the soul survivor. But now, she began to believe the worst. There was only one explanation for this. This was a Leprechaun! She listened to the creature, all in a wonder as it scrutinized every single item in unbridled triumph and glee.

Seeing a Leprechaun shattered the ideas she had about them. For instance, she had always thought them to be fat. She also thought Leprechauns flew about, clad in fancy green clothing with buttons of gold and polished shoes which curled

up at the toes. One thing she did know: Leprechauns were fiercely jealous of their treasure. They were quick and agile, to the point that a mongoose would be instantly panicked if chased by one.

In popped its hand again and out went the ornate chest.

"Le's see what you are . . . hmmm, interesting." Suddenly, there was a gasp of amazement and delight. "Oh, my goodness! Lookie what I've found. A Chest of Question!" There was abrupt skipping, dancing and a sudden song that lasted for a time.

A hunting I went where the neverwinds blow,  
In though Edgewood where seldom they go

I searched in the thickets, the caves and the mountain,  
I looked up and down, by the red dragon's fountain.

I spied in the darkness til dark turned to light,  
I hunted and listened with all of my might.

And then, there, I found them trudging along,  
So here is the happy part in my song.

Without being noticed, I napped this here sack,  
Then stealthily, cautiously, made my way back.

I opened this treasure filled with surprise,  
I gaze down in wonder with my own two green eyes.

I'm much richer now than ever before,  
Bards will include me in their legends and lore!

They'll sing of the Leprechaun, him will they feed,  
And raise up a toast to this masterful deed!

Raven looked down at her hand. Without realizing it, she was keeping beat with his tune. Instantly she stopped. Yes, Leprechaun. She was right. But, what was she to do now? This creature was far too fast to escape from.

Another gleeful song burst forth with vibrant energy. Dismayed, Raven looked around and began to think. She still had her crystals. Maybe she could trade them for her freedom. Thinking on that for a while, she decided against revealing herself. Besides, her pack was in the Storing Sack with her. She doubted a Leprechaun would ever accept a bargain with the items it stole. To the Leprechaun, everything it snatched was its rightful property.

In this situation, Raven was helpless to do nothing more than listen and wait. She had no choice. Time and time again, the Leprechaun reached in and pulled out another chest, pack, or bag from the Storing Sack. At times, its hand came alarmingly close. The creature seemed so happy and cheerful.

Miserable, Raven put her head down and waited . . . then, after a time, drifted into an uneasy dream in which she attended a grand birthday party. She was dressed all in green, and when she looked in the mirror, her hair was green, as well as her eyes. A tap on her shoulder startled her, causing her to turn about.

"May I have the honor of a jig? I hear girls jig most excellently, and are quite good at it." She was staring at the Leprechaun, who bowed as he levitated before her. She didn't want to jig with this creature.

"No. I - I have to open presents. This isn't a dance, sir, it's my birthday party," she stammered, not feeling well. It was stifling hot all of a sudden.

"Oh, I understand. Here, I brought you three gifts, one for each of the last three years I missed your parties. I usually keep things, especially toys, to myself, but it is your birthday." It moved in close. "And this is a very special day for you."

The Leprechaun's smile broadened, almost too large for its this face. "Here, these presents on the table are for you. "Come, open them. You deserve this. After all, it is your birthday. And, I will not take them from you, and beat you, or break your wings." He raised green eyebrows up and down eagerly as he motioned to the presents, his eyes narrowing.

Spooked, Raven slowly approached the table and looked down at three gold wrapped boxes with silver ribbons tied up in bows. No one ever gave her a present, let alone three. A faint smile spread across her lips as she reached up and took hold of the two ends of a silver ribbon.

"Thank you . . . ummm, I don't know your name sir. Mine is Raven." The Leprechaun's smile took on a whole new heir. He looked manically pleased, yet began to tremble, as if trying to stop smiling.

"My name . . . ahhk! . . . is . . . grrrr . . . Simeon . . . No!" The Leprechaun's smile instantly faded to a distant look of longing and regret. For a moment, Simeon's feet touched the ground. looking down, he frowned and clenched his fists again and again, obviously struggling with some internal conflict. A worried expression played across his face as Raven watched on. She noticed everyone at the party had fallen silent and was staring at the both of them - most at Simeon.

"Well, open the presents, Raven, then I'll probably have to go. Please, open them. Raven turned to the present she was touching and pulled the ribbon ends out in opposite directions. It came loose. Excited, she began ever so carefully to unfold the paper away from the box, not tearing it. She wanted to keep it all as new as possible. She unfolded the exquisite paper down flat onto the table, and as she did, Simeon stepped back, a feverish look twisting his once handsome face. She glanced at the guests, staring at them and swallowing hard.

"Raven, I have to go. I'll be back soon. Don't go away now. I have to get some toys. With that, Simeon walked unsteadily out of the room. Raven watched him go, and waved, throwing him a smile.

"Thank you Simeon. I hope to see you later." As she called his name, he clenched his fist, bit it, drawing green blood, then fled the party.

Raven turned back to the box. With eager hands, she reached out and pulled the lid off. Instant horror and dismay filled her as she stared down Artemis's severed head.

Screaming, Raven leapt up from the blankets breathing heavy, a dread panic exploding in her mind and heart. She looked around, confused for a moment, then realized what she had done. Falling to the blankets, she looked up in horror. She began to sob heavily, unable to hold in her emotions. Between breaths, she screamed out to her captor.

"Just look in the sack! Come and get me! What are you waiting for?" But there was no reply, and the Storing Sack remained untouched. After a time, Raven realized the Leprechaun was gone . . . at least for the time being.

She was alone.

Looking around, she noticed most everything was gone. She glanced up and saw the sack had not been closed either. "Now this might be a twist of luck," she thought. She crouched, tears yet streaming her face. Extending her wings upward, she leapt upward with all her might, thrusting down with her wings to elevate her jump. It worked! She caught hold of the top of the sack and pulled herself up and out. As she exited the opening, it began to shrink. Vertigo threw her mind into a whirl, causing her to fall heavily to the floor. Sobbing, she struggled, kicking the sack free of her legs, then stood up quickly, panic jumbling and confusing her thoughts.

Gathering her senses, Raven grabbed Artemis's sack off the floor. Steadying her emotions, she looked around, half expecting the Leprechaun to return. If it did, she would be in a world of trouble. She had to act quickly.

With all speed, Raven placed everything she could get her hands on into the magical sack, beginning with the ornate chest that had given her the black orb.

Within a few minutes, she stood in a room void of smaller objects. Angry and satisfied, she kicked a chair over, highly frustrated.

"This is what you get for what you did. I hope you rot in wonder when you return." With that, she exited the small house and leapt into the night sky.

She had no idea which way her companions were, and so picked a direction and flew. As she ascended, Raven looked to the stars, quickly getting her bearings as to which way was north. She then scanned the forest. Off to the east, the woodlands looked more dense than the other areas. Artemis had been leading them into a thicker part of the woods, so it seemed logical her best chance would be in that direction.

Artemis led them through the dense timberland, heading into an area of the Ever`Shade Forest he had visited before, and more than once. He could feel Ogrin and Krisha's hearts beating as they followed him. Raven's heart felt steady and even. She was asleep. Good. She needed the rest. She had been through a lot in the past few days, and she, being a novice traveler, needed a break.

Raven had a strong will, yet needed more experience. Out here, in this forest, alone, she was vulnerable. He liked her very much, and was glad to have found her, but she needed to learn more to survive. In the coming days and weeks, his plan for Raven was to build her self confidence; something she was already touching upon. Artemis had already witnessed her demonstrate strong willpower with Krane. She did well negotiating with him. She should not have mastered the spider, which astounded him. Most of all, she had resisted his charm . . . even mocked him for it, and multiple times. Deeply impressed with her, Artemis found himself smiling and actually feeling it; something he had not felt since . . . shaking his head, he banished a dark memory that began to threaten him. Focusing on the task at hand, he continued on. No, he had never met a creature like her.

Artemis led them into an area where the normal shadows of the forest became night. For half the day they pressed on into an area where the trees looked as if they were starving and contending for the last shoots of sunlight managing to make their way down through the twisted, dark forest canopy.

It was in the evening, as they stopped to make camp, when Artemis realized his magical Storing Sack was missing!

"Raven", he whispered in instant panic, though he did not let the others hear. There was no answer. Casually, Artemis approached them.

"Krisha, Ogrin, set up camp. There are some particularly delectable and rare mushrooms in this area. I'm going to see if I can find some for our meal." They both began to set up camp. Ogrin smiled and licked his lips eagerly.

"With eggs," he whispered. Artemis smiled at him.

"With eggs, Ogrin. Watch out for Krisha. I'll be back as soon as I can, but it may take some time. Krisha, if you eat, do not cook, and keep it to berries and nuts, at least until I get back. There are predators here which are attracted by the scent of food. Just keep it simple for now." Krisha placed a hand on Ogrin's shoulder. At the mention of berries and nuts, the Dwarf looked as though he was about to rebel. Without another word, Artemis turned and jogged off the way they had come.

As soon as Artemis was out of sight and hearing range, he knelt down, sitting on his heels. Closing his eyes, he began a soft chant. After a few moments, he stood, stepped forwards and turned to see himself kneeling on the ground. Looking about the area, he spied out every darker place all about him. It looked safe. He felt only the beating of tiny hearts. They were harmless. Taking up a stick, he placed two forefingers at its end.

"Banur adis Bahled ys shaedarin (Create this circle of protection)," he quietly uttered. The end of the stick began to glow with a light, similar to the radiance of the moon. Placing the tip to the ground, the vampire drew a large circle about himself, ignoring the sudden crack of a branch within the undergrowth off to his left.

Closing his eyes, Artemis placed the point of the stick to the ground, directly over the completion of the circle and placed both hands over the stick. In one swift motion, he shoved the branch deep into the earth, forcing the end level to the surface ground. Before lifting his hands, he whispered, "Granu sheldin ys imperion. (Great shield of power)" Sparks shot out from under his hands in a brilliant display of yellow and red, scattering out through the forest in all directions.

Again there was the snapping of undergrowth to his left. Again, he ignored it. He blinked once, slowly, his normal eyes vanishing, replaced by what appeared to be molten silver. Looking up through the trees, Artemis cocked his head

slightly to the right, bending all his senses upon the area.

"Where are you Raven?" he whispered, his voice continuing to whisper again and again, echoing through the trees, never fading. He stood still as stone for a time, an ear to the canopy of the forest. After a time, Artemis leapt upward into the night sky, rising upward, vanishing out of sight, passing through limb and tree, as if they were no more than illusion.

Shortly after departing, a small deer ventured out from the density of a thicket, ears raised. It sniffed and looked at Artemis's body. After a few moments it began to graze on a patch of grass, unconcerned about the Vampire close by.

"Og is hungry." That's all the Dwarf would say, and had repeated it for the third time. "Og is hungry!" Krisha smiled lovingly at him.

"Well, Ogrin, I've saved a little something for such an occasion as this." Ogrin stalked over to Krisha as she began digging deep into her pack. He leaned over, spying down into it with hungry eyes.

"What is it?" Krisha moved in, and pulled a half-loaf-sized object out of her pack. It was tightly wrapped in wax-cloth and wrapped in twine. She knelt down and placed it on her lap and began untying the package. Once the string was loosed, she opened it to reveal a large chunk of white cheese. Ogrin smiled and sniffed it. He looked at the cheese, then at her.

"You have a knife?" he asked in all seriousness. She smelled the cheese, taking in the scent, then nodded.

"I do," she whispered, squinting her eyes at the Dwarf. Quickly, Krisha retrieved a knife from her pack and cut a thick piece off. She handed it to her stout bodyguard, then cut a thin slice for herself. Ogrin raised the cheese and opened his mouth.

"Wait, don't eat yet." She said in a motherly tone. He stopped and lowered his portion as Krisha reached into her pack and pulled out another similarly wrapped package. As she unwrapped it, Ogrin watched, licking his piece of cheese once. It was a loaf of bread, tightly wrapped in waxed paper to keep it soft. Ogrin grinned.

"You are smart!" he bellowed, startling her. She cut each of them a thick slice, then began putting her pack back together. Then, they both ate. The Dwarf hungrily devoured his, then sighed in satisfaction. After eating half of her's, Krisha handed the rest to Ogrin, who took it with a grin and devoured it as well.

"Krisha is good to Og. Og likes you. Thanks!"

"You are most welcome, my loyal bodyguard." They sat back to back, and waited for Artemis to return. As they waited, Krisha spied a small deer come into

view not far through the trees. Ogrin, sitting at her back, did not see it. She watched it as it limped about, then staggered. Slowly, Krisha stood.

"Ogrin, keep an eye on the forest the way you are facing. I need to do something. Don't look, okay?" Ogrin nodded.

"Og promises not to peek." He stood and glared at the woods before him. "Og is gentleman."

"Thank you, she stated as she slowly made her way over to the deer, which had collapsed onto its side. It looked at her, panting. As Krisha approached, she noticed a shaft with black feathers sticking out of the deer's back leg. Frightened at her approach, it tried to get up, but collapsed, panting hard. It panicked as she knelt beside it. It had become so weak, there was nothing it could do.

"Easy, little one. I am going to help you." She gently stroked its head and ears, looking at the dart.

"Looks like you've had a run-in." She glanced at Ogrin. If he saw the deer, he would kill it. She could not stop the fire that would be built after that. Looking back down at the small creature, she smiled, caressing its ears. It was watching her intently.

"I can remove this dart easily." She pinched the shaft between her forefinger and thumb and whispered, "Thasa (Release)." Pulling gently, the dart came loose. Discarding it, she placed a hand over the wound and closed her eyes again.

"Melannua suin (healing light)." Instantly, a blue radiance glowed beneath her hand, then, slowly, extinguished. Removing her hand, Krisha stroked the ears of the deer. She then stood and backed up, watching it slowly regain its feet.

"It will be sore, but not for long. You will be okay now." Kneeling down, she looked at it and grinned. To her surprise, it walked directly to her, its tail wagging. Stroking its ears, Krisha smiled.

"Affectionate little fella', aren't you?" The little creature didn't seem to mind the attention, and pressed into Krisha, instantly adopting her. She slowly

stood up, resting a hand on its head and caressing it with her fingertips.

"You better run along. Go on. Go back to your family." As if it understood, the deer turned and walked away. Soon, it was gone. Krisha returned to Ogrin and sat down. The Dwarf sat down and placed his back against hers again.

"Thank you, Ogrin."

"Krisha is welcome. Krisha gave Ogrin dinner. Ogrin is happy." Krisha's thoughts went to this Dwarf. Smiling, she found that she did not know what she would do without her stout bodyguard and friend.

Raven scanned the forest in all directions. She was lost except for the edge where they had entered. She knew what lay beyond the edge . . . grasslands, then the mountain.

"Well, I'm not as lost as I thought," she muttered, a look of anxiety etching into her eyes. If the patrol guard saw her, they would take her back. She knew she would be whipped for leaving. Worse yet, her large flight feathers would be clipped. No more flying for a season. She shivered to think of being grounded. It would be unbearable.

Descending in the opposite direction of the mountain, she figured it would be the best chance of finding her companions. She noticed the sun beginning to set, and knew it would become dark soon. This didn't bother her as much as the fact that she might not see Artemis again.

Another problem besides night predators was fatigue. She could fly for quite some time if she ascended into the thermals, but the chance of spying out her friends would be greatly lessened. She had to circle in order to get all the visual angles she needed to effectively do this. Once it was night above her, Artemis wouldn't see her silhouette.

On she searched, a dread building in her heart that began to descend into her gut.

"Where are you, Artemis?" she whispered.

Artemis slowly ascended above the furthest reaches of the forest's canopy. He had no way of moving any other way, other than up. This spell would not last long, but it gave him a slight advantage in finding Raven, if she had been able to get out of the Storing Sack. The problem was she would not be able to open it. If it was left open, she might be able to fly out, but this would be very difficult. She could cut her way out as a last resort, and that would be fine with him. As long as she was safe. The items within the sack were of no real consequence.

Focusing, he peered about, slowly turning, scanning each horizon. The problem was, this great forest was set upon rolling mountains, and the sun was setting. When the sun vanished, the predators would emerge. There was only a short time before he would have to return to the other two . . . keep them safe. Raven, if she managed to get loose from the sack, would be on her own. It would be better for her to just stay in the sack.

Closing his eyes, he focused for her particular heartbeat.

Krisha was beginning to worry, she could feel a creeping uneasiness beginning to clench into her gut that caused goose bumps to form on her arms and neck. Glancing back at Ogrin, she saw him scanning the forest suspiciously. She could see that he was feeling tense, and this worried her. When he was cornered, frightened, or threatened, Ogrin would always handle it by brute force. She felt comforted by his stout presence, but he could not take all predators on by himself.

The light of day was steadily fading, giving away to the night. Soon it would be too dark to see. Ogrin and Artemis could see in the dark as if it was light -- she could not.

"Ogrin, I need light. I can't see in this darkness creeping in. I'm scared." Ogrin abruptly stood, stalked over to his pack and retrieved his flint and tinderbox. Within no time, a fire was crackling, shedding light about the clearing. Krisha moved next to it, finding some comfort. As she looked into the trees about them, she suddenly wished the fire had not been built. The small clearing they made camp within made her feel suddenly surrounded, for within the trees shone numerous pairs of eyes, reflected in the fire's light. Some were large and round, some slanted. Most of them were small.

Krisha noticed one set of eyes which reflected a deep red. They did not blink, and moved high up into one of the largest trees at the edge of the clearing. Watching them in fear, she saw those horrible eyes steadily, slowly, descend to ground level. In all this movement there was no sound, and no rustling of the limbs and undergrowth. Krisha imagined it to be the eyes of some creature with either a very long neck or the hovering horror of a phantom creature. Her eyes fixed on those terrible eyes, and she found herself fighting against the urge to run. If she did run, where would she go? She could not see without the fire. She felt that if she approached it, she would be killed, so dreadful was the feeling.

Slowly she looked over at Ogrin. To her astonishment, her faithful bodyguard was poking at the fire, and adding more wood. He seemed oblivious to

what she was seeing. Maybe she was dreaming, or imagining the eyes.

"Ogrin," she whispered, "do you see all the eyes around us?" Ogrin shrugged, nodding.

"Yes, the eyes are curious about us . . . and the fire." Krisha nodded and pointed to the deep-red set of eyes, which had moved to another tree.

"What about those eyes?" Ogrin looked the way she was pointing and harrumphed`.

"If those were bad eyes, then Og would pound them!" The Dwarf's voice raised to a boom, signifying a challenge. Krisha admired his fearlessness; it was a great comfort, being in his presence, and it helped to retain her sanity in this situation.

She looked on, wide-eyed in horror as the eyes moved back to where she first saw them. She tensed as a wave of fear washed over her. Then those terrible eyes slowly narrowed until they vanished.

Not a second after vanishing, a small, familiar, deer walked out from behind the same tree, and into the firelight. Krisha's chest felt suddenly cold as her pulse quickened. Looking over at Ogrin, she noticed, he had fallen asleep next to the fire. How he had fallen asleep so quickly disturbed her greatly. Looking back at the deer, she forced a smile, holding out both hands as she knelt down.

"Come her, come on," she coaxed her little friend. "Why are you over there?" The small deer's tail wagged as it calmly walked over to her, as if it had no care in all the world. Krisha put her arms about it and pulled it into her lap.

"I'm glad you came. Now I don't feel so alone." She nuzzled and kissed the animal on the side of the nose. "You can sleep with me tonight . . . keep me company. Where's your family?" she whispered, playing with its ears. "I guess you lost them, and are all alone. Well, you can stay with me from now on." She massaged its ears and neck, much to its liking. Soon it was asleep.

As she held the animal on her lap, she did not feel afraid anymore, now that she had to be strong for something weaker than her. It gave her purpose.

Looking up, Krisha watched the stars lighting up the night sky like a host of innumerable fireflies. Softly, she began to sing, and as she did, she caressed the ears of her new pet. Sleep had no place in her, and so deep into the night she sang. When she stopped singing, she looked down to see the deer looking up at her.

"You are awake," she whispered. "Go back to sleep. I will keep watch so you can rest." Laying down, she wrapped her arms about the deer and pulled it close.

"Good night . . . hmmm, I need to give you a name. I will call you Lucky. Good night Lucky. Good night." She yawned again and slipped into unconsciousness without realizing.

Later in the night, Ogrin awoke and stocked up the fire. He then returned to his bedroll and laid down. A while after Ogrin closed his eyes, Lucky raised his head and looked to the sleeping Dwarf, but did not move. As Ogrin began to breath heavily, Lucky slipped out from under Krisha's arm, stood, and looked down at her. For a long while, the small deer stood motionless, its attention fixed on Krisha as the flames of the fire danced within its eyes. Ogrin mumbled something, instantly spooking the small deer, which quickly skipped out of sight, vanishing into the trees. The Dwarf became still again, unaware of Krisha's little friend.

Half the night passed before Krisha awoke, slowly opening her eyes . . . and missed Lucky. Sitting up, she glanced over at Ogrin. The fire had burned low, and so she stood to stoke up the surviving flames, but there was no wood remaining.

"Great," she whispered, "I don't want to fetch any wood. but I can't let the fire die," she muttered. "If I wake Ogrin up, he'll go get the wood. If he finds Lucky, he'll go after him." She looked at the tree at the edge of the firelight, not wanting to go out there.

"Please don't eat me, please don't eat me," she whispered. Not far into the

tree, she could see the shapes of what appeared to be branches on the ground. With a quivering breath, Krisha crept into the tree-line and grabbed the end of one and pulled. It came free easily, and soon she was at the fire again, tears streaming her face. Hauling it over the fire, she set it down so it would burn in two. Shivering, and not from cold, she wiped her face.

"Oh, stop it Krisha," she chided herself. "Don't be such a coward." She watched as the wood began to burn. As she stared at the flames beginning to rise, a haunting whisper came from behind.

"Krishaaaa." She spun about, startled.

"Who's there? Artemis is that you?" Ogrin stirred.

"Ogrin, get up!" The Dwarf mumbled something and rolled, turning away from her. Jumping to Ogrin's side, she grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him hard.

Ogrin, wake up!" But Ogrin did not awaken. "Ogrin, please get up!" she begged, not understanding why he was not responding. After three more attempts, she looked around the area, straining to see who had spoken her name.

"Artemis?" Just beyond the fire's light, Krisha saw movement within the trees . . . a mere shadow. Someone or something, was there. A wave of fear unbalanced her as she waited, eyes fixed on the area where she had seen movement. She wished Artemis was here. She wished Ogrin would wake up. Then that chilling whisper came again, seeming hollow and far away . . . yet very near.

"Don't be afraid," its voice echoed. Frozen in fear, Krisha looked with eyes filled with dread to the deeper shadows within the tree-line, expecting the rush attack of some terrible, nameless shadow. What happened next, surprised her greatly. As she looked on in frozen, captivated horror, a single black-feathered dart flew from beyond the same tree where she had beheld those deep-red eyes, landing at her feet. Startled, Krisha stepped back and looked at it. The memory of releasing such a dart from Lucky danced chaotically within her mind. Slowly, she

took up the dart and looked at it with an expression of disbelief. She then comprehended more than she cared to.

“You could kill me now, at any time,” she whispered, her voice quivering with terror. “But you haven’t. Why?” A sinister chuckle broke the still of the night, mingling with the snapping of the burning wood of the fire.

“Is this a test?” she whispered. The thought crossed her mind that Artemis was trying her, as he had done before. After all, he was a Vampire, and to lure the three of them out into the wild would suit such a creature very well.

“Artemis?” she whispered.

“I am not,” that macabre voice flowed from the confines of the trees. Each time it spoke, Krisha wanted to hide. But there was no where to go.

“Are you going to kill me?” She wished she had not asked such a question. But it was answered with a similar inquire.

“Did you kill the deer?” Chills cascaded her face and neck.

“No. It needed my help. It was so small and frail. No, I could not dream of killing such a creature. In fact, I’m am very fond of it.” Again, a sinister chuckle invaded her senses, causing her to weep and nearly fall to the earth.

“Krisha, I sent the deer to you . . . a test to see what you would do. I needed to know the workings of your heart.” Krisha thought for a minute.

“Then, you are the deer?”

“No, and yesss,” it answered with a hiss. “I found Lucky, as you named him, and used him to bridge the gap between us.” There was dead silence for a few moments as she thought on this apparition’s words. She wiped her face with badly trembling hands, then stared at them in the flickering light of the flames, frowning.

“Your presence is terrifying . . . like death itself.” There was no answer, but this being’s presence seemed to weigh down on her more, and suddenly.

“Can I see you . . . converse with you face to face?” she whispered between clenched teeth.

“Krisha, it would not help. If my presence brings you into such a state, as you are now, seeing me would bring you such dismay and hardship, if you survived, you would not remain the same. Maybe in the future, after your trials harden you, make you stronger, we may meet face to face.” Krisha shook her head and fell to her knees. Dropping the black-feathered dart, she grabbed each side of her head . . . and screamed in silence, trying to keep in control of her reeling senses. After a time, she dropped her hands, taking a few deep breaths, trying to be brave.

“Please, let me come to you. At least let me blindfold myself and touch you.” There was a silence for a time.

“Agreed, but you must promise you will not take off the blindfold. Krisha, I am ancient. Most would flee me in horror . . . to regain their sanity no more in this life.”

“My lord, I will be honest with you. I am not Human, but come from the realm of thought, beyond the earthen plane. I will come to the tree. Please do not leave,” she begged, suddenly fascinated by what was happening, she knew not why.

“I will wait.” Making her way unsteadily to her pack, Krisha fished out some cloth. Quickly she tied it about her eyes, so she could not see. Once secured, she turned back, not quite sure if she was facing in same direction.

“I would come to you, but I’m not sure the way,” she wept. It never crossed her mind at why she was doing this. The once warning in her heart was dead and gone.

“Place your hand upon the fawn, and he will guide you to me.” Krisha lowered her hand parallel to the ground, as if groping blind in the dark, and searched for the deer with her fingertips. Within a breaths' time, Lucky raised its head up under her hand, its ears twitching. Nervously, a fleeting smile flashed across her trembling lips. As they touched, the small deer began to move slowly forward. Krisha followed, letting the fawn guide her to the edge of the tree-line.

Holding out her other hand, she eventually came in contact with the tree from which the deer had emerged.

Krishna stopped for a moment and took in a deep quivering breath, attempting to swallow her fear, then slowly came around the massive tree, feeling in the air so as not to strike a low-hanging branch. Once behind the tree, she shivered and stopped, fear washing over her like cold water.

"I'm scared. Please, will you take my hand?" Softly, a cold hand slipped into hers, and she immediately perceived this person, this entity, to be not living. In fact she knew it to be one of the dead, not just half-living, as was a zombie, or a ghoul.

"If you wish to flee, I will not stop you," he stated in voice filled with intense longing. Krishna held out her other hand, which it took.

"Krisha, be not afraid of me. Never before have I met a creature such as you. Never before has any living person dared touch me. Some have died in the attempt, and not of my doing. Can you bear this?" Krishna forced herself to smile.

"No, but I will. I must. Sir, I feel longing and desperation in you. You yearn to have blood running through your veins once again. I feel it." A ghastly sigh whispered from before her.

"Yes," it replied, its fel voice echoing.

"I can help you, but it will take time. What is your name?"

"My name . . . my name . . ." Krishna felt a frustration rising in this being, and it caused her to suspect he had been in this state so long, his name had slipped from his memory.

"May I give you a name, sir, at least until you recall your own?"

"And what name would you give me, milady?" Krishna did not hesitate in her answer.

"Malek. I've always liked that name. Will you accept it?"

"Yes. I will be called Malek. Pray, tell me, what are you?" Krishna relaxed a little, feeling slightly less terrified.

"I come from the Plane of Thought. I am simply thought with no spirit, nor body. I was invited to gain a body by another. In accepting this body, I also accepted a test, a trial. If I succeed this trial, I will not only keep this body, or another of my choosing, but will also gain a spirit. Malek, I will become a living soul. In saying this, sir, I am sure I pierce you with sorrow, for I perceive what you are. You are neither living, nor half living. You, Malek, are dead . . . trapped in torment." Krisha took in an unsteady breath and exhaled, trying not to run. "Malek, with the end means to the path I am on, and the powers I will obtain, I can help you." She heard a ghastly sigh issue from Malek, and it unnerved her so badly, she began to silently weep in terror. She waited for a response, suddenly fearing it would feed on her; devour her.

"Your perception is correct. Krisha, what is the end path you seek?" Krisha tried to be brave.

"Mystic, sir. I will also follow the path of the Necromancer, which leads to Deth`Knell. With these two paths, I can accomplish what I desire in this lifetime. As terrified as I am, Malek, I am glad to have made your acquaintance." Krisha hesitated, a sudden thought coming to mind, she knew not why. "In the future, when we accomplish your reinstatement to mortality, may I have the great privilege of the first dance at a ball we will attend?" At her request, she did not see the surprise on Malek's translucent face, nor the doubt playing in his ghastly demeanor.

"That I recall, I have never danced."

"I could teach you. I am quite good at it. Would you let me show you now?" Surprised even the more, Malek did not know how to respond. In all the centuries, in his misery and tormented existence, no one had ever spoken to him in like manner. Most fled and were devoured. Malek fed upon the fleeing spark of life within mortals, only to crave more. The comfort gained in feeding off the living was fleeting, only causing his hunger to increase.

"It would be a rare privilege . . . milady," Malek uttered in all astonishment.

"Well, it is settled then. We will need a small clearing with no obstacles." Krisha froze, forcing herself to calm down.

"Malek, I feel such sadness in you . . . such insatiable hunger. And yet you resist devouring me. Why?" Malek guided her to an area, not far into the trees and stopped, turning upon her.

"I crave life; your life. But if I take it, my hunger will only be pacified for a time. You say you can help me?" Krisha reached up and pulled the blindfold free, yet keeping her eyes tightly shut.

"I can help you, sir. I know I can." Malek held up a hand, as if warding off her gaze, should she open her eyes.

"Do not look upon me, for I am only the hideous remnant of what I once was. Krisha, do not open your eyes." Krisha bit her lip, then drew close. Raising her hands up, she slowly reached out and touched his face, gently using her fingers to see this entity, as do the blind. He seemed normal, yet only half physical, which intrigued her.

"I need to see you, sir. I have to," she persisted, feeling it would be alright.

"Krisha, do not do this. You are a rarity, but do not be a fool. In the beginning, the reason for my pursuit of you and your small companion was to feed. My design has changed, though it pains me." Krisha threw Malek a fragile smile, tears streaming her beautiful face.

"Thank you for sparing us. I am in your debt."

"Krisha," Malek whispered, his voice echoing about her, "I do not wish you to live the remainder of your life in nightmare." Krisha lowered her head as she ran her fingertips over his lips.

"Has there ever been a bond between you and another?"

"It has been attempted," his voice echoed, dreadful to bear. Krisha shook her head, suddenly attracted to his half physical apparition.

"It has not been attempted by me," she whispered, her fear beginning to ebb; a mere candle's flame.

“Krisha, don’t.” Ignoring Malek's warning, Krisha slowly opened her eyes, beholding a translucent man, half physical, half spirit. As she looked upon him, she fought back a sudden wave of horror.

“You are a soul, Malek. I see you with my eyes.” The Dead looked upon her, shocked.

“How is this possible?” Malek’s voice echoed. Looking about, she was satisfied with the area he had chosen, Krisha moved up before him and slowly placed her right hand upon his left shoulder.

"Put your left hand on my waist, here." Malek reluctantly did as she instructed. She then reached down and clasped his right hand with her left, then pulled close to this apparition of death.

Now, I will be you, who are supposed to lead me. You play the part of me. When you know the dance, we will switch the roles and perfect our step. Are you ready?" Malek looked into her eyes, trembling, yearning to feed.

Krisha’s horror fell into deep waters, and she knew she was doomed. Still, there was something about Malek that drove her on. Within, she felt the tender beginning of . . . closing her eyes, she led Malek in a dance . . . within the dark of Edgewood Forest . . . deep within the night of her existence . . . blending with Malek’s hopelessness . . .

“I can help you become,” she whispered.

The influence of the dead.

Artemis drifted upward until he knew it no longer helped to be out of the trees. He'd been up here much too long. Earlier, he witness a distant fire had sprung to life, no doubt built by Ogrin. He had told them not to build a fire. It was dangerous, and would attract attention.

Scanning the horizon all about him for the last time, he despaired of locating Raven. Sighing, he closed his eyes and chanted a few words which would end the spell by which he was bound. As he finished the chant, he felt that familiar sensation of being suddenly stretched and pulled. Everything twisted and warped as the forest grew close. Then, everything went black, as if his eyesight had suddenly failed.

Artemis opened his eyes and took three deep, even breaths. He stood and quickly stepped out of the circle of protection, quite upset at losing the first person in well over nine centuries.

As he began to walk back to Krisha and Ogrin, he suddenly stopped, taking in the night, feeling his surrounding, his eyes suddenly shining like molten silver. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. His senses began to scream as something dark approached from his left. Closing his eyes, he felt outward with his native senses. There was no heartbeat, telling him this was either undead, or worse. As sudden, terrible thoughts came to him, he opened his eyes, fear beginning to burn within his heart. But this fear was turned to an anger that swelled up within his soul, even as terrible thoughts began to play and dance in his mind.

“If you have harmed my companions, I will find you and send you into the Abyss,” he threatened. A sudden, ghastly sigh drifted through the trees.

“Krisha was delightful, Vampire.” Instantly, Artemis's fangs extended. The sudden transformation revealed the true predator he was as a darkness cascaded from his physical form. Clenching his fists in rage, he growled. The lichen and grass beneath and about his feet instantly wilted and decayed,

crumbling into dust, so terrible was his presence. The trees in the area groaned and slightly swayed as he looked down, his silver eyes darkening to deeper than blackness. Artemis lifted a finger and pointed to his left.

“You cannot hide from me,” he threatened. Quick, came a response.

“She is whole and unharmed, Vampire. Be at ease. I do not wish to fight you.” Artemis snapped his teeth.

“If I find you have lied to me, I will never allow you rest, wandering dead. I will block the hope and peace you crave in vain. Do you understand?” Artemis waited for only a moment for an answer that did not come. “Do you!” he instantly raged, froth flying from his mouth.

“I do,” came the answer.

“For Krishna’s sake, I will leave you undone, ever fading” he whispered, then sprinted with all speed back to camp.

It was dark now, and that turned out to be the most frustrating aspect in all this. Hovering, Raven looked around for any predators in the area. She knew she was not the only one that could fly, but was glad not to be grounded. No doubt, the Leprechaun was out there looking for its items, which made her laugh. She would go down in history . . . well, she would have, had there been a witness.

Then, a thought occurred to her, “If I took back this sack to the leaders of my people, I could . . . would . . . earn a high rank among them.” She smiled, then shivered. It was starting to get cold. “I will never give you anything,” she whispered, picturing the faces of her parents.

Spinning around, she tucked her wings close against her body and plummeted toward the canopy of trees. A second before reaching the first leaf, Raven pulled out of the dive and skimmed the leaves with the tips of the longest feather of her right wing. Being grounded for days reminded her how much she loved to fly. Over the rolling hills of leaves she skimmed the trees at high speed. She needed to go faster!

Into the air, she ascended, and just as she neared the zenith of her flight, she leveled out and rode the upper wind current, circling many times, until she was nearly into the thermals where the larger avian predators traveled. One more time, she rolled and dived, forgetting the search for her friends.

She was free, and she was loving it. As she dove, she increased the speed of her descent by straightening her body out flat, as if diving into water. As she plummeted toward the forest, she laughed happily, and watched it steadily rise up to meet her. As Raven streaked downward, she happened to catch a faint flicker of light far below, off to her right, which quickly vanished. Instantly, her carefree demeanor changed to caution. Cupping her wings, she caught a draft of wind that slowed her decent.

“Dragon,” she whispered, suddenly feeling vulnerable. She turned and leveled off her decent, switching to a spiral flight pattern. Eyeing the trees and the

horizon all about her, the Karritch Gleighdor renegade began rising steadily upward again, Keeping a keen eye out for danger.

There it was again. With all the stealth she could, Raven ascended up, up, until she was directly above the tiny flame below. Peering down, she watched the flicker of the red light, a smile spreading across her lips. With sudden excitement, she began to descend, an idea taking form in her mind.

Krisha looked at Ogrin and shook her head.

“Are you sleeping Ogrin?” There was no answer. She thought of mentioning food, then abandoned the idea. If she did wake him up, she would be obliged to feed him, and she was beyond exhausted. As she stood there, watching the Dwarf, a nose touched her hand, causing her to recoil and turn. She nearly screamed.

“Oh, it’s you,” she stated with a shaky voice. She knelt down and opened her arms, inviting Lucky in.

“Come on, you know I won’t hurt you.” The deer wagged its tail and shyly made its way into her hands, sniffing them, then lowered its head and pushed into her fingers. She smiled brightly, pulled the small animal into her arms, then began caressing its ears.

“My little escapee,” she whispered, her voice still shaken from the encounter with Malek. Looking up, Krisha’s eyes fell upon the same large tree where those eyes had been. She took a quavering breath.

“Thank you for this little friend here. Lucky does help me to be more brave out here.” She waited for a reply she didn’t really want to experience, but it did not come. Instead, she heard a distant voice, seemingly filled with anger, though the words, she could not catch. She waited apprehensively for a few moments, eyes fixed to the border of the clearing.

Out from the trees sped Artemis, who, once he locked his eyes upon her, stopped, a look of relief flooding his countenance. He quickly turned away for a moment, then turned his attention back to her.

“My apologies for taking so long. I need to tell you something.” He approached Krisha and knelt before her, eyes locking onto the deer she held. The deer looked at Artemis and tensed. Artemis threw a quick glance at the sleeping Dwarf, then back at the fawn.

“Krisha, do you know what that creature is?” Krisha hugged it tight, still

shaking, and nodded.

“Yes, I do.” Artemis gave her a narrow look. “I really do, she stated, her voice trembling. Artemis nodded slowly, sensing her irregular heartbeat.

“Do you wish to tell me about it?” He asked. Krisha sighed heavily.

“Where did you go?” The Vampire sighed and shook his head.

“Krisha, my magical sack is missing. The Healer’s eyes widened in sudden alarm.

“Raven was in it . . . oh no,” she hoarsely whispered. We have to go back and find it. She needs us.” He nodded, agreeing.

“Yes, we do. I, we, can’t abandon her. Krisha, she’s special.” Krisha lowered her head and smiled.

“I agree . . . and you are falling for her.” Artemis eyes widened.

“Krisha, she’s too young and not of my race. Why would you say that?” Krisha nuzzled Lucky and smiled.

“I know the patience of the Ardenoth. You are a long lived race.” Artemis shook his head, but said nothing. Krisha placed a gentle, shaking, hand on his and gently squeezed.

“Tell me about . . . special,” she inquired in earnest. Artemis turned his hand over, intertwining his fingers with hers.

“I have looked into her soul. She has abilities the likes of which are rare to possess . . . legendary.” Krisha squeezed his hand and leaned slightly forward.

“Are you at liberty to say any of the particulars?” He thought for a moment, then sighed.

“I do believe she is a Dream Seer.” Krisha furrowed her brows and shrugged.

“What is a Dream Seer?”

“Raven dreams the truth of things.”

“You mean like the future?” Krisha inquired, suddenly interested. Artemis nodded, looked down at their hands and smiled.

“It runs deeper than that, but yes, that is part of what she can do.” Krisha , I am over a thousand years old. I have seen much in this world. Through all the many years, I have trained in the arts of many powers.” Artemis took her hand between both his. Krisha relaxed, her breathing less tense.

“You three are not the only ones I have rescued. There are many others.” Krisha moved closer to him. Lucky squirmed out from between them and stood by wagging its tail.

“Where are they now?” Artemis’ eyes glistened and narrowed menacingly in the firelight.

“I lured them out in to the wilds, like you, and keep them as slaves. They are mine to do with as pleases me.” Krisha looked at Artemis, not knowing what to say.

“What?” She stated, suddenly apprehensive. Artemis laughed at the look on her face, then placed a hand on her head and pushed her backward. Krisha looked at him with an odd expression, then snickered.

“Jerk.” Shrugging, he bared his teeth at her.

“I deserved that,” he laughed. “Well, I am a blood-sucking vampire, right?” Krisha laughed, closed the distance between them, and kissed him, wrapping her arms about his neck tight. It was sudden, and took him off guard, but he did not stop her. Caressing her auburn hair, he kissed her back. After a long moment, Krisha's eyes widened. Quickly she parted, her face flushing crimson.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I’m sorry.” Artemis smiled lovingly at her and shook his head.

“Krisha, you are not only beautiful, but one of a kind. You, milady, do not need magic or some extra-ordinary ability to be a healer. Thank you for the affection. I believe I am a better man for knowing you.” Flattered, she smiled, her eyes glittering with pleasure.

“I, I don’t know what to say.” She bit her lip.

“Krisha,” he whispered, “do you know what your gifts are?” He gently

stated, enveloping her in a tender embrace. Melting into his arms, she shook her head and looked up at him, now completely helpless.

“Do I have gifts?”

“Oh, indeed you do,” he replied.

“What is my gift sir?”

“You have the gift of . . . how should I say this? Let me explain it to you.” Artemis thought for a moment. “Krisha, I believe you have made an ally out of an ancient horror. I have never know anyone who could gain the attention of such a deadly being such as the one you have encountered, and not perished. Do you see what I’m telling you?” Krisha looked down at Lucky. She thought about everything that had happened.

“I don’t fully understand, but I think maybe Lucky is, in a way, the one I spoke with earlier. There’s more. I went to him, Artemis. I want to help him. I embraced him in all the tenderness of my soul. I believe I can help him be rid of this terrible curse that burns within him. I want to. I will do it.” Artemis grinned.

“And yet you still live. I am deeply impressed. Keep your promise to him. You may save a soul most would deem lost. There you go; that’s a beginning for you. With something like this, I cannot train you. This is something you must cultivate for you. It is deep and confusing, even to me. But it is also wondrous . I don’t know what else to say bout it, but let it flow within you. Don’t resist it.” Krisha grinned and kissed Artemis again. He accepted the affection gratefully.

“There, I don’t know if I will ever have another chance to do that again.” Artemis beamed a smile at her.

“You may, you may. You know, I have this effect on women. I was born with it.” Krisha forced herself to part from him. Grabbing a part of the branch, she pulled it over the flames, then looked at Ogrin.

“What about Ogrin? What gift does he possess?”

“Unbreakable loyalty and fearlessness.” Their Vampire guide and protector gazed long at the sleeping Dwarf, contemplating. “He is our anchor to simplicity,

something many leave behind as they ascend to power. I brought him along for me . . . in the begging. I felt I needed to be reminded of the basics of life . . . origins . . . innocence.” A sudden look of pure admiration filled the Vampire’s expression as he looked down upon Ogrin. “I love this Kithrin Dwarf outcast. He is a true, down-to-earth, anchor we can all take an example from.” Krisha looked at Ogrin.

“I find great comfort in his presence. I need him very much.” Artemis nodded.

“As do I.” She looked at Artemis in all seriousness.

“We need to find Raven. I know her absence is bothering you. He glanced out into the forest, a worried expression changing his face.

“We will not split up . . . wait, Krisha, would it be too much to ask you to ask your friend to help us find Raven?” Krisha’s shoulders slumped, as if a heavy weight had just been placed on her back. Her hands began to tremble. She took in a quivering breath and let it out.

“I will try,” she stated. Artemis could sense her heartbeat quicken, and regretted asking such a thing of her.

She walked out to the edge of the firelight and knelt. She didn’t know how to begin. The small deer put its head up under her hand. Looking at Lucky, she noticed his eyes were fixed on hers. She caressed Lucky’s head and ears and pulled the small deer up to her face. Nuzzling the tiny animal, she enjoyed its company. Then an idea took hold in her mind.

“Lucky,” she whispered, “I need to speak with your master. Can you please help me?” Lucky struggled free, backed up a step, looking at her, as if waiting.

“If you can hear me sir, I need your help. We’ve lost a companion, who is a dear friend of mine. I know you owe me nothing, but I beg your help. I would gladly trade a service for your help, if you so desire.” Krisha became silent, waiting. The deer laid down beside Krisha and leaned against her. It looked about the area, peering his way and that and she patiently waited. After a long while,

Krisha assumed the answer was no. At any length, it as a long shot.

It was not long after that, that Ogrin awoke. Standing, he stretched and suddenly scowled at the condition of the fire.

Raven circled lower and lower until she spotted the source of the fire. It was no dragon at all. Landing in the top of a massive tree, she spied out each of her friends with growing excitement.

"Let's see just how good they are. A little test to check their awareness," she whispered. She spied out Artemis, her eyes narrowing like a predator.

"He's going to be the hard one to sneak up on. But, if I can do it, it will be quite the accomplishment." Raven jumped out of the tree, landing lightly upon the ground, keeping the fire between her and her companions. Taking great care, she began creeping toward them, a slight grin playing upon her lips. Slower and slower she stalked, making no sound, heading for Artemis first. She was moving up behind him as he began stoking up the fire. Just as she was about to pounce on him, Artemis looked suddenly startled, as if something had surprised him. Instantly, he turned and ran to her with amazing speed, picked her up off the ground and embraced her. Holding her tight, he let out an exclamation of joy, mingled with emotion.

"I thought I lost you." Flattered, Raven wrapped her arms about his neck and looked into his eyes.

"Wow, if you like, you could show me a little more affection . . . I don't mind," she whispered, grinning. Sighing in relief, Artemis smiled briefly and tightened his hold on her.

"You're safe, you're safe," he whispered, his voice flooded with relief. Raven grinned, happily catching her breath. Looking into his eyes, she began running her fingers through his hair.

"I missed you too, fangs." He lowered her to the ground gently and turned to Krisha and Ogrin, who seemed thrilled at Raven's sudden return.

"Og is happy now!" he bellowed as he tromped up to her and bowed deeply. "Og was afraid Raven was bored in that magic sack!" The Dwarf reached up and patted Raven on the forearm, then threw Artemis a look of disapproval. "Og must

build the fire up," he stated down his nose at Artemis, then stalked back to the fire and began positioning the ends of the branches into it and blowing on the base of the flames.

Krishna, who was waiting her turn, embraced Raven with a strong grip. Raven noticed Krishna's eyes were tear-filled.

"I was afraid I would never see you again," she softly wept. "I'm sorry to be so emotional. It's just, you scared me." She squeezed Raven hard, placing her lips to Raven's ear. "Don't you ever do that again." Raven felt like she was being smothered, but it wasn't so bad, coming from a friend who really cared.

"Okay, I promise," she wheezed. Krishna released her, then hugged her again.

"Good. I love you Raven, and my heart would break if you were lost." The way Krishna said it caused Raven's heart to melt in her chest. Not knowing how to respond, she simply nodded. Artemis placed a gentle hand on Krishna's shoulder.

"All right, all right," he stated tenderly, "give her some space." Krishna backed away, then turned to see if the Dwarf needed any assistance.

When Raven and Artemis were alone, he took her hand.

"Where have you been?" Raven could tell she wasn't going to get away from the subject until he was fully satisfied. Taking his hand, she pulled him away from the other two.

"Let's go for a short walk." Artemis hesitated.

"You sure you are up to it? You are covered in perspiration. I can smell it keenly in your clothes. You've had a strenuous flight." Raven ignored the comment, tightened her grip on his hand and pulled him into a walk.

"Artemis, I need to tell you what happened." Giving in, he fell in beside her, interlocking his fingers with hers. She liked that. It thrilled her to know he was warming up to her. She hoped . . .

"I can't wait to hear your tale," he stated, pretending to already be amazed.

Without responding, she continued walking until she knew Ogrin and Krisha could not hear them. Looking back at the fire, Raven stopped and turned, letting go of Artemis's hand. Reaching under her left wing, at her hip, she quickly untied his magical Storing Sack and handed it to him. As he reached for it, she pulled it behind her.

"Earn it back." Artemis chuckled.

"Tenacious and witty." She nodded, agreeing.

"So that's why you wanted to be away . . . to bribe me with my own belongings." Raven stepped back.

"What would you do if you were me, huh?" Artemis laughed and held up his hands.

"But I'm a blood-sucking monster. Aren't you afraid of me?" Raven sighed.

"Do I need to be?" Artemis frowned.

"No," he stated with conviction, "never." Blowing some loose hair out of her face, she bit her lip, weighing her next move.

"You also need to earn the extras I got for you." His smile turned to curiosity. Giving him a cocky look, she chuckled.

"Earn it back," she insisted, stepping up to him. Raven was instantly embraced, taking her off guard. The hug he gave her melted her heart. After a few moments, he parted from her.

"How did I do?" She quickly handed Artemis the sack.

"Could have been better. You'll have to work on it," she teased, to which he smirked and opened the sack. Looking in, she watched his eyes widen in wonder and astonishment.

"Where did you get all this?" Proudly, Raven looked into the Storing Sack as she began scratching the top of his head, working down to his neck.

"Leprechaun," she whispered.

The instant she said, Leprechaun, Artemis grabbed her around the waist, closed the bag and sprinted with incredible speed back to the fire. The speed of

his movement nearly caused her to scream. Once back at the campsite, he dropped Raven to the ground, none to gently, and leapt into the flames, stomping it out with a feverish look on his face. The three watched on in stunned silence as the last of the flames were extinguished. Artemis then began scooping dirt onto the coals in haste until it was buried.

"We have to leave, now," he hissed, looking around the area as if he expected a sudden ambush. "This creature travels at incredible speed. We must be gone. Ogrin, Krisha, I need you to get all your things into the Storing Sack, now! Raven, I need you to fly us out of this forest. I am going into the sack as well." Artemis pointed. "That is north." Raven agreed without question, suddenly afraid.

"I know my bearings." She looked at the sack, which Ogrin had just squeezed into. Krisha followed after the Dwarf, vanishing in as well. Raven neared Artemis and pointed to the sack.

"Hurry." Without hesitation, he slipped in with a bit of difficulty. Once inside, Raven grabbed the Storing Sack and launched into the air, feeling a sudden warning that bit into her gut. No sooner had she taken flight, there came a scream and cursing on the ground below. She looked down to see a slender, tiny, man trailing after her at incredible speed.

"That's what you get, clepto thief! She yelled. "You shouldn't steal from us! Go rob a goblin!" she yelled in triumph.

"Raven, don't talk to it. This creature has an incredible memory. They are extremely intelligent and cunning." Raven shrugged.

"But, it can't fly." Ogrin burst into the conversation.

"Let us bash it!" he bellowed.

"Ogrin," Krisha soothed, "Don't let it hear you, please." Ogrin said no more.

Raven rose upward toward the thermals, where she could glide the currents of wind without laboring to fly. She was already tired from the previous flight,

and this was leading her slowly to exhaustion. To keep her mind off the fatigue, she began riddling Artemis with questions, needing to hear the sound of his voice to get her mind off of her weakening wings.

"Artemis, tell me about this Leprechaun. First what is so dangerous about it?"

"Leprechauns are infamous thieves. They are also fast; unnaturally fast. It can easily outrun the fastest war horse, and it takes only an instant to reach full speed." Raven whistled.

"Impressive. So why don't we just kill it?" Artemis chuckled.

"Raven, you can't kill a Leprechaun. Dropping a mountain on it would only trap it until it digs its way out, or the mountain erodes away over time. The only thing they fear is being captured, which is death to them. And capturing a Leprechaun is nigh impossible." Raven thought about it for a while, trying to contrive a way to capture the little monster, but could not come up with a plan. Giving up on the idea, she continued flying, watching the skies suspiciously for any signs of danger.

Not long after taking flight, she felt sweat begin to build up on every part of her body as she labored up through the bottom-most layer of the thermals. This was the hard part about riding the great river of wind; getting to it. Exhaustion was beginning to creep in on her at an alarming rate now, and the joints of her wings ached.

Looking up, she knew she had to get up higher, where she could glide. As for now, it seemed the thermals were trying to keep her out. High up in the thermals, Raven could spread her wings and let the wind do most of the work for her. The problem was, it was a well known means of travel for the larger avian predators. There was no choice in the matter. If what Artemis said was true, she would have a better chance to face an avian predator, even in her exhausted state.

Gritting her teeth, she worked her way upward, quickly catching a desirable updraft, and slipped into a massive current of wind she knew she should not have

trespassed into. Once up, she spun a circle three times in the attempt to spot danger before it took notice of her. She was alone, as far as she could tell, and so slipped into a steady glide to conserve energy and limit the fatigue beginning to weigh heavily in her shoulders and wings. After a bit, Artemis spoke up.

"Raven, do you see the edge of the forest?" She nodded.

"Yes, in the distance."

"Your heartbeat is very high. Are you okay?" Placing a hand over her heart, she cringed. He was right. Her chest was beginning to hurt, but she could not let her friends down, not now.

"I'll make it. I can do this," she panted. Artemis sighed heavily.

"Ours lives may depend on it." She didn't like the sound of that one bit. She thought about the dream she had . . . Artemis's head in that box. The memory of that dream caused her to shiver.

"Are Leprechauns dangerous?" she asked, already knowing the answer. She needed to get her mind off of how weak she was getting. This would have been no problem, but she had been flying too long already.

"Only if you rob them." She had taken everything it had. Now she realized just how lucky she was to have escaped that vile creature.

"Do they have any other weakness?"

"Yes, one. If you can call them by their true name, it makes them weak and vulnerable. But finding out a Leprechaun's name is impossible. It's like fighting a Lich. If you don't find and destroy the olfactory they place their soul into, you may as well flee and save yourself." Raven thought about the dream in which she spoke the Leprechaun's name. For a few moments, there was total silence, with the exception of the sea of wind that bore her forward.

"Then we can kill it. It may have just been a dream, but I've been having a dream about one of the Gleighdor, not my breed. Her name is Allanna." Raven waited for the three to laugh at her, but they did not.

"Raven, when you dream about something, or someone, do you feel like you

are in that dream, or like you are watching it?" She thought about the question for a minute, then replied confidently.

"I feel awake, like I'm there. Things change chaotically when I simply dream. Dreaming is different. Allanna is real, I know it. She's Sagen, of the snowy owl breed of my species. Artemis, she calls to me. My father and others never believed me, and, at times, beat me for talking about her . . . but they were ignorant of what I know, and what I can do. They simply did not want - did not wish - to understand and accept my abilities." She wondered what Artemis would think of her now. No doubt, he'd think her a fool with an over-active imagination. This was, of course, entirely untrue, as Artemis's next words confirmed.

"Raven," he stated with conviction, "I believe you. But, why are you telling me this?" Raven shuddered, remembering the dream . . . the presents.

"I had a dream while in the Storing Sack. I know the Leprechaun's name."

"If what you say is true, we have the advantage. Raven, I know this is a very personal question, but may I have permission to observe and enter into your next dream?" Raven laughed.

"As long as I can see you, sure. Might be interesting, but don't get any ideas," she jested. Artemis cleared his throat.

"You are the one with all the ideas lately. So watch your own self, and control your desires, little Raven." Raven smirked.

"You are the girl charmer. It's all your fault I . . . okay, yes, you can enter my next dream. I must warn you, Artemis, you will be stepping into a world I have created since I was a little girl. Are you willing to take that chance? I might not recognize you." Never before had she shared anything like this with anyone.

"Yes. I trust you. Whatever happens, I want you to promise never to blame yourself for anything that might happen to me. Promise me, Raven." Raven rolled her eyes, veering slightly to the right to catch a better current.

"The cat's out of the bag now," she panted. "Now Krisha and Ogrin know my secret as well."

"No, they don't. They are both sleeping. I . . . put them in a stasis sleep. They will not come out of it until I unravel the power over them. To them, they are at peace, in dreams of their choosing. They are safe, that I promise." Raven was confused.

"Why did you do that? Why would you put them to sleep?"

"Because, where we are now headed, I need to be alone with you. We need some one-on-one time together . . . seriously. And, Raven, we need to talk." His last words scared her.

"Am I in trouble?" she asked, dreading a negative answer.

"No, you are not." Without hesitation, she did trust him. In fact, deep down inside, she knew she could count on him.

"I trust you with my life, Artemis."

"Thank you. Maybe together, we can figure all this out. You intrigue me, Raven."

"I'll take that as a compliment, sir."

The high currents allowed her to soar along at great speed. But even then, Raven was worn out. She had been exhausted when they took off, but there had been no choice in the matter. Trying to ignore the fact that her wings were starting to fail, she thought of all the treasure she had confiscated, and where she got it. The thought made her grin, knowing she had taken everything but the larger items from the thief's lair.

"Nasty creature. A good dagger in the back would serve it right," she thought. "It stole me. I stole everything it had." On she soared upon the ever-flowing winds high off the forest floor, determined to get as far from Edgewood as possible. Edgewood . . .

"Hey, Artemis, I guess that dungeon is out the window," she panted.

"It will have to wait until another time. Your heart rate is dangerously high." She cringed, gritting her teeth.

"Artemis, I don't know how much longer I can do this. My wings are failing.

"Look back. Is Edgewood far?" Raven glanced back, scanning the area.

"It is only a small, tiny forest now."

"Impressive. How come you almost froze on that mountain? Why did you not come down?" She shrugged.

"Coming down would have been worse, trust me."

"Ah, yes, I see. Well, from your position, do you spy any civilized areas below. You would see a number of small lights." Raven scanned the area.

"There is a cluster of lights on the horizon." Artemis contemplated for a minute.

"Think you can make it there?"

"Yes, but, Artemis, my strength is almost spent. I'm starting to lose altitude.

"Can you do it?" His voice was filled with concern.

"I hope so. Yes, yes, I can do this."

"Tell you what. After you make it, I'll buy you something nice . . . really nice." Raven's hopes rose.

"Like a ring?" Artemis coughed.

"Always so outspoken. I love your candid nature." Raven laughed.

"Okay, I would absolutely love an outfit. I want one that is red, with plain sleeves down to the gloves."

"Agreed," Artemis said matter-of-fact. "I'd love to see you in a beautiful dress. I'd have to ask you to dance." Raven blushed.

"I've never danced before," she panted heavily, laboring to stay airborne. "Oh, Artemis, one more thing. I want my shoulders and wings massaged."

"It would be my pleasure," he replied without hesitation.

"Ha! I got two things out of you, Vampire. You are easily manipulated. Too easy, too easy. But I must say," she gasped, "it would be my pleasure." She cried out as the joint of her right wing hyper extended.

"When we get to this town, will you allow me the pleasure of going out on a date with you?" Raven's spirits rose instantly, spurring her on toward the lights on the horizon, which were much closer now.

"Yes, please," she stated, then cried out in pain again. As she descended, she knew she should land out of sight, just in case this town harbored prejudice and hostilities toward outsiders. If someone landed in her city, they would be taken quickly. If they had no connections, and had no reason to be there, they would be executed.

Just as she came in low, her wings gave out. The landing was rough. As she touched down, she stumbled and fell, tumbling across the hard-packed earth. She tried to tuck in her wings, but was too late. In a tumbling heap, she felt the elbow of her left wing twist. Her left wrist burst out in pain as she came to a stop. Crying out, Raven rolled onto her stomach and spit dirt out of her mouth within a cloud of drifting dust.

Laying on the well-traveled road, Raven panted, instant tears flowing. She

was hurting like never before. It felt as though she had just been jumped by a group of bandits and beaten with clubs.

"I can't believe I just did that," she lamented, tears streaming her face. She tried to retract her wings, but failed to bring her left wing in all the way, due to injury. She lay for only a moment, before she struggled into kneeling position, her left wing dragging the ground.

"Raven, are you alright?" Artemis asked, concerned. Wiping her face, she cried out in pain and grabbed the Storing Sack. Ignoring the pain in her wrist, she untied it from her waist, opened it and reached in a hand. Instantly Artemis's hand slipped into hers. Gripping tight, she pulled. Artemis was as light as a small rock, but when he exited the sack, he quickly grew to his normal size and became heavy. Struggling as best she could, Raven helped him out, then backed away, crying out through clenched teeth as she held her wrist against her chest.

Staggering to his feet, Artemis caught his balance, grabbed the Storing Sack, tied it to his belt and tucked it beneath his trench-coat. Making his way over to Raven, he knelt before her and reached out, lightly touching her wing, a look of sympathy etched into his handsome face.

"How bad is it?" Leaning forward, she rested her head against his chest, breaking down in tears.

"Not sure," she sobbed. "I think I broke my wrist." She went silent, slowly trying to gain control of her emotions. Gently wrapping his arms about her, Artemis held her close as she composed herself.

"Take your time. We are in no hurry now," he reassured her. "Thank you, Raven, for bringing us out of danger. What you did was incredible, and I am so grateful for you.

"Simeon, I think that's the Leprechaun's name. Simeon." Nodding, Artemis retrieved the Storing Sack, opened it, and pulled out a roll of clean, white cloth.

"Where is your wing injured exactly?" Sitting back, she pointed to the elbow, then let her head fall against him again, feeling sick to her stomach.

Pulling a length from the roll, he tore it off and gently began wrapping her injured wing. Raven jerked back, then collapsed against him again.

"Hurts!" she cried out.

"Okay," Artemis stated, "I'll have to bite you then. That will make everything go away." He didn't see her grin.

"You wouldn't," she replied, bringing her wing back so he could continue tending it. As he wrapped the joint, Artemis chuckled.

"No, I would not." Holding out her left arm, she looked up at him, noticing just how incredibly handsome he was. Taking another strip of cloth, he wrapped her wrist with skill.

"Does your wing hurt bad?" She nodded.

"Yes."

"You and I are going to be alone for a couple days, maybe longer. I'll take care of you." Raven brightened up through her tears.

"I'd like that. I'd really like that." Artemis smiled, then became deadly serious.

"Raven, no one can know what I am. As far as they need to know, if they ask, I am Human. Understand?" She nodded, looking at the dressing on her wing. It was very good.

"Thank you," she stated through clenched teeth.

"You are welcome. But I hope I never have to do that again," he whispered, gently touching the wrapped joint of her wing.

"You know, fangs, you need to stop doing that." Artemis laughed.

"Doing what?" he asked.

"You know exactly what. You don't need to do it with me. I already enjoy being with you, so don't try and charm me." Understanding, he shook his head.

"You know, you need to stop allowing yourself to succumb to my charm." Raven shook her head and snickered mischievously.

"I don't want to." She argued, fresh tears welling up in her eyes. Brushing a

hand through her hair, he smiled.

"You are so beautiful, you know that, right?" She blushed, then cried out as she pulled her wing in.

"Even as filthy as I am?" He nodded.

"Yes, even as filthy as you are."

"Thank you, Vampire." Putting a finger to his lips, he indicated silence on the subject.

"Sorry," she mouthed. She reached her good arm up about his neck.

"How many women have you said that to?" Smiling, he rolled his eyes.

"Raven, I've been alive for over a thousand years." She let out an emotional laugh, cut short by her condition, and rested against him once again.

"Then, you are too old for me." He smiled, and stroked her hair. "Artemis?"

"Yes, Raven?"

"Thank you for all you've done for me. You really don't know just how lucky I am to have met you. I really do enjoy you." Genuinely flattered, Artemis continued arranging her long, black hair back into place.

"You are very welcome milady." Looking up, she playfully snapped her teeth at him. Standing, he lifted her gently to her feet and offered her his arm. Resting her head on his shoulder, Raven enjoyed a time she had never experienced in all her life. Even with the pain she was in, she had never been happier . . . even if he was a blood sucker.

"Sir, where did you come from? It's like you planned all this out." Artemis thought for a just a moment.

"Our meeting was destiny's fate. I came for you. You are far more special than you realize. I had to get you out of there." Raven looked up at him.

"Special? Came for me?" He nodded.

"You will understand later, I promise. Until then, let's you and I enjoy some time together, shall we?" She liked the sound of that.

"Yes, I would enjoy that very much. But, you didn't answer my question.

Where did you come from?"

"A very, very long time ago, I was born in a small village that I will not name. It has long since decayed, and is now considered a ghost town." Raven was intrigued.

"Is it really a ghost town?"

"Yes. Only the brave and powerful go there . . . or the young and foolish." A haunted look crossed his face.

"There are many souls trapped there . . . sadness. There are a few who see nothing more to their existence but to take charge of those souls. It gives not only those spiritual leaders purpose, but gives the lesser souls, phantoms, who are eternally trapped, a purpose as well." She did not know why, but Raven felt sad for them.

"Is it possible to release them from such an existence? Can you help them?" Artemis shook his head, then nodded.

"The leaders would resist anyone who tried. The common spirits would also support their leaders. To say the least, it would be a fight, and one you and I could not win. Best leave it be – that is where I come from. Raven shrunk against Artemis, leaning into him heavily as she looked behind her, half expecting some apparition trailing after them.

"Do not fear, Raven. There is no danger near us. I know this." His words gave her courage.

"Oh, Artemis, this is yours." She slipped the black orb into his hand. "I took it out of the ivory carved box. I'm sorry I meddled with your property. I became too curious, and I was wrong to do it."

"Raven, a lot better and a lot worse comes out of that chest. Next time you reach in, please have me with you. Also, that chest must be out of the sack and away from people . . . far away." He placed the small orb back in her hand. "Keep it as my first gift to you." Raven's eyes widened.

"Thank you," she said, giving Artemis a look of surprise "Why me?"

"What do you mean?" Raven rested her head against his shoulder. Understanding, Artemis guided her toward the city, supporting her. He could feel how weak she was.

"I felt something about you since I met you. I see things in people. You are one of those people." Exhausted, Raven looked up at him in earnest.

"What is it you see in me?" He thought about it as they walked.

"For one, you can fly." She scoffed.

"Not for a while." Artemis chuckled.

"Yes, but you will." Rolling her eyes, Raven looked up at him in all seriousness.

"Okay, anything of significance?" He thought for a moment, amusing her.

"You have the most gorgeous wings." Raven gave Artemis a stern look, to which he held up a hand.

"Okay, okay. I believe you see the future, in your dreams. I'm not sure yet, but when we get to the inn, I will stay with you as you sleep. Please don't comment on that. I get it all the time from women. Being a Vampire comes with a few curses just as a Karritch Gleighdor, especially a beautiful one like your, walks into a Human civilization." Raven was utterly flattered. Tears began to flow again.

"Is this another curse you possess . . . to make me cry? Artemis, all my life, I was told I was ugly." Artemis stopped and turned.

"They lied. You are one of the most beautiful girls I've ever met, especially for being so very young. Raven, they lied."

"I'm nineteen," she said, rebelling against his judgement of her. He laughed.

"Liar." He winked at her sudden look of shock. Squeezing his arm, she shook her head.

"You maniac," she mumbled, and rested her head on his shoulder again. She was so tired.

"In all seriousness, Raven, I've never seen anyone with such a physical build. Your slightly high cheek bones, dark as black eyes, and the grace by which

you walk. You should be proud of the knock-out you are. Watch the men as we enter into town . . . watch their eyes. I think you will be genuinely enlightened to the truth of which I speak. And yet, I did not choose you because you are beautiful. I chose you because I believe you are - or I think you are - something more than what you seem to be. Raven, you are special, and I'm not just trying to flatter you.

"I'm beautiful?" she asked timidly, not believing what she was hearing.

"Yes. And if I wasn't Ardenoth, I would attempt to claim you as my own." She snickered as he gently brushed dust from her hair and shoulders. "It surprises me that no one in your eerie ever told you this."

"Well, putting aside the vampiric' lure thing, I don't mind that you like me. And putting aside my beauty, I don't mind liking you." Artemis smiled, backed off, still holding her uninjured hand.

"The dawn will be coming on in a few hours. Then, we have a date on the town." Instantly, Raven eyes brightened up, rivaling two radiant stars.

"I thought vampires can't be in the sunlight," she retorted, knowing full well that was merely a legend.

"I am true race."

"I was kidding, fangs." He grinned.

"I'm going to show you a great time."

"I can't wait," she replied.

Turning, he led her toward the distant gates of the town. As they walked, he produced a flask of water and a cloth. Stopping, he pulled the stopper from the flask and doused the cloth. He then proceeded to clean her face, hair and wings as best he could.

"Here, wash the dirt out of your mouth." She took the flask and did as instructed. Soon, she was as clean as she was going to get without actually bathing.

"There, that's better. Wow, you are more gorgeous than I thought." Putting

the stopper back into the end of the flask, she handed it back to him. As he put away the flask and cloth, she wondered at something.

"Artemis?"

"Yes, Raven?"

"Again, why me?" Stopping, he pulled her to him, wrapping his arms about her, careful not to cause her pain.

"Why not?" Accepting that answer, she once again rested her head on his shoulder, feeling heavy, especially in her eyes.

"Okay, I can accept that." she whispered.

As they approached the gate, they both stopped and waited to be seen.

"Who goes there? State your business," came a stern command.

"I and my wife are explorers. My name is Artemis, and this is Raven."

Raven focused on keeping her face emotionless as he spoke. She looked at the city gates that appeared to be a very large, very well constructed log fort with ramparts. It was a sure sign this place had been under attack multiple times.

"What business does a Gleighdor have here?" Artemis opened his Storing Sack.

"I am confident in her peaceful nature. As a token of peace, I will give you each a very valuable gem. If I am wrong, I will allow you to kill me." Raven's eyes widened in surprise at his words. He pulled out six, twelve karat rubies.

"I hope we have a deal, my friends." The captain of the guard came down and opened the small gate-door and looked at them.

"What if they are fake?"

"Then take these for you and your men as well. You can't go wrong with gold. The captain's eyes widened as he looked into a sack of gold Artemis pulled out of nowhere and opened. Curiously, Raven looked at the Vampire's trench coat. She had not seen him reach into the Storing Sack, yet this bag of gold was rather heavy.

"Well, a wealthy man is no bringer of doom. Welcome to our city." He bowed. "And welcome milady. You grace us with your beauty." He looked at Artemis.

"No disrespect intended."

"None taken sir," Artemis said, throwing Raven a knowing smile, as if saying, "I told you".

They passed through the gate as the Captain of The Guard divided up the goods with his men. Raven looked at Artemis, suddenly smiling, which he noticed.

"What," he inquired at the look she was giving him.

"Where shall we celebrate our honeymoon? Or is that after the night on the town?" Artemis stopped.

"Had I only told them you were a traveling companion, I don't think they would have let you in." She grinned even the more.

"What would my father say?" Raven stated slyly. Artemis grimaced.

"Well, he would say no for one. Then he would have me killed." Raven laughed.

"To think, I'm married. I didn't even know it until now. Aren't you going to kiss the bride?" Artemis shook his head, exasperated.

"You'd like that wouldn't you?" Raven nodded, then pointed at him.

"And you would too. So just seal the deal now. Come on."

"No," he flatly stated.

"Fine, you have to sleep sometime. I'll get it then."

"How's your wing doing?" Artemis inquired, changing the subject.

"Really sore. I am grounded for a while." Artemis touched it. "Artemis, we better get to an inn. That Leprechaun was trailing me." Seeing her point, he looked around.

"Okay, come on." Raven stopped, throwing him a funny look.

"Only if you carry me across the threshold." He rolled his eyes and ruffled her hair into her face. Raven flipped her hair back over her shoulders and laughed.

"I bet there is more to you than you would ever tell." He nodded, but did not expound on the subject. "I have a lot of questions. When we get to the room, would you mind if I talked with you then?" Artemis shook his head.

"Not at all." They continued down the empty street, seeing a few guards here and there, all of which were mounted on horseback.

"I have to confess something. I've never had a date before." Artemis looked at her in disbelief.

"Well, their loss. Okay, remember, Raven, you are supposed to be my wife.

Please don't give anyone any other ideas. These people know each other, all of them. Can you act the part?" Nodding enthusiastically, Raven threw him a sly grin, enjoying the banter.

"Can you act the part of loving me more than anything?"

"Yes, I can," he said.

"Too bad you really don't," she teased.

"Raven, hush." She looked about, pretending to check out the shops. One shop in particular caught her eye. Artemis noticed.

"It is easy to act like I love you," he whispered. "Raven, please just play the part. I told them you are my wife." His words sobered her.

"Artemis, do you love me?" Bending close, he whispered, "Raven, I like you very much. Its deeper than that. To be honest, when I thought I lost you, my heart threatened to break. Yes Raven, I am beginning to seek your heart." She nodded, then narrowed her eyes at him.

"Do you love me?"

"You are a very persistent, Karritch." Raven sighed deeply, then cuffed him with her uninjured wing. "Karritch custom?" he asked. Raven shook her head.

"No, I just felt the need to hit you, that's all." Artemis smiled, amused.

"Let's continue, shall we?" Soon they were both standing before the finest inn in the city.

"Raven, the food here is exquisite. Do not be fooled by the simplicity of the place. Looks can be deceiving." Raven perked up and laughed.

"You are living proof of that." Artemis chuckled.

"At some point we are going to be alone, so you better watch it." Raven thought about it for a moment, taking the arm he offered.

"Sounds good to me," she replied.

"Let's go in and have some dinner."

"Please," she replied without hesitation.

Artemis led her up a set of log cut steps to the front door, and stopped.

Above the eave hung a large steel sign. On it was the inscription, Iron Toe Inn.

"Raven, as you enter, be aware that they will look at you . . . stare at you. They are not trying to be rude. It's just, the Karritch Gleighdor seldom - if at all - make their way into these parts. To them, you are different. They are not being rude, just curious." Raven nodded.

"Good to know," she sighed, bracing herself to be the center of attention . . . something she had always avoided.

"Here are a few coins to do with as it seems good to you. Money always cures the oddities of a strained social encounter. That's why I always carry around enough to buy up a small town. It has socially saved me more times than I can count. Most of these people are poor, so don't flaunt it." Raven squeezed his arm tight, a nervousness setting it.

"I'll be careful. You are the first person to ever give me any money." Smiling down at her, he winked, instantly charming her . . . again. He then opened the door and led Raven into a large common room.

There were three minstrels playing music over by a very large hearth. Looking around, Raven instantly fell in love with the place. On every wall were set pictures of great hunts. One in particular caught her eye. It was a group of adventurers taking down a blood-thirsty vampire . . . another, a werewolf. Artemis leaned in and whispered, "This is a tough lot here." Nodding, she let go his arm. Stepping over to the portrayal of the vampire being destroyed, she did not hear the music ebb, and then stop.

Everyone's focus was on Raven, who stared at the life-size pictorial, intrigued at the nature of vampires who were different than Artemis.

"Artemis, this must have been a grand hunt." She leaned toward him, lowering her voice. "Do you know this vampire?" Rolling his eyes, he took her by the hand and pulled her away from the painting. Every eye was on her, and it crossed her mind to turn and leave. If not for a gentle squeeze from Artemis's hand, she would have.

Artemis took Raven to the check-in desk and inquired about a room for the night. A large man with an apron and a towel hung over his shoulder shrugged at the two of them, frowning.

"I'm sorry, all rooms are filled for the night. And your names?" Artemis bowed respectfully.

"I am Artemis, and this is my new bride, Raven, of the Karritch Gleighdor Eerie. She is injured, as you can see." Artemis wrapped a reassuring arm about her, feeling her tremble. "We just need one night to rest up. And your name sir?" Shocked, the large man shook his head.

"Where are my manners. My deepest apologies. My name is Iron Toe, and I am the owner of this inn. My dear, you look pale, you must've taken quite a landing. Tell me, how did it happen?" Raven winced; modest drama on her part, just as the minstrels began to fill the common room with music.

"I was trying to get to the top of Mount Eerie, when a strong wind blew. The gale forced me to the rocks below. If Artemis, who was not my husband at the time, had not come along, I would never have survived." The innkeeper looked at Artemis, and whispered.

"We don't have any rooms left sir." Artemis held out a hand politely.

"Please, just call me Artemis."

"Right, right, Artemis. I'm sorry." Artemis reached into his pocket and pulled out a few high-quality gems, and black-gold (the highest form of currency).

"Sir, we really need a room. My wife is hurt -"

"Right . . . right. Well, I'll see what I can do." Off Iron Toe went, and disappeared through the kitchen door without taking any of Artemis's gems or money.

"I love the sound of this music," Raven whispered, enjoying it immensely. Artemis agreed.

"These Bards skilled in their craft." Artemis walked over to them as he slipped three gold coins into Raven's hand.

"Give them each of them one," he whispered. "You need to be liked." Eagerly, she made her way over to them and placed the coins in the brass container. Without stopping, they nodded.

Every seat in the house was taken, but the bar stools, which was perfect for Raven. Artemis helped her onto a bar stool, but, before he took the seat by her, an elderly man sat next to her. Turning, he smiled, obviously drunk.

Artemis walked to the other side, of Raven, but found it suddenly taken as well by a young man who instantly minded his own business. He shrugged and mouthed, "Watch this". He approached the young man.

"My wife and I were going to sit here." He laid a white-gold piece on the counter before him. "You wouldn't mind, would you?" The man instantly took the coin and got up.

"Here, it's all yours sir."

"Thank you," Artemis stated politely, bowing slightly. Raven smiled admirably at Artemis.

"What about a room?" she inquired. "We may be out of luck here." Artemis thought for a moment as the innkeeper returned.

"I'm sorry hun, our honeymoon will have to be put on hold." Putting on a look of true disappointment, Raven fretted.

"Well, what do we do now?"

"I'll tell you what you do now," Iron Toe interjected. Come with me." Artemis threw Raven a quick wink. After climbing four flights of stairs, they proceeded to the end of a well taken care of hallway. Once they reached the end of the hall, the innkeeper reached up and fiddled with the roof. Raven watched what he was doing with sudden interest as Artemis looked at her, amused at her interest in what the innkeeper was doing.

"You okay?" Artemis stated, rather concerned. Raven nodded.

"I've seen better days milord, but I'll be alright. Thank you." Snap, went a piece of the roof, producing a small handle. Iron Toe pulled down hard, producing

a steep stairwell, which reminded Raven of the stairs she had often ascend to get into the attic at Guild`House.

"You'll find it clean, that's a promise. Well, good night to you both."

Artemis grabbed the innkeeper's hand and quickly placed ten black-gold pieces in his palm. He then placed a pearl of no small size in with the small pile of coins.

"For going out of your way for us. Thank you sir. I am in your debt." Iron Toe looked at the small fortune in his hand and laughed.

"It is I, sir, who am at your service. There is a bell up there, pull it and someone will come see to your every need. Well, goodnight folks." Iron Toe formally bowed, then proceeded back down the hall whistling a merry tune.

Without warning, Artemis scooped up Raven and climbed the stairs. Once up into the room, he set her down. Behind them, the stairs slowly closed on their own.

"There, I carried you across the threshold. Happy?" She shook her head and grinned.

"Yes," Raven answered, not daring to look into his eyes. An awkward silence filled the rather large and lavish room. Artemis looked at Raven, who seemed to be interested in something on the floor. When she did look up, she realized he was looking at her rather fondly.

"I'm hungry" She stated, a tinge of nervousness playing in her voice. Nodding, he pulled out his Storing Sack.

"Mind if we keep it simple?" Raven shook her head.

"No, not at all."

"Good, because we have quite a night ahead of us." Raven's eyes widened as she felt her heart go cold. Artemis laughed quietly and pulled out something wrapped, catching her attention.

"All I need is something simple. I could even sleep on an empty stomach right now. I'm so tired."

"A Dream`Weaver works better when she has food in her stomach. Raven

bit her lip, to which Artemis's eyes changed from all seriousness to almost playful.

"What," she asked.

"You are adorable when you bite your lip like that." Blushing slightly, she turned her attention to the package in his hands.

"Don't make me self conscious." He opened the package to produce a number of small cakes, a bottle of liquid and two cups. Raven looked at the bottle curiously.

"What is it?" She inquired in all curiousness.

"Water," he replied.

Oh, the strong stuff." Artemis nodded.

"Best drink on the planet." Raven laughed.

"I agree. Besides, I've never drank anything alcoholic." Artemis chuckled.

"After we eat, I'll give you a taste of a drink I believe you will enjoy."

They both ate within the soft glow of a single candle set between them. Raven relaxed, though her wrist and wing tortured her something fierce. She could feel her heart beating in her wing, and knew it was useless. However, the pain was overshadowed by what was happening. She didn't want it to end, and so she ate slowly and pretended she was feeling better.

After a time, Artemis reached into his Storing Sack and pulled out a clear bottle with a long neck. She watched him pull the cork out and pour a little into her now empty cup. Raven looked down at it, then smelled it. It had the aroma of mint, which was one of her favorite scents.

"This smells good," she said, inhaling the aroma. Artemis poured himself some as well.

"Just sip it. Don't drink it all at once." Lifting her mug, she let a little into her mouth, tasting it. It instantly warmed her tongue and mouth. When she swallowed the liquid, her throat rebelled, causing her to cough. But, with pure will power, she swallowed it. Artemis did the same.

"Rather tasty, wouldn't you say?" Half choking, she nodded.

"I like . . . it." He laughed and poured himself another cup, then offered her more. Putting her mug under the open end of the bottle, she waited.

"Yes, please." Her stomach felt warm, and her head lightened a bit. It felt good. Pouring her half a mug, he set the bottle down between them and sat back, watching her. Raising the cup to her lips, she closed her eyes and inhaled the scent, then drank it all in one breath. Artemis drained his cup as well, then set his mug down in front of him.

"Raven, slow down." She smiled.

"I'm good. It's really tasty, you know?" Leaning forward, he looked into her eyes, as if searching for something.

"Raven, when I said it was light, I meant for the normal type of drink. For you, not so light. You better have no more." She agreed with a dramatic nod, and pushed her cup across the table toward him. Pointing at the bottle, she narrowed her eyes.

"I would like some more, please." She shook her head, then nodded emphatically. It was then Raven noticed her wrist was no longer throbbing. Extending her left wing slightly, she noticed the same.

"Is this a healing drought?" Artemis poured the liquid slowly, shaking his head.

"No. What you are no longer feeling are the effects of this drink." Before lifting the bottle, she placed two fingers on the tip, forcing him to fill her cup to the brim. Artemis looked a bit worried.

"Raven . . ." Sighing, he shrugged. "Well, go ahead. You've never had a chance to let go before. Drink up, you've earned it." In one breath, she drained the entire mug, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then abruptly slipped into a fit of coughing. After getting control of herself, she pointed at Artemis.

"You know, blood-sucker, you are good to me," she slurred. "You called me little Raven . . . little," she emphasized. "If you get to call me little, I get to call

you blood-sucker." She nodded once at him, pleased with herself. Artemis stood, setting his mug down on the table. As he stood, so did she, keeping one hand on the table as the room swayed and tilted.

"Raven, are you ready to explore that dream gift you have?" As he stepped close to her, she looked up at him, squinting her eyes, trying to focus on his face. Slowly, Raven gripped his shirt with her uninjured hand and raised up on her toes. Abruptly, she puffed a breath into his face.

"That's what you get for tricking me, fangs." Without emotion, he looked down at her, unmoving. She felt drawn to him, like never before, and liked it.

"Stop it," she whispered. "You are beginning to annoy me." A slow smile played across his lips and he bent close to her, gazing deeply into her eyes.

"I . . . can't," he whispered in return, then blew in her face. Raven felt her heart quicken, and her face become warm. Her head began to swim more than what the alcohol was causing.

"I know you can't. You already told me that."

"Then why did you say it . . . again . . . like before." Raven thought about it, then sighed.

"Can't we just get married?"

"Raven, you should not drink." She thought for a moment, then blushed.

"Did I just say that? I'm sorry. I mean, I'm not sorry, but I am." She closed in on him, wrapping her arms about his neck. Slowly, she moved as if to kiss him, then stopped just before making contact.

"Artemis, I need to get away from you. This drink is weakening my resolve to beat you at your own game. I can't have that." She inhaled his breath, then shook her head, blinking, her vision blurring slightly. "Help me," she begged. Quickly, Artemis reached up and pulled her arms from about his neck and pushed them down. Backing away two steps, he pointed at her.

"Are you still willing to let me into your dream?" Taking a deep breath, Raven closed her eyes and shuddered. Focusing for a moment, she opened her

eyes and looked at him in all seriousness.

"What do I do?" Artemis pointed at the bed.

"Go to sleep. I will be right here by your side, holding your hand." Against her will, she turned to face the bed, then walked over to it. Turning, she raised her hand and made a circular motion.

"Turn your back." Smiling, Artemis turned away from her. In a haze of wonder, she climbed into the bed and pulled the blanket over her.

"Okay, you can turn around." She watched the Ardenoth Vampire turn, then slowly walk over to the bed. Sitting down beside her, he reached out, feeling her heart beating faster than normal, and knew it was due to the nature of what she might discover about herself, as well as the affects of his charm.

"Why did you have me turn around?" She smirked.

"To see if you would do what I say," she replied, rather proud of herself. He sighed and smiled.

"Raven, do you trust me?" She didn't hesitate in her answer.

"With my life," she stated groggily, taking in a deep breath and letting it go. Reaching out, she interlocked her fingers with his.

He felt her squeeze and not let go, mumbling something about a goodnight kiss. She warmed his heart; made him feel like life had meaning to it . . . again.

"Now, close your eyes and rest. You've have a hard day." Nodding, she sighed and shut her eyes.

He could see she needed him. In fact, she was latching onto him more and more with every passing day. He did like her very much. Her resistance to his natural charm made him admire her even more. Never had he known anyone to be so resilient to his charm. This had never happened before, and it deeply impressed him. Raven was strong willed, yet inexperienced in the world; a dangerous combination for someone as young as she was.

Raven smiled up at him in a haze and blinked, trying to stay awake. She didn't want this evening to end, but his words echoed gently in her head, causing her to obey. Slowly, she closed her eyes, giving in, passing into a peaceful, restful, slumber.

Artemis waited for a while before placing his free hand over their interlocked fingers. He noticed the grip she had on him was still tight, even in her sleep. Looking down at their joined hands, he smiled, noticing her knuckles and fingers were white from the grip she had on him. Running his fingers through her hair, he looked upon her, watching her slowly relax.

"You really are something, aren't you?" he whispered. Closing his eyes, Artemis lowered his head slightly for a few moments. When he opened his eyes again, they were changed, colorless, without light. He then began a spell.

“In your dream, I share its true,  
Now I leave my mortal home.  
Because you dream, I'm one with you,  
To be with you, I'm not alone.”

Stiffening, Artemis exhaled, his eyes rolling back, as if he had suddenly been slain by the piercing point of a blade. As if time had slowed, he fell forward onto Raven. The moment his body touched hers, she shattered like fragile glass.

Passing through her, Artemis fell through the bed, which also shattered. Down through the floor of the inn he fell, breaking each and every floor of the inn . . . until he struck solid earth.

Landing hard upon jagged rock, Artemis growled in pain as a cloud of thin glass shards showered down upon him. Keeping his face to the rock beneath him, he covered the back of his neck with his hands, protecting himself from being lacerated. Soon the unnatural shower of razor-sharp glass ceased and sunk into the rocky terrain about him, as if each piece was paper thin ice beneath a blistering sun.

Slowly he stood and looked around for Raven. This was her realm. He was cautious about being in her dream. He recalled being brought to death's door in the past, just for entering others dreams. Raven had been brutalized all her life, warning him she would have many defenses up. The entirety of the world he had just entered was of her making, and he could guess it was filled with the power to counter pain, fear and abuse.

Looking to the sky revealed only a dark mass of clouds, forbidding the sun's light to shine through. He wondered if it had been wise to do this without first knowing more about this Karritch Gleighdor he had rescued from an icy death. Well, there was no turning back now . . . at least not yet. He had to know more.

Artemis began walking, making his way through traitorous crags of razor-sharp rocks, deep ravines and up over steep hills filled with loose boulders. Sudden landslides broke loose from a number of areas about him, some of which were dangerously close.

After traversing this deadly, inhospitable landscape, Artemis began to regret entering into Raven's dream world. This, by far was the most hazardous dream he had ever entered. It informed him of just how defensive she had become. Interpreting this world with her past life, Artemis began to fear for his safety. Looking about, he felt his heart break for Raven. He had known some broken souls in his years of gathering them in, but Raven was, by far, the single most oppressed he had ever witness.

As a boulder broke loose beside him, Artemis froze, holding his position,

and watched as it slowly began to roll by. By the time it was halfway down the slope of the mountainside, it had picked up momentum, breaking others loose to follow after. The ground below his feet trembled for a time as the newly born landslide intensified. Where was she?

"Raven", he whispered, "Raven", where are you?" An instant reply came from behind him.

"I should kill you father! Give me one reason why I should not. Beware, your next words will probably be your last." Artemis took a deep breath, calming himself. He thought of a dozen responses, but not one would work. She needed to hear something that would connect her to him . . . help her to remember the bond they had forged in the waking world.

"What is the Leprechaun's name – the one that took my Storing Sack?" He already knew the answer to his question, but she needed to remember it. He waited, watching her reaction. Raven's anger and rage slowly turned to annoyance.

"You know, we should kill it!" Artemis nodded in agreement.

"Yes, we should, Raven. We can, you know. All we need to know is its name. By speaking its name, it will be weakened, vulnerable." Raven flew up and landed directly in front of Artemis, the tips of her wings brushing each side of his head.

"I know you, don't I?" she said, an arrogance in her demeanor.

"Yes," he whispered, "you know me." Folding back her wings, she looked up at him, tilting her head slightly.

"What is your name?" Oh, how he wanted to reach out and embrace her. But, he dared not. Within her was an heir of confidence that told him everything he needed to know. Here, in her fabricated world, she was safe. Within her dreamworld she could manifest the power of her own making with but a simple thought. Here, she had unlimited strength.

"Artemis," he whispered, smiling slightly. She thought for a minute, staring

at him, weighing him. A grin slowly played across her lips, and that predator demeanor began to melt away.

"Artemis, Artemis," she thought aloud. "I know you. You are not my father." Staring at him hard, she narrowed her eyes. "I know you. I see you with my eyes, and I remember. You made it." Slowly, Artemis held out a hand between them, palm up. Glancing at his hand, she grit her teeth and slowly raised her hand, resting it in his. As he gently tightened his grip, so did she. Smiling, she relaxed.

"Where have you been? I've been waiting for you to come for a long time. Did something happen?"

"No. I followed directly after you fell into slumber, even after you began to sleep. I am sorry it took so long. Will you forgive me?" he asked. Pulling up to him, she rested her body against his and looked up into his eyes.

"Always." He grinned and kissed her on the forehead. Frowning, she shook her head, breaking away from his kiss.

"Will you ever truly kiss me fangs?" He suddenly laughed, his senses flooding with relief.

"When the time is right. Patience, Raven." Cringing, Raven rested her head against his chest.

"That is one thing I have never been good at. But, I will try. Simeon. Its name is Simeon," she stated, grinning wickedly, though he did not see the expression. "It needs to hear it. It will serve the freak right for parting us. I want to kill it. It's a danger to everyone . . . especially you and I." Artemis reached up a hand, being cautious and began caressing her hair. Tilting her head to the side, she smiled, listening to the beat of his heart.

"I love it when you do that," she whispered. Artemis sighed in relief.

"This is a dream, Raven, you know that, right?" She shook her head slightly, still listening to his heart.

"No."

"Well it is, and I am with you . . . at your side. You are safe. What I need

you to do is think of Simeon being in the common room of the Iron Toe Inn. Can you do this?"

"Why would I do that? The creature is dangerous."

"Because by speaking his name, he becomes a simple commoner. We will then have our chance to dispose of this menace. If you do not do this, we cannot go to Sanctuary. Also, will you please focus on all the people in the inn not seeing our encounter with Simeon, should he show up?" Instantly, she understood, recalling Krishna and Ogrin . . . their journey.

"Okay, it's done. You better reward me for this, fangs. You owe me." Artemis closed his eyes.

"Raven, I will always be in your debt, just by knowing you. Are you ready to go back to the inn?" Raven instantly nodded, but did not respond. Wrapping her arms about him, she held on, as if she might be left behind.

"In your dream, I leave its true,  
Return me to my mortal home.  
This dream be over, I part from you,  
You and I are not alone."

Raven's world began to disintegrate, as if the decaying hand of atrophy had abruptly sped up to a million times faster than normal. As the mountain below their feet turned to dust, Artemis gripped Raven tight as they fell through the mountain, and into darkened chaos.

Artemis opened his eyes, coming out of her dream. As if coming up from a long dive, he sucked in a sharp breath, raising up off the still sleeping form of Raven. Standing, he snatched up the Storing Sack, turned and exited the room, vanishing down the stairs. Once the door raised back up, he broke into a sprint, jumped down four stairwells, sped into the common room and stopped.

Looking around, he was hoping to see the Leprechaun. His great hope was that she truly was a Dream`Seer, not a mere Dream`Weaver, or Simeon would not be brought to the inn. Within the darkest corner of the common room, he watched and waited, preying for the appearance of a creature he would rather avoid.

After a while, he was not disappointed to see the creature enter into through the front door of the inn, and begin snagging things . . . whatever it could find of value. Through the common room the Leprechaun raced, picking pockets and taking everything of value it could get its hands on. Artemis watched and waited for the right moment. From what he understood of these creatures, they had to make eye contact with you. After this, its name spoken would be its demise.

It was not long after it had entered the inn, that it noticed him and froze. As it's face twisted in rage and anger, Artemis grinned, even as it began to sprint toward him.

"Simeon!" he called out in a loud voice. Instantly the Leprechaun skidded to a halt, faltering, visibly weakened, as if it was suddenly parched and starving. In a single moment, the anger of the Leprechaun melted away, replaced by sudden panic. Instantly, it headed for the front door. Turning away, it awkwardly fled. As it ran past Artemis, he snatched at it, but it managed to evade his grasp.

Racing about a table, it headed for the door, but stopped short as it came face to face with an angry Karritch Gleighdor barring its way. Raven had somehow gotten down stairs without his notice. Her sudden appearance surprised him as much as it did the Leprechaun.

Raven began singing the song it had sung in its home when she was inside

the Storing Sack, though the words fell from her lips, dripping with sarcasm and hate. Astonished, the Leprechaun hesitated, and then cried out in dismay.

The distraction was perfectly executed, allowing Artemis to come up from behind and grip it by the neck. Without hesitating, he dragged the small, green-skinned humanoid out the front door kicking and screaming. Looking back, Artemis noticed it was business as usual at the inn. Throwing Raven a grateful look, he vanished into the dark of the night with the Leprechaun. Raven trailed him, suddenly silent, her eyes filling with an intense hatred.

Not long after dragging the now panicked Leprechaun into a nearby alley, Raven and Artemis returned, entering the inn in total silence. Artemis led her up the stairs and down the hall of the fourth floor. As they reached the end of the hallway, Artemis pulled the stairs down. Raven threw him an angry look and ascended the stairs, fuming mad. She stormed into the room, made it halfway across the floor, then spun around to face him. After the stairs raised up, Raven growled at him.

"You let it go! Why? It's going to remember us, you know that!" Sighing Artemis calmly walked over, took her injured hand and looked at it. Slowly, he unwrapped the bandage. As he did, she stood there, glaring at him in near seething rage. Without looking at her, he reached into his magical sack, and pulled out fresh wrappings.

As if he had done it a thousand times, he re-wrapped her hand. Raven grit her teeth, tears welling up in her eyes, becoming more and more angry as he tended her wounds. Artemis gently unwrapped the bandage from her wing, and then re-applied another dressing to it as well, taking care that no feather was bent the wrong way. When he was done, he meticulously wrapped up the old bandages and put them in the sack. Once he was finished, he looked at her, smiling.

"Why did we decide not to kill the spider?"

"Because you said it was old, very old . . . and to kill it would have wasted

hundreds of years it took for it to mature. Something like that. What does that have to do with that, that thing!" Patiently, Artemis ran his fingers through her hair, admiring every arm-length strand.

"Think about it, Raven, please. I'm not telling you . . . I'm asking. Just, just think about that." She puffed a breath into his face, causing him to blink. She didn't want to think . . . she wanted to kill Simeon. But, as he tended her hair, she began to feel his presence wash over her, calming her down.

"Okay, I understand," she retorted, pushing his hand away. "I'm scared, Artemis. That creature is dangerous." Twisting his fingers through a large portion of her hair, he wound her hair about his hand, enjoying himself.

"You're dangerous," he whispered. She rolled her eyes up at him, and thought of slapping his hand away. She did not.

"You're doing it to me again, heart bender." She shook her head, as if trying to rid her hair of mosquitos. "Okay, maybe this Leprechaun is old, but he's deadly," she continued, taking in a quivering breath.

"And the spider was not? You are not?" He stumped her, which she didn't like, not one bit! Yet, he had a valid point. Still, she wanted him . . . no! . . . she wanted to kill it! She was losing this debate, and only because of his charm. Artemis noticed the conflict in her.

"It will never bother us again, I'm sure of it. No, not even Krisha or Ogrin." Raven melted and gave in, though she wanted to hit him. Looking at Artemis, she felt nothing but admiration for this Vampire that needed to be taken down.

"Thank you for the bandages," she stated half-heartedly. Smiling, Artemis looked them over.

"Anytime, though I hope it doesn't have to happen again. I have a question. How did you get down to the front door of the inn so quickly?" Raven held up a finger. Now it was her turn to take the advantage.

"I ran fast."

"Yes, but you had to get dressed. There's no way you could have done

that." Raven grinned triumphantly, then prodded him on with a look that meant, "keep guessing." As Artemis thought about it, Raven decided she was still mad at him. Well, no she wasn't . . . but she wanted to be.

"In your dream, you were dressed. So you not only brought in Simeon and blinded the patrons and workers to what was happening, but you dressed yourself as well." Raven shook her head.

"Don't think so magically all the time. Some things are better left to a practical explanation," she half mocked him. Artemis beamed with delight as he pondered the mystery. After a minute, he held up a finger triumphantly.

"You had me turn my back to keep your dignity. But you never undressed." Winking at him, she tip-toed and kissed him on the cheek.

"That's right. Also, when you woke up, I had already been awake for a couple minutes. I was enjoying myself immensely, that's no secret."

"Why didn't you wake me up then? Never mind, don't answer that." Giving her a more serious look, he pointed through the floor, toward the common room of the inn.

"It could've gotten away, you know." She nodded, reached up and began playing with his hair. She was definitely not mad at him anymore – well, maybe just a little.

"But it did not. And had it eluded us, we could have tried again. By the way, dreaming is like flying a hundred leagues. At first, when I awoke, I felt heavy – so heavy." Artemis's smile faded to concern.

"Has it passed?" She nodded.

"Yes, but I still feel a bit strange." Artemis pointed at the bed.

"Please, rest up then. We have a grand day on the town tomorrow, remember?" At his words, a sudden delight struck her countenance. She was no longer mad at him, but she hated Simeon.

"What are we going to do?" she asked in all eagerness as she pictured driving her nails through the Leprechaun's eyes.

"You'll see," was all he said. Knowing she would get nothing more out of him, she walked over and climbed back into bed. Artemis tucked her in, then placed a hand on her brow.

"Raven, you are a Dream`Seer, not a mere Dream`Weaver. What I find incredible about this is the fact that you never had training . . . only in the path of the Locust Magician. Am I correct on this point?" She nodded.

"Yes," she whispered, an apprehensive feeling washing over her.

"Your blood is slightly heated. To build such a world as yours must have taken its toll on you." Shrugging, Raven reached up and brushed a lock of his shoulder-length hair back, tucking it behind his ear.

"That thing in the forest with the molten-red eyes. What is it?" Surprised at the question, he sat down on the bed next to her.

"How did you know about that?"

"I haven't told you all the dreams I've had since you took me in," she soberly replied. Thinking about something in particular, a haunted presence crept over Raven, making her feel as though she was helplessly watching the nightmare of another from a short distance away, unable to help. Artemis could see the conflict in her.

"Raven, what is it?" She shivered as goose bumps cascaded down her neck and arms.

Artemis, I dreamed Krisha made friends with something that would devour her. Is she going to die?" Artemis stared at Raven gravely for a long moment, then sighed, giving in.

"I will only explain this to you in private. We can never discuss it openly; only you and I, alright?"

"Alright, I promise," she said, forgetting the green skinned freak. Smoothing back Raven's hair, he failed to banish a very concerned and troubled look. Raven noticed his hand was shaking slightly, but said nothing. She waited.

"That thing in the forest is a collector of souls. It is old, very old, and has

little, if any, compassion for living things. The only reason I say it has little compassion, is because it spared Krisha." Raven was confused.

"Then why is Ogrin alive?"

"I believe it was because she relies on him very much. I think, by taking Ogrin, it would've hurt Krisha deeply, so it did not." Raven took his shaking hand and squeezed.

"Is Krisha still noticed by this thing?" Artemis nodded.

"Yes, but only if she steps back into its territory. That is why we must stay clear of Edgewood forever." A darkness fell across the Vampire's countenance. "I should go deal with that monstrosity myself," he hissed, his countenance darkening with an invasive shadow that quickly washed over Raven, invading her senses. Raven let go, pulling away from him, a look of worry and fear etching into her expression.

Artemis had suddenly changed, and she was feeling a permeating terror suddenly emanate from him. Retreating to the other side of the bed, she held up her hands, as if to ward off an attack. This sudden change was more than frightening, and she had to clench her jaw tight to keep from screaming. She saw the darkness, like a shadow, fill his eyes, and then expand from his physical being to spread throughout the room. His fangs slowly extended.

"Artemis, please, calm down," she begged. "You're scaring me." His eyes fell upon her, driving her up against the wall the bed was set against. "Please, Artemis, stop. Please don't do this. I don't want to die," she cried out, horror set deeply into her eyes.

Startled by her words, and the way she recoiled from him, he closed his eyes, bowed his head and focused, taking slow and deep breaths. Raven shuddered, tears beginning to spill down her face.

"Artemis? Artemis, are we alright?" she begged. Opening his eyes, he slowly looked at her. She could see his look of regret, and it gave her courage. "Artemis, we'll just stay away from the forest, okay? Okay?" He took a deep

breath and sighed, looking at her with an open admiration and love that began to melt away the icy claws of terror which had begun to dig into her.

"It's not that simple. Sanctuary lies within that forest. I cannot just walk away. Raven, I would never hurt you. I frightened you. Will you forgive me?" He held out a hand and waited. Slowly, Raven crept back across the bed and took his hand, her mind yet reeling from what she had seen . . . how he had made her feel.

"Always," she whispered, badly shaken, and looked to him as if he could make everything better. As he gently pulled her to him, she gave in and embraced him, unable to conceal the sudden emotions that burst from her.

"I'm sorry if I did anything wrong. I didn't mean to upset you. You have always sheltered and protected me. I spoke of things I should not have. I won't do it again." Pulling her tight, Artemis felt pained by her words.

"I should control myself. I've prided myself on just that for so long, I became weak when self control was needed. Actually, Raven, your dream has helped out more than you know. I doubted myself on the relationship that abomination and Krisha might have. If I had given her the choice in this matter, now I see, because of you, she would have been lost."

Pulling her head back, so she could see him face to face, Raven forced herself to smile, a single tear slowly running down the left side of her face. Artemis brushed the tear away.

"You must understand something. Krisha, Ogrin and you are my purpose. I want to save you all, not inflict you with fear. Raven, I know I can be intense, but know that never, never," he emphasized, "will I harm you, or anyone I take under my wing.

"You don't have wings," she laughed emotionally, smoothing his hair back. He shook his head, a slight smile playing across his lips.

"I'm relieved to hear the humor. Raven, my purpose in life is to bring to Sanctuary those who are lost, afraid, or are giving up." Raven was beginning to

see who this man really was. This Vampire, this dreaded creature of the night, was the most self-sacrificing, truly charitable monster she had ever been in the presence of. All she had ever known paled in comparison to this man who displayed such a passion for love and life. Truly, he was the best man in the world.

Bringing her hands up on either side of his head, she took two fists full of his hair, gripping tight, and stared at him, taking in every feature of his face . . . feeling his soul. Raven's senses were so enslaved, she knew she had lost the contest of will against him. She wanted to kiss him so badly, but simply did not. Not that she had the willpower to resist – she simply did not move.

"Artemis," she whispered, "I can't wait until tomorrow. At least tell me one thing we are going to do." Nearing her, he inhaled and let out a steady breath. It was then, she noticed a visible change in the way he looked at her . . . and she liked it. It gave her hope.

"No. Tomorrow. The sooner you sleep, the sooner you will know. All I will say is, I need to show you something. Goodnight." Slowly, against her will, she let go of him and laid back on the pillow.

"Sometimes, I want to hit you," she mumbled. He stood and looked down upon her, admiring her.

"I love your spirit . . . your independence. Raven, you are truly unique." His words melted her heart and healed some of the wounds she had been inflicted with, and had been carrying around for years.

"I do not believe I will be able to sleep tonight. Your charm has thoroughly got a hold of me," she confessed.

"Would you like me to help you with that?" Quickly, he added, "I mean help you sleep." Disappointed she nodded, but did not agree with it in the least.

"Yes, please, I would like that," she lied. Nearing her, he placed a hand upon her forehead and closed his eyes. Within moments, she felt weary. Closing her eyes, Raven fell into restful slumber.

Artemis watched over her all night, making sure she was safe.

The next morning brought Raven out of her sleep with instant excitement. On the pillow, next to her head, she noticed a folded piece of paper. Picking it up, she unfolded it and read the following:

Raven,

I needed to give you your privacy so you can get ready for the day. Take your time. There are towels and soaps in the side room. You will notice there is also a hot bath waiting for you. Enjoy! Come downstairs to the common room when you are ready.

Artemis.

Grinning like never before, Raven laughed for joy. Today was the first date she had ever been on! She jumped out of bed, headed into the bathroom and stripped down.

Washing her hair, body and, especially her wings, she made haste in readying herself for the day. After drying off, she brushed her hair, slipped into the only dress she owned, quickly buttoning it up. She then headed downstairs, entering into a busy common room where people ate and talked and laughed. Just the luster of her countenance, and the smile she could not be rid of, drew the attention of half the patrons as she entered the dining area.

She stopped long enough to watch a female Bard performing, her crowd captivated by the most beautiful dance Raven had ever seen. After the dance was over, Raven looked for Artemis, but failed to find him. She inquired at the check-in desk. Iron Toe looked through all his notes and found one for Raven. Handing it to her, he pointed to the nearest table.

"Please, sit and relax." She did so, and opened the note:

Raven,

I had to get some things ready. Please stay at the inn. Iron Toe will make sure you get breakfast. I won't be long.

Artemis

Excitement grew to overflowing. Iron Toe chuckled, bringing her back to the here and now.

"I bet yer' hungry, eh beautiful lady?" Raven looked up from the note and nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

"Yes sir, please."

"What's yer' pleasure?"

"What?" She asked, confused. The big man laughed softly in his baritone voice.

"What would you like to eat?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I would love eggs and potatoes sir, please."

"It will only be a short bit." She nodded enthusiastically, throwing him a wide grin.

"Thank you sir. I really appreciate you." Iron Toe waved her off, then drew close to her.

"You know," he whispered, "he got lucky." Raven blushed and looked down at her hands.

"How so, sir?" Iron Toe smiled broadly.

"If I married a beauty like you, I would be the happiest man in all the world. Yep, Artemis is one lucky man. Congratulations on your betrothal." She laid a hand on his and smiled.

"I consider myself lucky to be talking to a good man, sir. I can feel you are honorable, and I hope we can always be good friends." Looking down at her hand on his, he smiled. Suddenly, he cleared his throat.

"Always, pretty woman, always. Now, I'll go and get you that breakfast. Oh, what would you like to drink?"

"Water please." Turning his hand over, Iron Toe gently squeezed and then let go. Turning, her merrily headed off to the kitchen, disappearing through the door.

Brimming with impatience, she watched the front door of the inn, anticipation rising. Not long after waiting, Iron Toe brought food and drink to her, catering to her every need until her "husband" returned.

After eating, Raven did not have to wait long before the inn door opened. It was Artemis, and he was carrying a few packages. He stopped and looked around. Raven waved, catching his attention. Smiling, he made his way over to the table. She instantly placed the utensils and cup on top of her plate. Within a few seconds, a waitress came by and whisked them away, smiling charismatically.

"Oh, hold on," Artemis stated quickly, halting the waitress. He put five packages of various sizes and shapes on the table, then reached into an inner pocket of his long, black, fine-leather trench coat and pulled out a few coins. Taking her hand, he placed them all into her palm and closed her fingers.

"Thank you for taking care of my wife." She nodded, practically swooning over him, which instantly annoyed Raven to no end.

"Thank you sir." She curtseyed and went on her way. Artemis sat down across from Raven and clapped his hands together.

"You look a bit put out . . . dear. What's the matter?" Raven gave him a look that plainly stated, "Give me a break." Glancing at the waitress, then back at Raven, Artemis grinned.

"You know I can't help it." He looked at the packages, then at her, drawing her attention to the gifts in front of her. She scanned them in awe.

"Who are these for?" Artemis lifted a finger.

"I'll give you one-thousand guesses." The jealousy steadily melted away, replaced by a bright-eyed grin.

"Are they for me?"

"Right you are! Wow, a thousand possibilities and you chose the correct

answer on the first try." Pointing at them, he stated, "Go ahead." Instantly, she sat back, staring at them. Artemis gave her a curious look.

"What's wrong?" She shook her head slightly.

"When I was in the Leprechaun's home, still in the sack. That thing took so long to pull everything out, I fell asleep." Nervously, she tucked some hair behind her ear, then continued, relating the dream she had. Artemis listened without interrupting. After she finished, he reached across the table and took her hand.

"Okay, I understand. But I am here. Ogrin and Krisha are still sleeping peacefully in the Storing Sack. I know, because I checked on them just before I picked up these packages."

"Artemis, I like presents. This would be the first time I've ever gotten any, except for the black orb you gave me. But that was not wrapped, and so doesn't count." Taking a deep breath, she looked at the five packages. "I need to get over it." She shrunk a bit as a few patrons looked their way. Artemis just laughed.

"Would you like me to open them for you?" Raven shook her head, leaned forward and picked out the smallest one. Each present was wrapped the same – plain brown paper, secured in twine. A smile stole away the worried look on her face. She untied it slowly and pulled the string off the package. Slowly, she opened the paper, revealing a pair of elbow-length, red leather gloves. She picked one up and slipped it on. The leather was of the most exquisite make. In fact, it was so soft, it did not feel like leather at all. She put the other one on and held up her hands, extending and clenching her fingers.

"Oh, Artemis, these are perfect . . . and a perfect fit. Thank you." Pleasure beamed in the Vampire's eyes.

"You're welcome." He watched her, pleased she liked the present, yet secretly saddened she had never had this experience before. Watching her delight, he could not help but enjoy her more today than any other day since they met.

Raven folded the paper wrapping and tied it with the twine, then set it aside. There were four more gifts to open. She chose the next largest gift and opened it in

the same fashion, revealing a cape of matching color. She quickly stood. Artemis stood with her and helped her put it on.

Raven didn't notice the entire common room was watching, smiles matching hers. She spun in a circle.

"It's so beautiful. You are too good to me. Thank you." Artemis chuckled and pointed at the three remaining gifts.

She stepped up to them and touched each one. Not sure which to pick next. Finally, she grabbed one off the table and opened it. This package held a pair of red boots, which pulled up to her knees. Her mouth dropped open in speechless wonder. Quickly she sat down, kicked off her old shoes, then slipped them on.

"Now you have, indeed, gone too far sir." She paced the floor a few times until curiosity stole her attention back to the table where lay two more gifts. Artemis and Iron Toes eyes met. Iron Toe winked and smiled at Artemis, who nodded slightly his way.

Raven opened the fourth gift. It was a pair of red leather trousers. Putting them over her shoulder, she opened the last package, this time slowly, savoring every moment. Soon she held up a long tunic, that would fall two hand lengths past her hips. As she held it up before her, Raven's eyes widened.

"Fantastic!" She exclaimed. "Thank you so much." She lowered the tunic and looked at Artemis. His eyes were smiling brightly at her. For a moment their eyes locked. She froze, suddenly realizing she loved this Vampire more than his ability to charm her. Walking over to him, she wrapped her arms about his neck and squeezed, whispering in his ear, "I love them. Thank you, thank you . . . thank you." Resting the side of his head against hers, he whispered back, "I can't wait to see the outfit on you."

At this point Iron Toe walked over to them.

"Ahem. Pardon the intrusion, but a new room has been prepared for you both. He handed the key to Raven, who looked at the number on it.

"Thank you sir. I'll be back." She happily stated as she bolted down the

hallway and vanished.

He sat at the same table, patiently waiting. The talk in the common room turned to legend, adventures and the daily doings in each of their many lives. Artemis listened carefully to everything, hoping to pick up on something he and his friends could sink their teeth into.

While Raven kept him from being bored, she was growing on him at a quick pace. He more than liked her, but needed to be careful. He'd been in many relationships which always ended in death and sadness. While he did not age, they all did. He had kept his honor in every relationship, but even that barely stemmed the horrid feeling each time a wife passed away on her death bed. There was no getting used to it. It was just the way it was.

Raven walked back into the common room from the hallway, adorned all in red, her hair fixed perfectly, and with great care. Looking at her, all he could think was, she was too much, even for him.

As she approached, he stood, even as the all the chatter in the common room hushed. One of the Bards quickly got up and walked over to her. Bowing, he handing her a beautiful rose. He then returned without a word to his seat. Flattered, she smelled the rose and sighed.

"I wonder where he got this rose from?" She curiously asked. Artemis shrugged.

"You look more than beautiful." Raven beamed a smile at Artemis.

"Thank you sir."

"Ready for a day on the town?" Nodding, she slipped an arm through his as he offered it.

"Well, then, let's go have some fun, shall we," he whispered, trying not to become too distracted by her intense beauty.

On the way out, Artemis gave Iron Toe a few coins. The innkeeper nodded, but that was all the communication there was between them. Once outside the inn, Raven looked up at Artemis.

"How are Ogrin and Krisha going to take all this?" Artemis thought about it for a moment.

"When they awaken, time will not have passed for them. When they come to, we will be outside the city gates, exactly where you landed." She smirked.

"You mean crash landed."

"Speaking of which, how is your wrist and wing?" Letting go his arm, she extended both wings a few times. Beating them slowly, she gritted her teeth.

"I can fly, but I'd pay for it after. My wrist seems okay, thanks to you. I took the wrapping off so I could wear the glove.

"Are you a Herald?" Artemis flatly asked. His abrupt question flattered her, as absurd as it was. Laughing, she shook her head.

"No."

"You look like one." Pulling her wings in close, she took his arm again.

"Flattery like this will get you nowhere, sir, although it is enjoyable."

Artemis noticed the faltering resolution in her countenance, meaning she was once again succumbing to his charm. Looking around, he noticed they were alone.

"Raven, I need to tell you about the clothes you are wearing. You are wearing clothing that is about seven-hundred years old. They are enchanted . . . magical. I wanted you to have them." Lifting a hand, she looked at the glove.

"Wow, what do they do?"

"As long as you wear them, I can find you. What happened with the Leprechaun, I had a very hard time with." Raven's eyes narrowed. She turned on Artemis and hugged him.

"Thank you, I really do enjoy you." For a moment, pain filled his eyes. It quickly vanished as he controlled his emotions. She looked up, obviously smitten by him. He knew the natural charm his race threw out at every female he came in contact with . . . and hated it. The question was, could she return the same affection if he had no such charm? This one question had always played doubts in his mind in every relationship. He would know before their date was ended, and

this scared him more than any soul-devouring monster in a forest.

"You're a good man," she whispered.

"Well, shall we go do some things?"

"Yes, please," she said with all enthusiasm.

He led her to a huge lake where they rented a small boat. After he rowed her from one end of the lake and back again, he took her to a small bread shop where they tasted every type of bread the baker had made that very morning. As they departed the bakery, Artemis secretly paid the baker with a single diamond, placing a finger to his lips to keep it quiet. Happily, the man bid them good day and began whistling a merry tune as they departed.

They happened upon an antique auction and watched others competing for certain objects for a while, and by late afternoon found themselves sitting on the green in a park set at the center of the large town. Raven laid back and stared at the sky for a good long while.

"This is the best day of my life, Artemis. Thank you." Laying down beside her, he looked up at the sky and smiled.

"The day is not over yet. I want to show you something, but we must wait until at least three stars have appeared. She nodded, obviously curious at what he was referring to.

"Well we have some time until then. Let's just talk for a while, okay?" Artemis looked over at her and grinned.

"If it means being in your company, I hope this day drags on too long." Raven moved up against him. As their conversations began, there seemed to be no lack of stories, which she prodded out of him. Also, he never knew a better and more attentive audience than her.

Until the stars began to come out, Raven laughed and spoke of anything he inquired, all the while nestled up safely against him. Pointing up into the darkening sky, Artemis brought the first star of the night to her attention.

"Okay, there is the first star. Now, find the second," he whispered. Raven

searched for it, eager to spot it. After a few moments, she pointed.

"There it is." Artemis nodded.

"Now we need the third star. When it appears, I will show you something you need to see." Raven stood and pointed.

"There it is," she whispered, standing up. Standing up behind her, he bent close to her ear.

"Now, think of your dream of dreams . . . what you most desire in this world, and keep watching the stars. Do not take your eyes from them, or you will lose this moment." She nodded and watched, leaning back against him as she gazed up into the sky. Though she did not hear him, Artemis began quietly chanting, then also gazed up into the night and watched as well, a haunted and troubled look playing into his handsome face.

Raven saw only the stars at first. But then, as other stars appeared, visions - vivid daydreams - of her past and present began opening up to her. Some scenes were uncomfortable, some made her angry, an unwanted memory caused her to fidget, then stagger, as if in overwhelming surprise. If not for Artemis, she would have fallen to the ground. Wide-eyed, Raven gripped his arms and began to squeeze, coming to perceive what was playing out before her eyes. Guilt swept through him like a cold wind, but she had to be shown.

The stars had vanished from her sight, replaced by a girl, fair to behold. She was smiling and teasing Artemis, who laughed and embraced her. The scene caused Raven to smile to see such happiness. There was no jealousy, no envy . . . only joy for the happy couple. She watched as the years of this woman played out to an end that slowly pierced Raven's heart, like the chilled arrow of a hunter. The girl aged as Artemis retained his youth and vigor. In the end, Raven beheld Artemis holding the now aged woman's hand upon her deathbed, tears streaming his face. As the old woman exhaled her last breath, Artemis stood, and backed slowly away, his spirit broken, like fragile glass. Raven saw him scream and grip

his chest, as if he had just received a mortal wound.

Far into the night, Raven witnessed the same scene, yet always played out with another beautiful girl. It always ended the same . . . an old woman exhaling her last breath upon her deathbed as Artemis bitterly wept . . . crying out in agony.

Again and again and again, Raven was compelled, held by the power of some horrible power, to witness each and every girl turn old and die before his eyes. The worst of it all, was Artemis's heart being broken and scarred repeatedly as he desperately held the hand of the woman he loved as she passed into the confines of life in which he could not follow.

They were all the same, and all ended exactly as the one before. Once the first scene ended, she struggled to break free, horrified. She tried to cry out - beg it to stop - but she could not so much as utter a single word.

She cursed the wish of her heart, disturbed by the choice she set her mind upon. She could not stop beholding scene after scene until the moon crested the lake, bathing it in deep-orange luminescence. It was then, it ended. She found herself released, and left to herself, trembling with heart-stricken pain.

Coming to her senses, she turned on Artemis and pushed away from him, eye wide, tears streaming her face. Pointing at him, Raven shook her head.

"You knew what my dream was . . . what I would choose. That's why you made this happen. You knew I would see them, see them all," she choked. Backing away from him, as if suddenly realizing he was a real vampiric monster, she sobbed. It had been so long since they were in this park. She had been taken away to witness terrible things, and it seemed as though ten years had passed.

"Why would you do that to me?" Sighing heavily, he shook his head.

"Such would be our end, if I accepted you, Raven. As much as I am beginning to love you, I cannot, will not, see your end . . . like the others. They are lost to me now, and I remember every moment of every day with each wonderful girl who said yes to me . . . each blessing of my life who wore a

wedding ring, pledging their life to me. She shook her head, suddenly understanding what he was telling her.

"I am not them. I am me. I choose my own path," she growled, feeling challenged, cornered.

"But, Raven, the pain of loss never fades from my heart. I do not wish to be selfish, but what about me?" His words struck her like a hammer to the chest. Gasping, she stood there, speechless for the longest while, staring at him. In silence, Artemis waited for her. Finally, after a long while, Raven shook her head.

"How do you endure it?" she whispered, horrified. Sighing, he looked out over the lake, then back at her.

"I don't know." She felt old and chilled now. It was like she had just come back from a long, long journey.

"This is the way it always ends. Though I would not wish to hurt you, it would be better not to see you grow old and die . . . like all the others."

She tried desperately to separate the feelings piercing her heart, and the logic of his words. He was being honest, but he should have warned her. All those wonderful women . . . good people drawn in. She could see all of them now, young until old and on their death beds. Most of all, she saw his face as each one had passed away. Suddenly, she pitied him. Then it struck her deeper than any weapon. She was suddenly afraid, afraid to leave him alone . . . again . . . some day.

"There was no way you could have warned me in words. I would not have listened." Standing there in silence, Artemis waited. She could see hope in his eyes, yet also a great and terrible fear. Slowly, Raven neared him.

"I don't know what to say, Artemis. For me, it's not so bad. For you, I cannot imagine." Giving him a fragile smile, she placed a hand on his arm. In return, he began putting her hair in place.

"Artemis, why don't you date someone of your own race, another Ardenoth? Then you would never feel such eternal loss." He grimaced.

"We Ardenoth mate for life. But if one dies, the other must tarry, and must do so in honor. If, one day, I die, and have kept my honor, I will reunite with her again forever. That is the tradition of the Ardenoth." Raven wiped her face, trying not to be so emotional.

"That doesn't sound so bad." He shook his head, and for the first time since she had met him, there were tears in his eyes, the sight of which instantly broke her down. Resting her head against his shoulder, she squeezed his arm.

"Artemis?"

"Yes?"

"I love you." He smiled happily.

"I love you more." She suddenly struck him with her strong wing, trying to break out of this ongoing emotional state. It was exhausting her badly.

"So what's next?" He thought about her question.

"I say we keep all this a secret, and see how it plays out. What do you think?" Raven smirked.

"Keep it simple . . . probably smart. Were Krisha and Ogrin going to keep traveling with you?"

"Yes, but only until I delivered you three to Sanctuary. Everyone I take there belongs and has a purpose."

"You say Sanctuary – in the heart of Edgewood?" Artemis growled.

"Yes." She felt distressed.

"That's not good, especially now that something has noticed Krisha," Raven stated perceptively.

"Exactly. Which means I move Sanctuary out of Edgewood, or remove the monster."

"You know what it is, specifically, don't you? We talked about it, but you know more than what you told me, or I'm a fool." He looked down at Raven.

"I could just eat you up." Shaking her head, Raven held up a finger.

"Don't change the subject mister fangs. What is it? What is that thing in

Edgewood? Please, tell me." He sighed, obviously reluctant to tell her.

"Okay, let me put this in a tiny nutshell for you. It's a Revenant, created upon what is known as a Death Alter. This Revenant now stalks Edgewood, and feeds its hunger on anyone who takes the bait." Artemis watched Raven, wondering how she was going to comprehend what he had just spit out. Her response surprised him.

"The deer. The bait is the fawn." Raising an eyebrow at her, he nodded.

"How'd you get so smart?" She laughed.

"I've always had to think things out. I had no choice. Okay, no changing the subject again, or I'll bite you . . . hard." Artemis grinned, looking very pleased.

"I . . . might promise then." Smoothing out some feathers on her left wing, she thought for a minute.

"Okay, what if we find this Death Alter, put the Revenant's remains on it and burned it with holy fire?" She looked at him expecting an answer.

"You know, Raven, for being so young, you are pretty smart. I believe that would work." He sighed, flipping out two daggers which reflected no starlight . . . no moonlight. "Or, I could dispatch it." Shaking her head, she laughed, a darkness rising in her expression.

"I hope it is not in your head to rejoin your beloved by starting a fight you well know you can't win." The daggers vanished.

"Raven, I can beat it. The problem is, I would leave you alone. It has seen you . . . Simeon has seen you. No, I can't leave you alone just now. While Simeon is now just like an ordinary person to you and I, that Leprechaun has allies, and is still capable of bad things." All of a sudden, a light popped on in Raven's eyes.

"Hey did Simeon have anything of use which could help? I took all its things", she said with a wicked gleaming in her eyes. Artemis shrugged.

"Well look when we get back to the inn." Pleased, she snaked her arm up and around his as they began to walk.

"More time together. We better check its items thoroughly." Artemis

quietly laughed.

"Your wings are beautiful," he said, changing the subject. She quieted, blushing a little.

"Thanks," she replied, "then snapped her teeth at him.

Once back at the inn, and in their new room, Artemis reached in and took everything out of his Storing Sack that used to be Simeon's. What they came up with were three potions, two enchanted items, three magical rings, three-hundred coins of various types as well as seven gems -- not to mention a whole lot of nothings. Artemis looked at the items thoughtfully. Waiting for his edict, Raven watched him in great anticipation.

"These items are not going to be of much use," he said, "but you should take them, seeming you found them." Raven looked at the items and money, instantly coveting it all. She loved the gems most, yet she hesitated. Artemis noticed she wasn't sure if she should take the stash. He shut the sack, before Raven could decide either way, and slipped it into his trench coat.

"Now you can't say no," he stated firmly. Looking at the bed, he noticed it was easily large enough for the both of them. Sighing, he looked at Raven.

"What, what?" she inquired.

"I'll take the floor, you get the bed. I am tired and need to sleep." Instantly, she shook her head in rebellion.

"It's big enough for both of us. You could sleep on one side, I'll take the other. Look at it; it enormous." Artemis laughed quietly and ran his fingers gently through her night-black hair.

"It's not that. It's me. You take the bed, I insist. I cannot be near you when we sleep." Before Raven could respond, he leaned down and gently kissed her on the temple.

"Please, trust me on this. I know what I'm talking about." Leaning into him, she felt her heart skip a beat and her neck and cheeks flush warm.

"You mean, you can resist me, but I can't resist you. And if I give in, you might also." Smiling happily at Raven, he nodded and kissed her again, this time just over her right eye.

"Exactly."

"Honor," she whispered, beginning to melt.

"Honor," he returned, kissing her one more time. Just as she reached up to embrace him, she stopped, as if suddenly awakened from a dream. Backing away, she shook her head.

"Well," she whispered, flustered and frustrated, "we could get married." Instantly, her eyes widened. "Blood-sucking vampire! Your precious little lure won't reel me in!" Before he could respond, she pointed at him. "But you get the bed this time, I insist." Shaking her wings to cool herself down, Raven turned away from Artemis and walked over to the window. Parting the drapes, she placed a hand on the cool glass surface and looked at herself in the reflection. She also watched Artemis, who closed his eyes, took in a deep breath and looked at the bed. Walking up behind her, he began playing with her hair.

"Okay, but just think what your beautiful feathers are going to look like come morning." The way he put it instantly changed her mind.

"Alright, you win, I'll take the bed," she agreed. "But don't think you can always sway me, Vampire."

"Yes milady, I understand. I wouldn't want to have to take you to a feather healer tomorrow. Just think, he might end up knowing your father." The mention of her father instantly aggravated her! Dropping down, she drove her left wing hard to the back of his legs in the attempt to take him down. To her astonishment, he simply was not there. From her left side, he seized her by the throat.

"You're dead." Kissing the side of her head, he released her and casually walked to the center of the room. "We are going to have to work on your combat moves. If you are going to hang around with me, you are going to need to learn how to fight." Turning, she grinned, her mood suddenly changing.

"I'd like to know how to fight. I can evade while in flight, but do need to know more hand to hand."

"I agree," Artemis stated, "I'll teach you two things right now. The first thing is balance. Raven looked as though he had just insulted her. Her balance was

good, and she knew it. Yet, before she could respond, he continued. If you take your opponent's balance, you got him. That's the tricky part. The second thing is to move off the line of attack. Do that successfully and you keep from getting hit, or take much less damage. Would you like to learn?" Understanding, she eagerly, nodded, tucked her wings against her back and neared him.

"Please," she stated, her voice housing more of a challenge than an answer. There was a gleam in her eyes that meant she wanted this.

"Okay, now, I need you to be absolutely serious." She nodded, but said nothing; just waited. Artemis came at her slowly and tried to strangle her, as if in slow motion.

Again and again, he did the same, reaching for her throat. When she began to understand that she needed to move, he slowly increased the speed of each attack. For nearly three hours she practiced stepping off the line of his attack. Then, Artemis stopped.

"Good, good. That is one of ten-thousand moves I'll be teaching you." Raven pulled her hair back, and wiped sweat from her face.

"Intense," she stated, smiling briefly, catching her breath. Artemis nodded, though showed no signs of sweating or fatigue. He pointed to the door.

"Would you like to take a walk? We could cool down a bit." Raven nodded, then shook her head.

"No, no, I'll just go to sleep now. I'll open the window to let fresh air in." He looked at her admirably, walked over to the window and opened it.

"I'll wait here with my back to you. You tell me when you are covered." Raven undressed, this time not so concerned he might look at her. Her trust in him was complete. When she had put her clothes over the back of the bed, she slipped in under the blankets and pulled them over her.

"Okay, you can turn around." Artemis walked over and sat on the bed next to her.

"Now, no dreaming tonight." She nodded, placing a hand on his as she

looked up into his eyes, as if seeing something for the first time. She had a sudden idea.

"Artemis, I'm going to find a way to live forever." Her statement caused visible pain to fill his eyes, as if she had just slapped him in the face.

"But then, what if I die?" he replied. She thought about his question, but didn't answer until she began to drift off.

"Then I'd have to find someone like you," she mumbled. He smiled and gently kissed her on the forehead.

"Goodnight Raven."

"Love . . . you," she faintly whispered as she drifted off into a peaceful, dreamless slumber.

She awoke to the sun shining down through the window that was now shut. Looking around, she noticed Artemis was gone. Quickly, she got up, dressed and brushed her hair. Where did her Vampire go? They were leaving town today, and would bring Krisha and Ogrin out of the sack once they were out of town. But then what? She was afraid of going back into that dreadful forest again. What would possess someone to start a colony there? How would they even survive?

"Too many questions, Raven," she mumbled to herself as she quickly dressed. Slipping into her boots, she snatched up her gloves and pulled them onto her hands. For being leather, this outfit felt like silk. She could feel it tighten about her entire body perfectly, yet not constrictive in the least. It was then, Raven decided she loved enchanted clothing. It was like each piece was alive and willing to perfectly fit the contours of her entire physique.

Raven sniffed. She could smell smoke, which made her stomach begin pulling her downstairs. Iron Toe and his employees were, no doubt, stoking up the fire-pit in the common room and kitchen stoves, preparing for the day. This could mean only one thing . . . food.

Before she got to the door, however, a rumbling crash nearly shook her to the floor. It felt like something had struck the inn . . . something big.

"What was that?" She exclaimed in a hushed whisper. Quickly, she grabbed the door handle. Even faster, she let go, recoiling from it. It was hot! Gritting her teeth, she backed away from the door, holding her right hand in pain. Her glove had saved her from a severe burn, but still, her hand was singed.

"Artemis! Artemis!" She called out, slowly backing away as smoke began to trail into the room through the spaces between the door and the doorframe. Looking back over her shoulder, Raven spotted the only way out. Making her way to the window, she quickly thrust it open. Poking her head out, she looked out onto the street. Everything would have appeared to be normal, yet there were no people in the streets.

Being on the ground level, she nimbly slipped out onto the grass as another crash shook the ground and echoed like thunder through the area. Raven ran along the back wall of the structure and ducked into the alley behind the inn, her gut screaming at her to be silent and unseen. Hearing no others sparked a great fear within her, and there was something else gnawing like a badger at her insides, though she could not put a finger on it. She froze for a time, listening in vain to hear or see a single soul.

After a few moments, a series of rumbling crashes shook many areas around her. It wasn't just the inn that was burning. Not far off, trails of smoke began to rise high into the air all about her, and were increasing in number. Gathering her senses, she forced herself to swallow a profound terror building within her.

"This must be a nightmare," she thought. But what if it wasn't? Where was Artemis? Where were all the people? Taking a few deep breaths, she tried to be calm, then crept down the alley toward the main street, staying close to the wall of the building next to the inn to conceal herself.

As she reached the halfway point, a sudden darkness blotted out the area just outside the alley ahead of her. As if sudden night had fallen, the day was replaced by a darkness deeper than anything she had ever seen. Pressing herself against the building, she froze, not daring to move. That was when she noticed her gloves had changed from red to ashen-black. She looked at her sleeves to find them also the same shade of black. Ignoring it, she fixed her attention on the mass of darkness in the street, not daring to lose sight of it. This was no ordinary darkening of the sun when a cloud passed beneath it . . . this was a monster, unnatural and without form!

She held her position, as if frozen in time, not daring to move. The blackness abruptly moved into the alley where she was. As it did the sides of both buildings began to crumble and splinter, falling to pieces as it moved toward her. All she could do was wait. If she flew or ran, it would notice her. Deep down inside, she knew, if it found her, she would be destroyed.

Artemis had to be out of town, or he would have come for her. She had to find him! The most disturbing and terrifying thought was the lack of people.

Halfway to her, the mass of blackness suddenly stopped, shifted and moved back out of the alley and into the street. It hovered and boiled in the street, like some unnatural cloud, then moved on. This was her chance to get out of town. Raven moved back out of the alley, staying to the shadows. Once out of the alley, she sprinted for the front gates, then launched forward, spreading her wings, gliding low, just off the ground.

Approaching the gates, she saw they were thrown down in ruin. Landing before them, she scanned the area, looking for survivors, yet there was no one – not even bodies. A sudden crash behind her drew her attention. Spinning about, Raven beheld an entire structure twist in upon itself as flames and shadow engulfed it. Turning, she fled out of town in all haste, sprinting through the shattered fragments of the gate.

She was out!

Raven's eyes shot wide open, though everything was in a haze of confusion. She tried to sit up, but strong hands held her, pinning her to the bed. In wide-eyed terror, she saw a shadowy figure hover directly over her, a black fog flowing from it as it held her immobile. Panicking, she lashed out and squirmed, attempting to slip free. With astonishing speed, it not only evaded her attacks, but kept her firmly weighted down to the mattress, mercilessly pressing down upon her.

"Raven, come to the darkness," a deep and sinister voice beckoned. "You have powers which -"

"No! I hate you," she screamed, lashing out all the more.

"Raven, hold still. The sacrifice must be completed. You must be still, ready . . ." Brining her knees up, Raven kicked the man, who had pulled forth a black, serrated, dagger, knocking him off the bed. She leapt up.

"Artemis, help!" she screamed.

"Raven." The image of the cultist before her blurred and shifted. "Raven, it's me." He stood, brushing himself off. Suspiciously, she watched him as she came to her senses, her vision steadily clearing until she saw him for who he was, not a dark visage bent on sacrificing her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," was all she could say. Artemis raised an eyebrow at her.

"Nice kick, by the way. I have to give you credit for that one. It took me off guard." Though being casual, she could he was now on his guard, watching her carefully.

"Artemis?" He nodded.

"Yes, it is I, the blood-sucking monster." She leapt into his arms, shaking. "That was some nightmare you had," he whispered pulling her close. She looked up at him.

"Did you see it?" Shaking his head, he began clearing her hair out of her face.

"I did not. I wasn't going to Dream`Watch anymore unless you were aware of it. Maybe I should have." Tenderly, he brushed her hair back. "But you were tossing and turning and talking in your sleep something fierce. I could only make out a few of the things you said. Do you want to tell me about it?" Slowly, she backed away from him, realizing she was undressed.

Quickly grabbing a blanket off the bed, she began to wrap herself in it. As she did, she noticed she was fully dressed, and fully donned in ashen black leathers. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she dropped the blanket back onto the bed. Holding up her hands, not knowing what to think, she looked at Artemis.

"What is this?" He stared at her, but said nothing. With her left forefinger, she touched the palm of her right hand. The pain instantly told her this had been no ordinary dream. Pulling off her right glove, she looked at the inside of her hand and fingers, which were red. At the center of her palm rose a single blister.

"How is this possible," she lamented. Artemis looked at the burn.

"You are a Dream`Seer. You don't just dream, Raven. I can go into dreams, even give them to you, but you, Raven, build worlds and fill them with your ideas. Your gift, if you cannot learn to control it, will become your curse." Staring at her palm, she felt at a loss for words. After a moment, she shook her head.

"My clothes aren't red anymore. Do the enchantments in them cause this?" Looking to him for the answer, all she got was a shrug. "Artemis, I've never hurt myself in my own dreams. I am hurt." She held up her hand, showing him. Taking her hand, he studied the injury.

"Tell me your dream," he stated, stepping toward her, hands out as if showing her he meant no harm. Raven backed up, then shook her head, stopping. Slowly, she walked to the edge of the bed, turned, then slowly sat down, throwing him a brief smile.

"May I sit with you?" he asked, watching her with an expression that completely drew her in. Sighing, she bit her lip and patted the bed to her right.

"It was a dream . . . just a dream. Please, sit." Slowly, he sat down. After a

moment of silence, he put his arm about her and pulled her gently to him, kissing the top of her head.

"If you do not wish to talk about it, then we let it go. I'll not ask again." Nestling against him, she sighed, feeling safe. It wasn't that his vampiric lure was pulling her in, dulling her senses and making her vulnerable against him. It wasn't that at all. She was completely, hopelessly, irrevocably in love with him. His vampiric lure actually annoyed her to no end. It wasn't fair. But, that's just the way it was. She grew to see past his charm, to see the man he truly was. Take away his natural charm, and she saw an honorable man she loved.

"No, I think you better know about this. This one is significant, and not only to you and I. The people of this town - I believe - are in great danger." Resting his chin upon the top of her head, he reached up and began gently smoothing her hair. Oh, how she loved his attention, but this was not the time to play.

Raven rehearsed it all to him. When she was finished, she saw Artemis pull out a wrap from his Storing Sack. Before wrapping her hand, he produced a purple bottle from the sack, uncorked it and saturated the wrap. He then corked the bottle and put it away.

"Hold out your hand. This will not hurt." She did as he said. Quickly, yet gently, he dressed her hand and secured the end of the cloth beneath the wrap. Instantly, her hand felt soothed and slightly chilled. It felt good.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome," he replied.

"The blackness -- as far as I know -- that attacked the town closely describes an unhallowed creature call the Vexthul. It is a monster from the Dark`Fire Plane." He thought fora bit as she sat in silence, waiting to hear something from him she could understand. She suddenly realized, she relied on Artemis far too much, and it disturbed her.

"Well, something might happen in this place. My hand is burned from the

dream. Maybe we should warn somebody, or do something about this. Artemis, am I overreacting here?" He touched her bandaged hand.

"Truthfully, I don't think you are. Given the evidence, I believe there is legitimate concern. Raven, there are a lot of people living here. Where would they go?" Taking her hand, a worried expression twisted into his brow.

"What is it?" she asked.

"If you experienced a burning doorknob, and awoke with a burn, what would have happened if it had caught you in the dream? Obviously, you were injured. If that can happen, can worse things happen to you as well?" She hadn't thought of it that way.

"Artemis, can you make me stop dreaming?" It was a desperate question, so she wasn't surprised when he shook his head.

"I can observe dreams, be a part of your dreams, even cause you to dream. But I cannot make you never dream unless I kill you." She smiled ruefully.

"See? You do have a cure for me," she weakly jested. "Would becoming a Vampire stop me from dreaming? Don't answer that," she quickly added, seeing a lecture coming on. "I just wondered, that's all. I think we need to warn the town." Artemis stood and held out a hand.

"Then let's do it." Taking his hand, she stood. She could feel the charm flowing over here like a welcome breeze of fresh air. Pressing up against him, she wrapped her arms about his neck.

"You belong in a tackle box."

"Tackle box?" She ruffled his hair and backed off.

"That's where the lures are kept." Rolling his eyes, Artemis began fixing his hair.

"Ha ha, very clever," he stated, suddenly grinning.

"You could even be a hook, or a fishing pole. Ha, you could be the worm. Fish like worms. Yes, you are a wor -" Raven was instantly cut off as Artemis leapt and grabbed her, spinning her about to face him. Startled, she looked up and

was met with a real kiss. Her heart leapt within her chest as she snaked her arms about his neck to keep him there. After a long moment, they parted.

"You are the lure," Artemis stated.

"Thank you for the compliment, sir," she whispered, feeling the room shift and spin slightly. Catching her balance, she poked him in the chest and smiled triumphantly.

"I won. You lost." Shrugging, Artemis kissed her again.

After a long and wonderful moment, they began to pack up their belongings. Just before leaving the room, Raven turned to Artemis and took the arm he offered.

"Best time I ever had," she said with a grin.

In silence, they ate breakfast together. After finishing, Artemis tipped the flirty' waitress, who gnawed Raven's nerves something fierce. Artemis asked for Iron Toe, and soon the large man was at the table.

"Thank you for your hospitality sir." The large, burley man clapped his hands together.

"The pleasure is all mine, Im sure. Now, is there anything I can do more for the two of you before you get on your way?" Artemis nodded thoughtfully.

"In fact there is. I would like your opinion on something." Iron Toe smiled.

"Opinions are dangerous things, but I'll do my best not to upset the common balance. What's on yer' mind?" Artemis looked at Raven and nodded. She turned her attention to the Innkeeper.

"Sir, I had a dream last night in which I burned my hand." Raising her hand, she unwrapped and showed him the burn. "When I awoke, I was burned." Iron Toe shrugged, glancing at Artemis, then back at Raven.

"Did you sleepwalk young lady, meaning no disrespect, or course." Raven shook her head.

"No, and Artemis can attest to that. It's not the burn that's the problem. It was the dream that accompanied the burn. Sir, all my life I've had dreams, many of which happen." She kept a steady eye fixed on him as he silently pondered her words.

"Okay, what did you dream?" Raven looked around. There were no others near enough to hear, and so she told Iron Toe the dream in full, leaving out no details. When she was finished, Iron Toe sat in silence for a while, thinking. Raven and Artemis sat quietly to let him ponder what he had just heard. At length, he placed his hands on the table.

"You wanted my opinion. Okay, right." He looked at the both of them. "If your dream comes true, we are all in serious trouble. I have to say that, or I cannot remain objective in this." Raven nodded gravely.

"What would you do?"

"Have you told anyone else this?" Artemis and Raven both shook their heads. Artemis cleared his throat, drawing the Innkeeper's attention.

"In all the years you've known me, have I ever been false, or inconsistent?" This was news to Raven, and it openly surprised her. They knew each other! Iron Toe chuckled at the look on her face.

"I trust you more than the town council, sir. No, I believe this story." Raven held up a finger.

"Maybe a great celebration outside of town. All are invited." Biting her lip, she cringed.

"That's a good idea. Do you have any idea as to when this will happen?" The innkeeper asked. Raven thought for a moment, then shook her head. Artemis quickly interjected.

"Did you say there was a waxed moon in the sky in your dream?"

"Yes, there was a bright ring about it," she replied.

"Okay, that is in seven days. If I contact all my friends, we can plan a huge feast with games and prizes. We'll make it the biggest bash this town has ever experienced."

"I will play for all the expenses up front. And all expenses to pay for your inn to be rebuilt, should this truly occur." IronToe's eyes widened.

"That will cost you a fortune, Artemis."

"Yes, but by being free for everyone, everyone will probably show up, and that might save them all." Iron Toe sat back and looked at Artemis in wonder.

"You are a better than a good man, sir. Thank you. What more can I say?" Artemis smiled.

"You've always been good to me. I'd hate to see this town in ruin. What of the authorities?" Instantly, the innkeeper shook his head.

"They are on a need-to-know basis . . . and they don't need to know. No one does. Now, there is one detail that is critical in all this." Iron Toe's brows knit

together in deep contemplation. "There will be lights, fires, laughing, yelling, etc. Now, I have a few friends in the guild houses here who dabble with some impressive magics'. We are going to need more than one of them to cover up all our doings, if you get my meaning." Raven impulsively got up and hugged IronToe, who gently hugged her back with a huge arm.

"Now, now, there we go and thank you pretty lady." Raven sat back down to Artemis leaning across the table and raising an eyebrow at her.

"Should I be jealous now?" he said, and winked at her. Instantly, she understood what he was referring to . . . the waitresses.

"I get it, I get it." Iron Toe didn't even pretend to know or care what they were talking about, and so continued.

"Are you two going to stay for the festivities? Artemis shook his head.

"We can't. I wish we could, but there is a pressing matter we need to take care of." Raven frowned and shrugged, but said nothing. Artemis arose, and so did Iron Toe.

"Raven, we need to be in private. It won't be long." Raven smiled and relaxed. After the two vanished into the back, Raven waited impatiently. She wanted to go outside and fly again. She tested the joint of her wing. It was still sore, but she knew she could do it. Besides, she needed to work the joint, or it might heal stiff. It wasn't too long before the two returned.

She stood and slightly flexed her wings in a vain attempt to get the jitters out. Turning to stand side-by-side with her, Artemis slipped his hand into hers. Instantly, she relaxed and beamed a smile at Iron Toe, who returned the same with a bow.

"It was a pleasure to meet ya' milady. I hope to see you again." She broke away from Artemis and hugged Iron Toe tight about the neck, whispering, "Please stay safe." He melted and hugged her back.

"I'll do me best. You stay safe as well." She let go, grinning brightly, then took Artemis's hand. Artemis bowed.

"We will come check on you as soon as we can. Save as many as you can, if not all." Iron Toe chuckled.

"With the incentive donation, even the highest paid person in the region wouldn't dare miss the festivities . . . and the door prizes," he proudly stated, holding out a hand. Artemis took it and replied, "Pleasure to know you sir. You run a fine inn."

"The pleasure is all mine, trust me. Good day sir." With that said, both Artemis and Raven walked out, being greeted by a warm sun with a comfortable breeze.

They walked out the front gate, and as they did, the guards watched them. Raven turned and smiled at the first guard to catch her eye and waved. A sudden smile crossed his face as he waved back.

"I hope they will be okay," she whispered.

"I hope so too."

"How much money did you give him?" Laughing, Artemis put his hand on the side of her head and pushed her away. She was at his side instantly, and persistently inquired again.

"Come on, how much? I'm dying to know." Wrapping an arm about her, he pulled her close, instantly driving her crazy.

"About two million in value." Raven elbowed him in the ribs.

"Cheapskate." Artemis laughed and gripped her at the waist with strong hands, holding tight. With incredible strength, he threw her as high as he could.

"Fly!" He called out to her, then watched as she soared and dove, twisted and climbed, stretching out her body, and especially her injured wing, which needed this workout more than anything.

After a lengthy workout, Raven landed before him. With the first two fingers of her right hand, she touched her heart.

"Can we fight tonight?" Artemis pointed down the road.

"When we camp. Wait until then." They walked on down the road for close to a league before he led her off into the forest. Two hours later they entered a clearing where Artemis made a fire. The sun was beginning to set. As Artemis stood and turned to Raven, she instantly attacked him. He evaded the first three punches, then countered her last strike and pinned her to the ground, face down. She spit dirt out of her mouth and regained her feet, a wicked grin on her now filthy face. Their sparring went on for two hours before Raven lifted both hands, signifying she was done.

"You are learning quick, Raven. You got me four times. Your fighting style is improving astonishingly fast. That's not normal." Raven panted heavily, trying to catch her breath.

"Improving hurts." Nodding, Artemis agreed.

"It always does. After a while it hurts less and less, until most of the time it just is. You okay?" She nodded, then knelt before the campfire controlling her breathing. For a while she meditated calmness and found it in the dancing of the flames. Soon, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the smell of the fire, the sounds of the insects, and a gentle breeze that cooled her.

"Artemis, I am impatient. It is something I've never done well with. I will work on it." Her hair was instantly being braided.

"You are who you are, and that is why I love you. If you change, do it for you, not me or anyone else." She tilted her head.

"Okay fangs. You know, I've always had to scrap, push and shove for everything I've ever gotten. I hated it. And now that I don't have to anymore, I've kept a grip on some habits which, no doubt, are trying your patience. Will you please tell me when I'm being a fool? I really would appreciate it."

"Yes, if you wish it."

"I wish it, and I will listen." Opening her eyes, she turned to Artemis. With the first two fingers of her hand, she touched her heart again, then touched his. Smiling, Artemis returned the same. Pulling her into a gentle embrace, the he whispered, "I wish I could heal all the hurts, all the wrongs. It will take time for these to heal. Give it a chance . . . then give it more chances."

"Artemis, ever since that night you showed me them in the stars, I've come to a decision."

"Oh, what is that?"

"I want you to bite me," she stated in all seriousness, then slowly grinned, her eyes glittering dark. Shaking his head, Artemis let out an exasperated sigh.

"Really? You jest."

"I'm not kidding. I could be with you forever if you did." The Vampire's fangs slowly extended, and his eyes darkened to a shade deeper than night, to the point that not even the dancing flames reflected in them. A feeling of power and dread flowed from his being, washing over Raven. With supernatural speed, he gripped her, pulling her close.

"Is this what you want to become, only a lesser who flees the light of day?" Tears instantly spilled down Raven's cheeks. She could barely gaze upon him without darkness overtaking her. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to speak.

"You made me see how many times your heart has shattered. I did not ask to see your heart die so many times. You made me see that. It is nigh unbearable, the memories you cursed me with." Raven groaned, placing a hand to the side of her head, nearly faltering. Artemis's presence was so overwhelming, yet she had to finish. Gritting her teeth, she heard herself growl, as if she was some kind of animal.

"If you really love me, then let me love you as well . . . forever . . ."  
Blackness took her sight away, but she could feel his grip on her.

"Love . . . you . . .," was all she could say before all went into oppressive,

pain filled darkness.

Raven awoke in a lush bed. The wall at the foot of the bed held a deep-set hearth with a warm fire dancing within. As she got up, she noticed she was wearing only her underclothes. On the end of the bed were laid out the clothes Artemis gave her. All in wonder, she dressed, then looked about the large chamber. Seeing a vanity, she approached it and found a silver-handled brush. Sitting down before the mirror, she looked at herself and frowned. After brushing her hair, Raven set the brush slowly down. Looking around, she noticed the walls of the chamber were cut stone, flawlessly fit together.

"This must be his castle," she whispered. Her voice echoed in the chamber, as if she were in a valley with cliffs on either side.

"It is my home, Raven." She turned and saw Artemis standing at the center of the room.

"How did we get here? We were just at the fire." He nodded.

"You asked to become a Vampire, to be with me forever. Do you still hold to that decision?" She remembered.

"Yes, of course I do," she stated with conviction, and without hesitation.

"Why?" he asked.

"You know why." Artemis slowly approached as she stood and faced him.

"Are you ready then?" Going to him, she wrapped her arms about his neck.

"Now, do it," she whispered. Gently he kissed her neck, then bit down ever so gently. For a moment, she tensed, her hands gripping his hair. Artemis reached up and grabbed her by the wrists, then gently pushed her away. Confused, she tried to re-embrace him, but he was too strong.

"Let me be like you. Loneliness will never be shared by either of us, especially you. Please Artemis."

"Raven, it is already done. It is done." Raven stepped back and raised a hand to her neck. She then looked at it. It was stained with blood. Her eyes widened as slight smile played across her lips. Artemis turned and walked to the

door. Opening it, he walked out of the chamber, stopped and turned.

“Raven, I am so sorry for the next three days. I hope you will forgive me.”  
With that said, he shut the door. Raven heard it lock.

Confused, she waited in anticipation for three hours, but nothing dramatic happened. She stood, approached the vanity and sat down. She looked into the mirror, abruptly shocked by what she beheld. Her eyes were deeply blood-shot and sunken . . . hollow. As she stared at herself, she smiled. No fangs.

After another eight hours of pacing the room, her stomach began to stab at her, as if something was biting her from the inside. Growling, she focused on nothing, making the pain go away, forcing herself to control.

On the second day, she vomited and lost control of herself. Throughout the day, she continued vomiting and losing her self respect until there was nothing left to lose. Forcing herself not to scream, she knelt in meditation, enduring unbelievable pain and anguish.

On the third day, she began to see the world around her in a totally different perspective. The flames of the fire were tinged in violet and became intense. Everything she beheld and touched seemed to call out to her.

The end of the third day brought on the worst of it all, for she found she could no longer breathe, as if she was being strangled. Sitting in meditative position, she closed her eyes, trembling for want of breath. Gritting her teeth, she let death take her, mentally embracing oblivion. It did so, at the price of great pain and suffering. She did not give into groveling, or begging. She chose this path and it was hers! She simply waited in blessed agony . . . embracing death.

“There is nothing to forgive you for, Artemis,” she forced through clenched teeth. Raven lifted her head to the ceiling and grinned, happy to embrace the horror of death’s hand.

Artemis held her in his arms before the light of the flames, bending his will upon her in the form of a dream; not just any dream . . . dream reality.

He watched intensely as he gave her a vision, the experience simulating what it was like being changed from mortality to the state of immortality . . .the immortality of a Vampire. He observed everything, and by the time the dream had finished its course, his eyes widened in disbelief and true astonishment.

It was then she opened her eyes, instantly smiling up at him. Raising a hand, she placed it over his heart.

“Now, I am like you,” she whispered. “I will never leave you, never, not ever.” The Vampire shook his head in disbelief.

“Raven, I -”

Exhausted, she slowly pulled out of his arms and knelt with him beside the fire. She looked into the flames and blinked, shaking her head, confused, as if something was not right. She raised a hand to her neck then looked at it while Artemis stared at her in wonder.

“You are a gem among the bitten. What you just did is unheard of. It has never occurred in all the histories I can recall.” Raven suddenly perceived what had happened and darted a glance at him.

“A dream to show me that what I want, I don’t want.”

“Yes, and I was wrong, Raven. Do you still -”

“Yes, and not because I want to be a Vampire.” It is for you I will take this path.” She moved close and nuzzled in close to him with sudden, loving affection. “It is for you. If you will allow me, I will end this constant, ongoing sadness that eats at your heart and mind.” She pulled back and gripped both his hands tight in hers. Artemis return her grip and caved in to her decision.

“Okay, but not out here It has to be in a place where you can learn to survive . . . even master sunlight, which will become your greatest enemy.” Raven gave him a curious look.

“Master sunlight?” He nodded.

“Unknown to many, I know truths and ways. I can teach you how to bring on shadow, envelope yourself with it, and throw down sunlight, so it has less, even no effect upon you. Raven, understand this: The darkness I speak of, and the shunning of light, is neither evil or good. It merely is what it is.”

“Okay, then, let’s do this . . . let’s go.” Artemis stood, aiding Raven to her feet.

“First we must see Krisha and Ogrin safely to their new home.” Raven blushed, suddenly ashamed.

“I’m sorry. That was selfish of me. Of course we help our friends. I am very tired. I am going to sleep now.”

Soon Raven was asleep, and Artemis was meditating across from her, staring into the dancing flames of the fire, watching over her. He never slept unless he calmed his senses. Even then, it was only a half-sleep state wherein he never dreamed. He could fully sleep, but refused to do so outside his home.

Slowly his eyes fell upon her. Wonder, total respect and admiration filled his soul for her. Within his dark eyes there glimmered a spark of hope.

“How did you do what you did, Raven?” he whispered. “If you can gain more control over your emotions before you are changed, you will truly become more than a mere Vampire. I am truly astonished at you. You need more training before your journey begins.” Closing his eyes, Artemis slipped back into meditation.

Though her back was turned to him, Raven’s eyes were open. She knew she had controlled her breathing and heart rate perfectly, or he would know she was awake. One of the things the dream he had given her was knowledge . . . vampiric knowledge. It was useful.

She heard what he said, and it weighed down upon her with a sudden

responsibility she accepted without reserve. Her true challenge was emotional balance. He was right. She needed to throw out all her unnecessary thoughts, her actions, bad habits. Her old self would soon be no longer needed, and that would have to be dealt with when the time came.

As sleep took her, she thought of Krisha and Ogrin.

Raven smiled.

With a start, Raven awoke to the voice of a Dwarf.

“Og is hungry! Yes he is!” Raven adjusted her wings outward and slowly stood. Krishna threw her a loving smile.

“Good morning Raven. I trust you slept well?” Raven nodded, grinning happily.

“Yes, and you?” she inquired, quite liking Krishna.

“Very well, thank you.” She adjusted the skillet over fresh coals and loaded it with potatoes, salted pork and sliced onions. Ogrin looked on, licking his lips, seeming nearly feverish at the sight. He threw a glance at Raven and pointed at the food.

“It’s good!” he practically bellowed. Raven nodded and began checking every feather on both her wings, making sure they were perfect for flight.

“Good morning Ogrin,” she said, smiling. He waved at her, terribly distracted by some herbs being sprinkled onto the food.

“Hello bird girl!” She snickered and looked around for Artemis. Spreading her wings out to full, Raven stretched them until they felt just right for a little flying. Before that, though, she rolled up her bedroll tight and secured it. She then took to the sky, keeping close to the group. She flew about the clearing, diving and rolling, giving her wings a solid workout. The joint in her wing hurt, but only a little. After one ascent, she dove and buzzed Ogrin, who was looking at the food in the skillet.

“Love you!” she stated and pulled up hard, turning upward into an ascending spiral, then dove and buzzed him again. “Love you!” She called out again. Krishna began laughing, seeing the Dwarf’s attention beginning to split between Raven and the skillet. On the fourth dive, Ogrin looked up, grinning ear to ear.

“Og likes your wings!” he bellowed, glancing quickly at the food. He then looked up and raised his hand, fingers extended, to which Raven ran the length of

her wing across as she flew by. Three more times, she held his attention, the last time slapping his hand with her's.

"Food's ready," Krisha laughed. Raven ascended one more time, then did a spinning free-fall with her wings tucked in tight. Just before hitting the ground, she extended and cupped them, breaking her fall. She landed, both feet and one hand on the ground, the other hand out, pretending she had a blade. Krisha watched, cringing as she landed. When Raven stood, Krisha clapped.

"Impressive move. Scary, but impressive." Raven walked over to Krisha and hugged her.

"You are the one who is impressive." Krisha embraced her in return.

"Good to see you to. Are you hungry?" Raven let go, glancing at the sizzling meal.

"Smells really good." Ogrin pointed at it, then quickly opened his pack. As the Dwarf rummaged through the contents, bent on breakfast, Raven looked around.

"Where's Artemis?" Krisha shrugged.

"I don't know, but it's not like him to not be here. This is the second time, and he's starting to worry me." Raven looked out into the trees. She wondered if Artemis was going after the Revenant. At the thought, a shadow of dread slowly crept into her heart. She refused to eat, even though Krisha tried to get her to. After the third attempt, Krisha gave up.

Not long after Ogrin began eating, Raven saw him come from the trees. Smiling, she leapt into the air, flew over to him and landed.

"You're late." In silence he walked past her, running a hand through her hair. She watched him walk over and take a plate of food. Something must have happened. Artemis looked tired; worn down. Quietly, she got her plate of food and ate on her bedroll, which she used like a log to sit on. She noticed the Dwarf had already finished eating, and was watching the skillet carefully. Raven never ate too much – it hindered the coordination of flight. She looked at the food

heating back up, shrugged, and set her plate down.

"I can't fly my best if I'm stuffed." She leapt into the sky and began doing maneuvers to work her wings and body into shape. She had been grounded longer than she liked, and riding the winds was refreshing.

After camp was put away, Krisha waved Raven down. She shot into the air one last time, rolled backwards and cupped her wings to break her fall. Slowing her descent. Just before landing, she beat her wings hard, once, and touched down as light as she could. This was the most difficult landing to do, but she succeeded. As soon as she landed, Artemis spoke.

"Okay, we have three more days until we enter the thickest part of this forest. It will be tough going. After that, Sanctuary." Ogrin grinned.

"Og wants a new home!" Krisha placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I will be your neighbor." Ogrin nodded enthusiastically. Raven watched Artemis who beamed with pride.

"Let's go," he stated confidently. Raven continued to watch Artemis as they moved on. Before leaving the clearing, she saw him glance uneasily at the trees where he had come out from.

Upon entering the forest, again, she quickly became entangled. Artemis, who had been keeping a close eye on her fell back to her side.

"Bird in a thicket," he whispered. Looking around, she locked her eyes on something, raised her hand and snapped her fingers. Out of the forest suddenly buzzed a finger-sized wasp that landed on his neck. Artemis stopped moving and looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

"I know enough about wasps to know that when you smash them, a scent is released that tells all others to attack." She smiled, narrowing her eyes at him like a predator. "The sting of this particular wasp really hurts." She made her way directly in front of him. "Say you love me." Slightly shaking his head, he threw her a slight smile.

"You love me," he whispered. Rolling her eyes, Raven poked him and sent

the wasp away.

"I already know that, vampire boy."

"Then why have me tell you the obvious?" She laughed.

"Pretty sharp-witted for a night owl. By the way, what is making you so nervous?" Raven pointed into the wooded area where Artemis's attention had been drawn. Slowly, he looked.

"You really shouldn't ask. If I told you, you wouldn't take me serious anyways."

"Yes I would, but I'll trust you and leave it at that," she stated confidently as he started picking bark and leaves out from her hair. Instantly she became distracted at his touch. She felt her heartbeat quicken, and her head began to swim. "You know, it's not fair. Some day, I'm going to get used to you. Then I won't swoon every time you get near me. I'm getting annoyed by it." Raven softly laughed at the look he gave her.

"You are getting bold in your speech, Raven. I think you are getting used to me already." Raven tried to smile, taking in a few deep breaths, trying to level out her senses.

"You smell so good." Raising a hand up, she placed it over his heart and closed her eyes. "I should . . ." Stepping back, she broke contact with Artemis, who smiled, appearing flattered.

"You know," he whispered, "I've never seen anyone hold out as long as you. You are strong-minded, and have a will to match your mind." Scoffing at him, she pulled a twig from her hair, then showed it to him.

"You are like this twig. You get stuck in my hair and are annoying. The good thing about this tiny branch, is it's good to use as kindling, to start a fire." Shaking his head, he stepped close and placed both his hands, one on each side of her head and took in a deep breath. Letting it out, he leaned in and gently kissed her. The moment his lips touched hers, she panicked and pushed him away, glancing at Ogrin and Krisha, who were exploring a short ways ahead of them. Looking up

into his eyes, she smiled happily, feeling half drugged.

"If we were alone, I would not have done that." Hesitating, she threw a glance over to Krisha and Ogrin again, then moved into Artemis and gripped his tunic with both her hands, shaking her head.

"Stop it Artemis, or I'm going to face-plant you." In surprise, he threw her a look of innocence.

"I didn't do anything."

"Liar."

"Weakling," he pressed.

"Blood-sucking woman-hunter," she returned.

"Oh, blood-sucking, am I? Do you feel unsafe?"

"With you? What's to be afraid of?" He laughed and tried to kiss her again, but she pulled back, not quite letting him make contact.

"After those two are in Sanctuary," she whispered. Looking over at Krisha and Ogrin, he smiled.

"I agree. We best be moving on." Disappointed, Raven placed a hand on his arm, gripping the sleeve of his trench coat.

"Okay," she faintly whispered, drawing close and smelling his neck, "we better go now, or I'm going to stop caring." Closing his eyes, he wrapped her in a gentle embrace.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear, just before stealing another kiss. Grinning, she rested the side of her head against his chest and sighed.

"I didn't know blood-suckers were capable of loving birds . . . think about it . . . Vampire Raven. The corn will be in much more peril than usual. Then the corn will become vampiric. After that, the farmers will feed it to their animals, which will become monsters. Can you imagine a chicken with fangs? There will be -" Artemis laughed and gripped her tight, and planted a long kiss on her, not caring if the other two saw.

"I'm afraid I have to spoil our moment here, but we must be moving on.

Would you care for a ride?" Artemis patted the sack at his belt, instantly causing Raven to cringe.

"Yeah, I guess I have to, or get stuck again," she said despondently.

"It would be worse not to get in the sack, you know that, right?" he gently pressed the issue, his perfect eyebrows rising slightly. Looking around, Raven hesitated. She hated going into that sack.

"I just feel so helpless in there. Maybe I'll try and sleep. It gets boring fast." Artemis reached into the Storing Sack and pulled out a bottle of liquid.

"Take a sip of this and it will help you sleep. I can see your anxiety here. I'm sorry about what happened last time. But that is over now. The problem is solved. I will take special care to keep a hand on the sack the entire time. How does that sound?" Pacified, Raven nodded and took the bottle.

"Alright, I trust you. When it is clear enough for me to fly, please let me out." Showing him the bottle, she grinned and slipped into the sack with his help. Just before she dropped down, Raven squeezed Artemis's hand. He brushed her hair back, smiling at her.

"It won't be long. Just rest up." Raven dropped down into the Storing Sack, cupped her wings to break her fall and landed, bottle in hand. Standing upright, she wiggled the bottle a bit, watching the liquid inside.

"What is this?"

"If you are referring to the bottle I gave you, it is the juice of a plant. Drink it, and you sleep. Just don't take more than a tiny sip at one time."

The next few days went by too slow for her to describe. She would rather be up there out in the forest, struggling with getting tangled up in the undergrowth than trapped in this sack, no matter how unique it was. There was no comfort in here. The only time she could come out was when they camped for the night. When she came out on the third night, Artemis called them all together. Over a small campfire, he informed them they would be heading into the thickest part of the forest. He turned to Raven.

"You will be out of the sack during this time." Expectantly, he waited for concerns to be expressed. Raven did not care.

"If I never see the inside of that wonderful sack again, it will be too soon. Artemis looked at Krisha and Ogrin, who looked at each other. Krisha raised her hand, briefly.

"How will she get through?" All eyes fell upon Artemis, who slowly looked about, taking in each of the three as if weighing them in the balance.

"We will be heading into the most dense area of Edgewood I know of, but it is not the same. The areas we have traveled are thick with undergrowth. It reaches out and grabs at you, as if it doesn't want you to reach the place we are going. That is why I chose Sanctuary to be built in there." Artemis pointed at the forest. All three looked in the direction he was pointing, then back at him. He continued after a lengthy time of silence. "When I first came to this forest, I was much younger, and filled with adventure. I craved the unknown, and here I found out what the unknown holds." Artemis looked at Ogrin, then Krisha. Last, he looked at Raven. Ogrin cleared his throat loudly.

"Og will protect the pretty ladies," he said confidently.

"I'm sure you will Ogrin De`Jor of the Iron Mountains. You have always been jealous of the safety of your friends. And for your bravery, we all owe you a debt of gratitude. Thank you sir." The stout Dwarf placed a hand on the head of his battle hammer and looked at Krisha expectantly. Krisha smiled brightly at Ogrin.

"Thank you, Ogrin. I don't know what I would do without you." Ogrin, reached over and patted her hand, then turned his attention to Raven, eyebrows raised. Stifling a laugh, Raven lowered her head and softly cleared her throat.

"Thank you," she soberly stated, trying not to laugh. She pinched herself hard, secretly. The Dwarf looked up at Artemis and folded his arms.

"All of you have said thank you. Now it is Og's turn to say something. He stood boldly, his arms still crossed. "All of you are welcome!" He half shouted,

then sat back down.

"Krisha, do you have anything to say?" Artemis inquired. She shook her head in silence.

"Raven, how about you?" Raven looked into the darkness of the trees, which seemed to dance like phantoms in the fire's light.

"Three days through the most dense area? Am I going to slow you three down?" Artemis's eyes glittered in the firelight.

"Yes, but only by a day at most. But it can't be helped. You are one of us now." Krisha gave Artemis a look that caused him to look away from her. "You all need to know that each and every person you meet in Sanctuary, I have traveled here with, just like you three. I know each of them not only by name, but by memory. Remember that." Raven suddenly had questions . . . too many.

"Artemis, you say the forest will become more dense. Tell us about the next three days, if you will."

"The trees are closer, but become much larger, and not just a little. Moss covers the north side of every massive timber. Even though the underbrush quickly vanishes, the roots of the great trees struggle to surface, becoming, at times, a hindrance as well, and you will never see the stars." He went silent, seemingly deep in thought.

"At least it won't be the sack that blots out the stars," Raven muttered.

"No it will not," he whispered distantly. "I believe you will enjoy this part of the journey, Raven. I believe you will like it very much." With that, Artemis looked up, scanning the trees. After a long moment he stood, said goodnight to each of them, then nimbly climbed a nearby tree, vanishing upward into its bows.

Krisha began a simple conversation with Ogrin, and soon the two were talking about less interesting things than Raven wanted to hear. Raven stood and walked over to the nearest tree and looked. There wasn't enough room to get a boost up by using her wings, and so she climbed up with a bit of a struggle. Finally reaching the lowest branch, she steadied herself, then climbed up three

more until finding a spot to rest for the evening. She found a point where multiple branches crossed each other. Settling down, she slipped into a half sleep, half conscious state. It wasn't a good rest, but it would have to do. At least it wasn't cold.

During the night, Raven awoke with an uneasy feeling. She opened her eyes, but did not move. Slowly, she scanned the area in the tree above her. On the ground, a fire kindled, quickly burning higher and higher. Still, it was not gone, that feeling of uneasiness. She spotted Artemis pulling something out his magical sack.

A deep chittering above her sent chills down her spine. Instinctively, she knew that sound. Turning slowly, she looked up into the eyes of a massive Preying Mantis. Again it chittered, looking down at her, tilting its head to the side. Wonder flowed through Raven's mind as she slowly balanced and stood. The great insect lowered its head and nibbled on the ends of her fingers as she carefully reached upward.

"Well, aren't you beautiful," she whispered. Though she did not see it, a golden hue briefly illuminated within her eyes. The glow of gold flickered three times, and then faded. "I had no idea you could get so big," she whispered, amazed and awestricken at this lethal predator towering over her. It cocked its head sideways and watched Raven closely, postured as though it would strike. It did not. Reaching out to it, Raven mimicked the chittering sound, beckoning it closer.

"Magnificent," she soothed as it closed in on her and began carefully grooming her wings. Raven held still and placed a hand on the armored chest-plate of this gargantuan preying mantis as chills cascaded her wings.

"You are too good at this," she groaned. "You big loveable beast," she whispered in total admiration, giving it to its attention. Raven continued to sooth and coo the massive predator as she ran her hands over its legs and side. "You are lethal," she whispered, her hands moving to the antenna on the right side of its

head. Raven was utterly charmed by this creature, which most all others would have instantly deemed a threat. To her, it was like being introduced to an old friend.

For a long while she spoke to it, charming it deeply into submission. She cast no spell, and held no magical charm over this creature, yet she enthralled it and bound it to her more powerfully than any spell could have. It never crossed her mind how she should not have been able to do what she did, and it never crossed her mind that, at any moment, it could quickly rend her body unto death.

Artemis stood by the fire looking up at the scene. At first, he was ready to leap into action. But after witnessing this union of strangers, he relaxed and watched Raven endear the beast. He wondered if it would follow her to Sanctuary.

"A true Witch, you are," he whispered. Until they parted, each to their separate ways, he watched Raven with more than just admiration.

After it had finished her wings, it stood motionless, watching her. Raven placed a gentle hand on its head, avoiding its eyes, and began scratching it with her nails. A deep chittering thrum began to fill the air.

"Like that, do you? Okay, my turn." Its head and chin got the first work over. Then, as she went for the neck, it froze and nearly slipped out of the tree. When she was finished, she gently brushed both its antenna with her hands.

"There, now we are even, you and I. Now you better go before a certain Dwarf wakes up. He gets upset easily." As if the great Preying Mantis understood, it turned and quietly stalked away, climbing up through the branches of the trees, vanishing into the dark of night.

Once it was out of sight, Raven slowly looked down to see Artemis standing by the fire watching her. For a time, she stared in silence at him, then climbed down. Once out of the tree, Raven walked over by the fire, holding his gaze for a long while before he reached out and gently brushed a feather on her left wing

back into place.

"Thanks, she mouthed, not wanting to spoil a good moment. It was always so hard to get him alone.

"You're welcome. That was something. I've never seen anything quite like that in all my long years. You are a very talented Witch, you know that?" She stood there, not knowing how to respond. Yes, she knew she had a spell-less link with insects. She didn't want to brag. She could tell him things which would make most others skin crawl.

"Artemis, I don't know how to honestly respond to that, but thank you." He began braiding her hair on one side of her head.

"I would like to hear it."

"You don't want to listen to someone who brags," she said, her voice calm and thoughtful. She held still so he could make the braid without effort.

"Well, I would like to know how you did what you just did without casting a spell, and then without getting eaten." She thought for a bit, closing her eyes, enjoying the attention.

"I get inside their heads. I've always been able to do it. It's just, well, when I graduated from Guild House, it became easier." Artemis gently kissed her on the side of the head. She smiled, keeping her eyes closed.

"You are being modest." She agreed with a slight nod.

"Oh," she said, raising a finger. "I also have the same effect on vampires." She opened her eyes to meet his. "Of course, I'm really trying hard to simply walk away, go back to my tree, climb up into it and get some sleep." They both laughed quietly, enjoying one another for a few moments.

"Well, you sure had that Gargantuan Preying Mantis wrapped about your little pinky. Again, impressive." Raven smiled with delight.

"Thank you sir," she quietly said, before walking back to her tree.

As she got back onto her perch, she laid down and watched him until sleep took her into a dream in which she was the queen of the insect kingdom.

"Raven, breakfast is almost ready, if you would like some." Raven slowly came to consciousness. Artemis was standing on the limb below, making him just tall enough to speak into her ear. All in a haze, she reached up, coursed her fingers through his hair, then kissed him.

"Morning fangs. I'll be down in a minute." He touched the braid he'd given her, stole a quick kiss, then vanished back down the tree. Raising a hand, she touched her mouth and smiled happily. After fully waking up, Raven climbed down and joined the three for a dish prepared by Krisha. Ogrin grinned as she knelt down by the fire.

"Food is good!" He yelled in-between bites.

"Morning Ogrin, morning Krisha. I hope you slept well?" They both nodded. Raven reached for a plate, but Ogrin beat her to it, quickly handing it over.

"Thank you Ogrin." The Dwarf nodded and pointed into the skillet. Laughing, Raven spooned a little onto her plate.

"Thank you Krisha. Your cooking really is amazing." Krisha's eyes twinkled with delight.

"Oh, you're welcome, and thank you." She gave both Raven and Artemis a warm smile, and a knowing look, making Raven uncomfortable. Raven got up and walked over by the trunk of the tree she had slept in and sat down to eat. She didn't like what Krisha had just implied. It was not her business, and she shouldn't have meddled. She sighed heavily and played with her food. Krisha didn't mean anything negative by it. She was merely teasing. It was nothing.

Movement to her left caused her to jump. She dropped her plate of food as she backed away from the tree, stumbling. Peering into the bushes, she saw tentacles moving.

"Artemis, there is something here!" She called, regaining her balance and retreating. At once he was at her side.

"Where, point to it." She pointed just past the tree.

"Right there! Did you see it move?"

"Yes I did," he said, snatching her up into his arms and leaping back, retreating to the fire. He put her down and turned. As he did a huge tentacle pierced out through the undergrowth and snaked up into the branches where Raven had been sleeping.

Ogrin bellowed out a challenge as he dropped his plate and pulled out his battle hammer.

"Og!" he thundered and charged the snake-like length of deep green. His charge was very fast for his size. He struck the moving tentacle with fury and rage, again and again relentlessly until only pieces of it remained. The rest of it withdrew back into the deep of the forest without any sound but the undergrowth it disturbed.

"And stay out!" Ogrin screamed, his face twisted in fury. Raven witnessed how quickly the Dwarf had destroyed vine, and the rage in which he attacked. It was very intimidating, and made her feel small and little. All she could do was stand and stare with her mouth open. She didn't see the smile that spread across Artemis's face as he watched the Dwarf destroy the creeping foliage.

"Thank you Ogrin," Krisha whispered.

"He is formidable," Artemis stated with respect. Raven watched Ogrin challenging the undergrowth as he stalked back and forth in a silent rage. Raven found herself afraid of him as much as the intruder. She wanted to leave, now, more than anything. There had to be a reason Artemis wasn't helping Ogrin. Raven kept quiet and still, keeping her thoughts to herself. She would wait and see what happened next.

After a few moments, she saw Ogrin put his weapon away. He turned and stalked back and stood before Krisha, giving her a sympathetic look.

"Is Krisha hurt?" He asked, very concerned. She shook her head.

"No, my friend. I am alright, thanks to you." His face turned crimson as he

lowered his head.

"Nothing will harm my best friend. Nothing." Raven saw the genuine love Ogrin harbored for Krisha. She thought about it, and came to the conclusion there could not be anyone who could not love and respect her. Krisha was so much better a person than she was. Raven stole a glance up at Artemis, who was watching the two with great interest. She felt his hand begin massaging her neck as he watched on. When the two were done talking, she felt Artemis's hand drop.

"Ogrin, may I have a word with you in private?" Without waiting for an answer, Artemis walked away and stopped within eyeshot of the girls. Ogrin followed him, his brows raised in curiosity.

Raven noticed Krisha was looking at her, and it made her nervous. After a few moments, Raven turned to Krisha and awkwardly started a conversation.

"How do you cook like you do?"

"I'm sorry about the way I acted," Krisha whispered. "I thought about it while you were apart from us. I was wrong to meddle. Please forgive me." All at once, all the tension melted away.

"Oh Krisha, that was all me; all those years at home. You didn't do anything wrong, not in the least." Krisha stepped up to Raven and embraced her gently.

"Thank you, Raven. That means so much to me." Raven didn't know what to say, and so she embraced her in return. At first, Krisha's hug was awkward. Yet, as she returned her affection, Raven felt the peace of a lasting friendship solid in her heart.

When Artemis and Ogrin returned, the Dwarf's head was held high, a proud look spread across his face. Stalking past Raven, she saw him head toward his pack, but not before patting Krisha on the hand.

They moved on into the forest that day, following Artemis in silence. Raven noticed the trees got larger as the day rolled on. Moss began to appear upon the trees, just as Artemis had told them. In this, Raven knew which way was north.

After tripping on protruding roots three times, she learned to pick up her feet. The bushes and over-abundant crab grasses that hindered movement, was replaced by a mass of roots which seemed determined to stop her from following the three.

Just as she thought it was at its worst, the trees decided to get wider than normal. Stopping, she looked up to find herself gazing into shadow and darkness. She pictured terrible predators lurking in the canopy above. She daydreamed of Krisha suddenly being pulled up off the ground, screaming and vanishing into the obscurity of the trees above.

Raven slipped between the trunk of two huge trees. As she squeezed through, the thought of them suddenly moving together to crush her compelled Raven to move quickly through to two massive wooden sentinels. She felt panic begin to set in as the very air about her seemed to press heavily against her in all directions. Desperately, she began searching for her companions, but they had vanished.

"Hey, I'm getting behind!" she called out. Her words did not carry, but seemed to fall to the ground as silent as the earth beneath her feet. Coming to a stop, Raven became still as stone, listening for a response – there was none.

"Artemis, Krisha, Ogrin?" Again, there was no reply. She noticed she was pushing on the tree she was next to, using the one behind her as leverage.

"What am I doing?" Raven whispered, wiping sweat from her brow. Staring at the tree she had been pushing against, she bit her lip. Putting the side of her face against it, she went still, trying to relax.

"Well tree," she whispered, not really thinking about why she was talking to it, "I bet you are used to this by now. I'm not. As much as this place is beautiful, in its own way, I just want to get through." She brushed away something from her face and continued as if the tree was listening. "I bet you could tell me the way to go." She dropped her forehead against the bark and sighed heavily. Patting the trunk, she smiled.

"Well, no hard feelings. I didn't expect an answer. You are wonderful, but I had best be moving on." Stepping out from the two trees, she looked around in hopes of seeing her companions. There was nothing but trees and roots in every direction. She looked at the ground, hoping to see footprints, but there were none.

Moving on in silence, Raven ran her hands over the surface of every tree as she passed, hoping to find her friends. At one point, she stopped and squinted up into the darkness after hearing a scratching noise above her. She wasn't sure, but Raven thought she saw the face of a large wolf-like creature above her in the deeper shadows. This had to be wrong, as wolves never climbed trees. The thought gave her no comfort.

Pressing on, Raven tried not to go in circles. As she moved through the forest, she felt as though everything was looking at her, watching, aware of her presence, causing her to panic. Breathing became difficult, and came in shorter inhales and exhales as she began to see more faces above her. She began saying, "Artemis didn't bring me here to die," over and over again.

She tried to travel on, but from the corner of her eye a fleeting shadow distracted her. Stopping, she spun toward the movement.

"Hello?" Her voice cracked with emotion and fear as a padding sound behind Raven made her scream and turn about.

"Who's there! Artemis!" She called as loud as she could, desperately hoping he would hear. She listened, holding her breath so she could hear better, but no other sound came to her attention.

"Artemis, please, I've gotten away from you!" She pleaded, tears welling up within her eyes. Why would he leave her now? She trusted him, and now he was gone, simply not here anymore.

Holding her wings, as if that would help, she pressed on through a blur of tears, ignoring everything she heard, or thought she heard. At any moment, Raven suspected to feel the ripping teeth of some predator send her into pain and then death.

She continued on until she was spent. Collapsing against the trunk of an unusually large tree, she laid her head against it, too tired to care about moving shadows and noises. There, she fell into a dreamless slumber, where she knew she was being watched.

When Raven awoke, she looked around, her mind in a haze. Smelling Krisha's cooking, she smiled for a moment, until the smell vanished. All went dark about her. She did not know how long she was in darkness, but when she opened her eyes, she found herself alone, still. Unsteadily, Raven stood and looked around, half expecting to spot some monster watching her, ready to pounce.

"Why do you keep looking," she whispered. "There's only trees . . . I hope." Raven suddenly realized what she had taken for granted, and she missed it terribly. She missed Krisha and Ogrin. She especially missed Artemis, and the security he gifted her with.

The entire day, she spent blindly moving, hopefully, in the one direction. During the day, or night, she wasn't sure which, she heard a distant noise, like a growl. She moved away as quickly as she could, but knew there was no escaping now. Within a short while, she was an emotional wreck as she moved through the forest, hindered by everything that could possibly stall her progress.

At length, she fell to the base of a tree, and began screaming. By the time her voice failed her, she passed out, not caring if she lived or died. Soon, Raven fell into a fitful slumber.

"Raven . . . Raven, wake up. Come on, wake up." Raven slowly came to consciousness and slowly focused on a woman clad in all green. Her silver eyes struck her speechless. Merely gazing into her eyes reminded Raven of the Ice Wolves of the Ferryl Mountains back home.

"You need to eat, Raven. Can you stand?" Raven shook her head, trying to

separate dream from reality.

"Are you real?" The silver-eyed woman nodded.

"I'm as real as you. Arise and come with me. I'm sure you are famished." Raven accepted her hand and stood. Gazing up at her, Raven could not help but stare in open wide-eyed wonder and admiration. Smiling, she woman beckoned her to follow. As they made their way through the trees, the way was no longer blocked by root nor tree. In Silence they traveled for what seemed forever. It felt as though Raven had slipped into a state of slumber, as if she were sleepwalking.

"Am I dreaming?" she whispered to herself.

"You are not." The woman replied. "You have entered into a part of Edgewood Forest known as Twilight, where few seldom travel. Conserve what strength remains in you. We are close to our destination." Raven did as she was asked. This green-clad woman was right -- Raven felt the very frame of her body beginning to rebel against walking.

A dreamwalk later, Raven began, or thought she began, to see shadows to either side of them. Looking back, she half expected to see a creature of shadow stalking them with ill intentions. Yet, each time she turned to see what it was, there was nothing there. Looking up, she was surprised to see a few stars between the leaves blinking down through the canopy as they continued on. Apprehension steadily replaced her fear, and her senses cleared. How long she had been in Twilight, she did not know, but one fact gnawed at her mid-section – she was hungry, as if she had not eaten for months. The tall, slender woman abruptly stopped and turned.

"Are you well?" Raven nodded.

"Yes, thank you. I'm just a little hungry, that's all." The woman's silver eyes fill with instant amusement.

"A little, I see. Alright then, shall we continue?" Raven threw her a weary smile.

"Yes, please," she whispered, and then yawned. The woman stared at her

for a bit, making Raven feel like a rabbit in a fox den. Wiping her eyes, Raven took a deep breath and waited for her to lead on.

"Follow me." For quite some time, they trudged along, Raven following a complete stranger without questioning her motives. Raven thought it odd how the trees were no longer hindering their travel. Even the roots of every massive tree were level with the ground, making it easy to get through this once nigh impossible barrier. It was no surprise that Artemis had picked the center of this great forest to build Sanctuary.

A shadow slipped past on her left side, startling her. Three more followed, two to her right, and one above. Raven looked ahead to see her guide alarmingly too far in front of her. She quickened her steps and caught up in haste, panting.

"There's something following us," she whispered, her heart beating hard. There was no reply, and she didn't say it a second time. They continued on. Raven was more careful to stay close, for when she did, the shadows all about her seemed to keep their distance.

At length, their arduous journey simply ended as they stepped out into a clearing filled with honey bees, butterflies, and a variety of common insects. Raven covered her eyes, feeling like a vampire suddenly exposed to the sun. The brilliance of the sun was so bright, she crouched and shaded herself from the light with her wings. Instant tears filled her stinging eyes.

As she adjusted to the daylight, which took a bit of time, Raven wondered about this place. Was this Sanctuary? Who was the woman who had guided her here? Where were her companions? She thought about her home, so far away. Not so far for her, but far away from her heart. The thought caused her to weep. She was glad for the stinging brightness of the sun that masked her emotions.

Slowly, Raven stood, still shielding her eyes from the sun's rays. She couldn't see the one who had brought her to this place, but suspected she was near. After a time, Raven lowered her wings completely, blinking away the tears from sore eyes. It took a while before she could look around and see with any clarity.

"Ouch, that hurt," she grumbled.

"Your eyes are adjusted then, good. It took longer than usual." Raven turned to see the woman standing nearby.

"Yes, thank you."

"You are welcome. Here, eat and drink this." The woman held out a honeycomb on a broad leaf, and a cup of water. Raven took it.

"Thank you so much." The woman smiled and simply watched as Raven ate and drank. When she sipped the liquid, she noticed it was not water, but a sweet nectar, light as water, laced with a taste of honey. It was refreshing, such a meal, and it brought her spirits up. Soon she finished. The woman took the leaf and cup, and vanished into the tree-line.

Raven looked around at the stunning array of colors throughout the glade. This place was amazing, so filled with life and splendorous wonder.

"Raven?" She heard a man's voice, and looked up to see Artemis break into a run toward her from across the meadow with all the speed he could. She was flattered he was so happy to see her, but also felt suddenly angry. He had left her! As he approached her, she pointed a finger at him. But Artemis wrapped his arms about her, picked her up and spun her around in a circle. She instantly abandoned the thought of being angry with him.

"I thought I had lost you," he exclaimed with much excitement. He put her down and embraced her. "How did you come to survive?" Raven returned his affection, enjoying the attention thoroughly.

"Survive?" she chuckled. "I was only in Twilight for about three days." Artemis stiffened and pulled away, his smile instantly vanishing.

"I never told you the name of it. How do you know it is called Twilight?" Raven pointed over Artemis's shoulder.

"Her." Artemis let go of Raven and turned. Instantly, he bowed a knee to the earth, placed his right hand over his heart and lowered his head as the woman neared. She stopped and nodded, her silver eyes flashing as she looked upon him.

"Princess Etheri, it is a great honor to see you."

"Artemis," she softly spoke, an open look of loving kindness in both her demeanor and speech. Their manner toward each other pierced and warmed Raven's heart. "As always, the pleasure is all mine, I am sure. Will you formerly introduce me to this young lady? All I know is her name." Rising, Artemis turned and held out a hand out to Raven.

"Princess Etheri, this is Raven of Ferryl Keep, of the Ferryl Mountains. Raven, this is Princess Etheri of Twilight," he said in a tone of reverence. Raven bowed, feeling awkward.

"Thank you for saving me," Raven said. Raven looked upon the green-clad woman, whose striking beauty defied description.

"You are very welcome here, Raven," Etheri stated, smiling upon her. "I'm sure you and Artemis have a lot of catching up to do. I will return." She then departed, leaving the two alone.

"So," Raven awkwardly began, "where is Krisha and Ogrin?" Artemis pointed south-east.

"They are settled in Sanctuary. Raven, what happened? Where did you go?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," Raven replied. "You all left me." Artemis frowned.

"We looked everywhere for you. For days we tried to find you. As far as we knew, you had simply vanished. I'm sorry. I really tried to find you. After a week and a half, I took Krisha and Ogrin to Sanctuary. I spared not a minute before I returned to continue my search for you. I've been looking for you for three moons." His words struck Raven still.

"Three moons? Did you say three moons, Artemis?" He nodded, then shook his head.

"Just when I had given up hope, I happened upon Princess Etheri, who quickly sent out multiple search parties to locate you." Artemis sighed heavily and gripped Raven to him in a strong embrace. "I thought you were dead." Raven's

mind spun in confusion.

"Artemis, I was only gone for no more than three days. There's no way I could have been missing for over three moons. How could this be?"

"I don't know. Maybe Etheri can give us wisdom on this matter. She is the master of Twilight."

They talked until Princess Etheri returned bearing food and drink. After the meal, Artemis inquired about Raven's survival. Etheri pondered his question for a moment, then turned to Raven.

"I believe you were placed in a catatonic slumber. There is a tree here that will do that to the one who sleeps while touching it. It is call the Dromlin Sage, and is of the oldest within these timberlands. I cannot account for any other explanation. It is a miracle you found one." Raven looked into the trees, feeling haunted.

"There were scratching noises, shadows all about me. Sometimes I heard growling, as if at a distance. Etheri glanced at Artemis uneasily, then to the trees where Raven looked.

"But you were not attacked," the woman whispered, a sudden dire tone in her voice.

"No, never attacked." Etheri instantly began to run from the two of them. As she did, the earth beside her split open. From within the gap a giant black wolf emerged and shook the soil from its fur, then lowered its shoulder as she neared. Etheri grabbed the mane of the great beast and leapt onto its back, even as more of them burst forth from the ground in the same manner. Twisting about, she pointed behind them.

"There is a portal that will take you both to the destination of your choice. It is a one-way trip, so choose wisely!" Etheri's mount stalked toward the two of them and stopped. Etheri looked down on raven, a terrible energy beginning to flow from her. Both Artemis and Raven backed a pace, all in wonder. "You are safe now Raven. Artemis, take care on this one. I see something in her that is of

great consequence to you and -" Etheri stopped in mid sentence and focused her attention on Raven for the space of three breaths. She then placed a hand over her heart. "We shall meet again." Giving Raven one last piercing look, she turned and spurred her mount into the thickness of Twilight. Within a few short breaths, all was calm again. The rends in the earth slowly shut, leaving no trace of their passing. Stunned, Raven silently watched the scene play out before her.

"You sure do know how to bring things to life," Artemis told Raven. She looked at him, struggling for words. Artemis shook his head and took her hand. Raven turned and leaned her head against his shoulder, looking south-east.

"I didn't get to say goodbye to them." Sheltering her in strong arms, Artemis stroked the back of her head.

"We can go there now if you wish." Looking up, Raven searched his eyes.

"Am I to become just a citizen of Sanctuary?" She watched carefully for any hint of hesitation in his reply.

"Should you be?" Raven shook her head.

"Should I be?" Artemis smiled.

"Come with me."

"Why?" she asked, to which he simply smiled and began tucking the length of Raven's hair behind her ear.

"Come travel with me, please," he whispered. Raven nodded.

"I would like that very much," she said in earnest. "You know, I dislike how you make me feel. It's not natural." He looked at her, but said nothing.

There was a long moment of silence between them.

"Artemis?" she finally said, breaking the silence.

"Yes?"

"Can we come back later and visit Krisha and Ogrin?"

"Anytime you wish."

"Then let's travel. Thank you for being a wonderful man and a perfect gentleman." Artemis smiled and began massaging her temples with the tips of his

fingers.

"If I have not honor, what am I? If I lack respect, what is my life worth? If I am void of integrity, all becomes meaningless. I am no heathen." She loved to hear him talk. She loved the way he massaged the sides of her head. Closing her eyes, Raven felt weary and content.

"I'm so tired. Don't stop talking to me sir. I want to hear the soothing tone of your voice," she said, loving the attention he was gifting her with. "You are really good at this. Had I known, I would have had you massage my wings every day."

"Well, from now on, I'll have to work on that." She opened her eyes hazily, throwing him an exhausted grin.

"Three moons?" He nodded.

"Three moons." She bit her lip, tilting her head slightly as he worked his way down to Raven's neck, just below her jaw.

"We have a lot of catching up to do then. It's not right that I haven't teased you for so long, you know?" Laughing, Artemis shook his head.

"Let's get through the portal, then you can sleep."