

# Raven

## “Raven’s Tomb”

### Book 2

Copyright © Michael G. Giles All Rights Reserved

As they approached the floating oval of shimmering energy, Raven's eyes widened, abruptly enthralling her in unbreakable curiosity. About the edges strands of blue energy constantly separated, shredding away from it to dissipate like tongues of flame from a burning campfire. Holding up a hand, she could feel no heat, and the energy cascading from the bottom of the portal did not consume the plant life it licked beneath it. She was speechless.

Artemis placed an arm about her shoulders they neared. Stopping not three paces before it, Raven held up both hands, feeling an energy flowing against her, yet it did not disturb one strand of her hair.

"Do not touch it," Artemis warned. If you do, and are not firm in the thought of your destination, you can be sent anywhere. Now we can get back, and you need not fight the woods again." Raven breathed a sigh of relief.

"That would be good. Keep talking, please," she said, enjoying the sound of his voice. Artemis took her hand and focused on the portal.

"I will take us. All you have to do is relax. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she said, yet fascinated by the structure of the energy in front of her.

"It's beautiful."

"This is a high form of magic, gifted us by Princess Etheri." Letting out a breath, Raven let go all her cares, as much as she could. Squeezing his hand, feeling the comfort of his presence, Raven calmed and thought of only Artemis. After a few more deep, slow breaths, she looked at him.

"Okay, I'm relaxed." Artemis pulled her close, embracing her tight. Turning, so he would be the first to make contact with the energy of the portal, he slowly backed into it. As he did so, she could not help but grin up at him. Never in all her life had she felt so happy.

The earth fell away from her feet, instantly causing her to fly. She focused hard not to take to the sky, trusting it was merely the effects . . . of . . . the . . . portal . . .

. . . she began crawling, her head all in a spin. What was she doing? There was soil and grass beneath her. Running her hands over the ground, she gave it a curious look, all in wonder.

"Why would someone just leave this here?" she asked, gripping a handful of grass and pulling it free. Within a few moments of studying the handful of vegetation, Raven felt strong hands lift her from the ground.

"Bye," she said to the grass, letting go the handful she had taken.

"The effect will wear off more quickly if you walk it off," came a familiar voice. Raven pushed the hands away, breaking loose from being smothered and controlled. She took a few steps away, then staggered about the area like a drunkard.

It didn't take long before she could walk a straight line without using her wings to balance herself. Looking over at the man who touched her, she squinted her eyes at him until he began clearing. After a few deep breaths, she suddenly recognized who he was.

"Artemis, I don't like portals." He smirked.

"They beat having to go on foot, or wing," he added. Raven shook her head.

"I think I'm good now." As her head cleared, she looked around, taking note of their surroundings. They were in a large clearing with a thick forest border on every side. She watched Artemis gather wood and rocks. After making a circle with the stones, he began setting the wood in a pyramid within the stones. Using a knife, he whittled a large branch until a thick pile of shavings lay before him. Putting the knife away, he stuffed the shavings into the center of the wood and set it ablaze with a match. After a short time, a fire cracked and popped, spreading into the thicker branches.

As she watched him work the fire, a breeze drifted through the campsite, blowing her hair and playing with the feathers on her wings. Closing her eyes, breathed deep and even, and inhaling the fragrance of the meadow. What had just

happened seemed like a daydream. Though it only felt as if a few short days had passed, in reality, over three moons had slipped by. She had always wished for adventure, but never imagined it would be like this. Well, now she knew to expect anything, like Artemis standing in front of her, bent on watching her. Raven smiled.

"I can feel you," she whispered. "You give yourself away by what you are." Feeling a gentle kiss, she smiled even the more, taking in the attention. She loved it, though the way he made her feel made her want to hit him. Raising her hands, she snaked them about his neck and returned the kiss.

"My apologies milady. I cannot help it. It's-"

"Your nature, yes I've heard that before," she interrupted, opening her eyes. "Where to now?" she asked, trying to shake him out of her head. She hated the thought, but she wished she could be with Artemis without the seductive feelings he radiated. Shaking her head, she pulled away and stepped back. "Artemis, if you could turn it off, would you?" The question seemed to surprise him.

"In a heartbeat. Raven, do you know how hard it's been for me to find someone like you who honestly, truly, resists it?" She shook her head.

"I have to be honest, it is very difficult to do. I like it very much, but I want to love you for who you are, not by the feelings which wash over me every time you get near. Don't get me wrong, I love it, but I'm frustrated by this ability you have. It's really not fair." Artemis walked back over by the fire, pulling out and opening his magical sack. Reaching in, he looked at her.

"You see? This is why I've been able to see the real you. And you are why I love you. Not because, as a female species, you can also charm me. Yes, you have the ability to do the same to me. You, Raven, frustrate me." She threw him a look of disbelief.

"You? I frustrate you, like you frustrate me?" Artemis laughed.

"Yes, I think it is in our nature to easily succumb to this attraction. It's why we - all of us - do not become extinct. It preserves our races; keeps it alive. It's

like a grand safety net to keep us from vanishing forever. Raven, all of us were born good, yet I've seen these feelings turn bad in so many. And they all, for the most part, give in, blaming nature instead of their own lusts. They place the fault on their drive, blaming it for their lack of integrity and willpower." Raven's face flushed crimson. She had a sincere question about this.

"So, what do we do? These feelings I have for you seem to grow every time we are together." she felt reluctant to talk about such things, but she trusted him. Artemis pulled out two bedrolls and began laying them out.

"Is that a bad thing, Raven?" She thought about his question.

"Well, no. I don't think so."

"I don't think so either. I knew a man who disagreed with me on this subject. He took as many women as he could. You know what happened? Can you guess?" Raven shook her head, feeling very flustered and reluctant to answer. Never had anyone spoke to her like this, and it took her off balance.

"What happened?" she asked quietly, looking down at her boots, curious to know where this was going.

"Raven, this is a touchy subject for many, but I will finish my thought, if you will allow me.

"Of course," she stated awkwardly, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

"Many women had children by him. When he found out a woman was with child, he vanished from her life. Over the years, I happened upon some of those children. From the shadows I observed them. Raven, most turned to the streets. Many of them turned to breaking the law."

"That's sad," she quietly stated, feeling suddenly sobered by where this little chat was heading.

"Raven, if that man had stayed with and married the first woman in honor, and had become a faithful father, what do you think would have happened?" Raven pondered his question as Artemis pulled out a frying pan and some food from the sack. She thought about it for a while as she watched him prepare their

dinner. At length, she supposed she had the answer.

"I think," she began slowly, thoughtfully, "there would have been no more illegitimate children. And, being there for his first child, as well as the woman, I think they would have been happy. I think the boy would have been taught a trade and made his way in life, coached by a mother and father who were always there for him. That's what I think." Artemis pointed at her.

"I believe the same thing." Raven felt proud of herself as Artemis sprinkled their steaming meal with what appeared to be spices, or herbs. "Raven, I cannot follow such an example. I cannot violate you, or any other, ever. To me, it is sickness and one that effects more than just the two. The thing is, I can, but I won't. I would rather be killed. And because of my choice in this, I remain happy, even through all the sadness of life experienced. My honor is rock solid, and that holds me up on a sure foundation." Raven took in Artemis with newborn admiration. Her heart warmed as he spoke. In silence, she watched him tend to the cooking and the readying of their camp.

"Wow," she whispered, watching him with a melting heart.

After they ate, they talked into the dark of night. She loved it when he took her hand in his. When Raven's eyes began to be heavy, Artemis stood and helped her to her feet. Guiding Raven to her bedroll, he helped her get situated, then covered her. It did not take long for sleep to overtake her. In her sleep, Raven fell into a dream where monsters chased her through a shadowy forest.

Long before the skies turned gray, Raven awoke, sat up, and looked for Artemis, but he was nowhere to be seen. She waited, but not patiently. It was midday when Artemis came walking into camp looking haggard and worn down. Raven saw him come from the trees and was instantly at his side. She noticed he was bleeding in several areas of his chest. She ducked under his left arm to support him.

"What happened?" she panicked.

"We'll talk later. I'll be fine," he replied with some effort. Raven looked at him, doubting his words. Ignoring her look of concern, he pulled out bandages from his Storing Sack and began wrapping wounds which should have been regenerating. Raven began helping, but he waved her back.

"No, I will do this. If you get my blood on you, you could be infected." Raven looked at her side and saw his blood on her, then looked up, meeting his eyes. He simply continued bandaging himself and shook his head, as if disappointed.

"Did you do that on purpose?" he asked in all seriousness. Raven suddenly felt small. She shook her head.

"No sir, I just wasn't thinking. I only saw you were hurt. Am I in trouble?" He looked at his blood on her.

"I don't know why I'm bandaging myself. I will heal, even if slowly. Still, binding my hurts, even as they heal, comforts me." After wrapping his mid-section up tight, he tucked in the end of the field dressing, securing it. Raven watched him, feeling as if he was going to reprimand her, scold her for what she did. Noticing her demeanor, he sighed.

"I wouldn't be surprised." Her eyes widened.

"I'm sorry, Artemis," she almost begged, tears welling up in her eyes. He threw her a quick smile.

"So emotional all the time. Keep that under control, got it? Always keep your mind on balance." It was like he was teaching her to master calm in a violent storm. She wiped her eyes and nodded, swallowing the urge to break down. He watched her slowly get her senses under control.

"Good. You are doing good."

"What happened?" she finally asked. Artemis gave her a flat stare.

"You know full well what happened."

"Then everything is safe?" Her Vampire nodded.

“Though you gave me some perfect advice, I had to improvise on the holy fire part. All the same, it was manageable. And, no, I could not have taken you along. You would have been killed.” He looked at Raven, waiting for an argument.

"I'm glad I was of some help in this," she stated. She swallowed hard, trying to keep her emotions locked away. "I'm just happy you are still alive." Artemis kept her talking for a long while, watching her eyes intensely. After a time the stern features of his face hardened.

"Okay, I need to get you somewhere secluded and out of the sun." He grit his teeth. "What were you thinking?" Raven's heart went cold.

"Artemis, don't be mad at me, please," she pleaded, reaching out a shaking hand to him. Taking her hand, he stood, lifting her to her feet. Taking her head between both his hands, he kissed her, and brushed her hair back.

"I am not angry with you. This is just a terrible place to begin such a journey. In a few hours, you will die when the dawn overtakes you." He tilted her head, studying her eyes, which were now fully bloodshot. "Okay, well, ready or not . . ." She cringed, blinking away the tears.

"I'm sorry." Shrugging, he pointed into the forest where he had emerged.

"The only permanently dark place I know is the tomb of the Revenant. Come." Raven ran over and buried the embers of the fire. Artemis took the skillet, and their bedrolls and hastily placed them in his magical sack.

They ran through the forest, Artemis towing Raven behind by the hand in a desperate rush to reach the tomb. After a long run, Raven felt her head begin to ache and throb. She knew what was happening, and what to expect. It didn't scare her in the least. In fact, she caught herself smiling. Glancing back, Artemis caught the smile and frowned.

"You think this is funny?" She instantly dropped the smile.

"Not in the least. I am happy though." Artemis stopped, turned and

scooped up Raven. Turning, he bolted through the forest in all haste.

“Why are you happy?” Artemis inquired as they made their way through an army of trees.

“Soon I will never leave you. I will not die. You will never be lonely again.” The look he gave her almost make her laugh.

They arrived at an opening in the side of a small hill before the graying of the skies. Artemis lowered her to the ground and pointed.

“You must go in there before the sun rises.” As Raven looked in, a chill flowed over her, making her shrink away from the opening.

“This is a bad place,” she whispered.

"It's all you have. Come with me." He took her hand and began leading her inside, but she stopped, pulling out of his grip.

"What are you doing? You have to get inside." Raven nodded.

"I want different clothes, water, and everything I will need. You stay out here and wait for me." Artemis looked at Raven rather surprised.

"I'm sorry," he lamented, and held out his Storing Sack. Taking it, she looked him square in the eyes.

"I'm not," she replied, then hardened her heart before walking in through the opening. As she entered, she came into a darkness, the likes of which she had never experienced. Forcing herself to be brave, Raven met the deep night head on without regret.

He watched her go down into the Tomb of the very creature he had just battled, a look of pain twisting into his face.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered.

Going through the torture a second time made her angry. Regrettably, she destroyed the Storing Sack while the transformation took place. She did not know

why she did it. Maybe it was a retaliation for Artemis making her go through this again. She had already done it once, and it grated like talons on her bones. It was her way of striking out; making him pay for . . . it was done. There was no turning back now. She desperately wished the transformation in the castle had been real; that it had already been done. All Artemis's belongings were scattered all through the back-most chamber of the tomb, most piled high up to the ceiling in a cluttered mess.

As three days passed, Artemis watched the entrance of the tomb with growing anxiety. On the third night, as the sun set through the trees, he watched it sink. All about him, the light of the waning day yielded to the darkening of night. There had been no sounds coming from the tomb. Not even a moan . . . nothing. He approached the entrance and waited for a long while. Still, nothing.

"Raven, where are you?" he whispered. He waited for her to answer, bending his will upon the opening of the tomb. Then, from within, near the entrance, came her voice.

"I'm here." Artemis stepped back as she slowly emerged from within that dark place. With great caution she walked from the opening, locking eyes with him. "It was easier this time," she lied. As she neared, Raven watched him closely. Everything was different now, as if she had stepped through a portal into a different world. All her senses were not as before. Her vision was enhanced. Her sense of smell and hearing were greatly increased. She could smell Artemis, his leather coat, his fear and his heart pounding out a rhythm that attracted and drew her to him. Placing a hand on his chest, she felt the beating of his heart and suddenly craved it. Taking his hand, Raven placed it over her own heart, suddenly dismayed.

"My heart no longer beats," she stated, tears welling up within her dark, lightless eyes. Artemis watched as the first tear slid down her cheek.

"Raven, you are not supposed to shed tears."

"I'm sorry", she whispered, trying to compose herself. "This is difficult. I will master my emotions. I'll do better, as I said I would." Shaking his head, Artemis reached up and took a tear onto his finger and looked at it.

"You don't understand. You are not supposed to be able to shed tears. It is not only impossible, but unheard of." Raven thought for a moment, then glanced out into the woods, taking in the many scents washing over her, and the chorus of insect heartbeats singing in the night air.

"But I don't have a beating heart. I felt it stop; I feel it - just - there, lifeless and cold." She turned and embraced Artemis, who wrapped his arms about her. He seemed cautious, wary, as if he were suddenly holding a viper.

"Artemis, I got mad at you while I was in there. I struck out against the Storing Sack, as if it were you. I'm sorry." Pulling back, Artemis looked at her for a moment, then broke out in quiet laughter, as if she had just told him a bad joke.

"I bet that made a big mess." Taken back by his statement, Raven shook her head, not knowing what to say. She thought he would beat her for what she did. Instead, he was laughing. She watched his smile fade away to a most serious and stern expression. Now, she knew she was in trouble.

"Raven, do you hate me?" he asked. Surprised at his question, she shook her head.

"Quite the opposite, I assure you." He wrapped her about her waist and lifted her off the ground, suddenly smiling.

"I love you more."

"I doubt it," she countered, her dark eyes glittering with surprise and delight. She slipped to the ground and looked around, taking in the soothing night. "What now? I can't leave. Am I trapped here? I don't know what to do, Artemis." He pondered the situation in silence, running his fingers through her hair. She loved the attention and closed her eyes, enjoying the moment. After being in that nightmarish tomb for three days, she needed something positive . . . and this was

doing nicely.

"Raven, I have contacts; friends and allies who can get you to my castle." Raven's eyes shot open, as if she had just been startled.

"You have to leave me here," she panicked.

"I'm not abandoning you. I'm going to fix the situation. I need help to make sure you arrive at our home alive," he said.

"I'm scared. I don't want to be alone. Is there no way to travel on foot and find safety before every sun-up?" Artemis nodded.

"Yes, but there is a high risk of failure. I will not risk losing you to an avoidable mistake." Raven's face looked more pale than usual.

"And this is what happens to fools. I destroyed the only hope I had of getting out of here." Artemis frowned.

"You are not a fool, Raven. This happened because you simply made a rash decision . . . a mistake. Trust me when I tell you, I've made many mistakes. What has changed you, was because you cared enough to help me. You could not have known the consequences of what you did. There is no way you could have known this would happen." Raven laughed darkly, breaking away from him and slowly pacing back and forth, resignation slowly taking her over. Stopping, she looked up through the trees.

"Now I am the monster people fear. I am that thing they talk about in hushed whispers behind locked doors."

"Raven, don't do this," he gently countered.

"I don't want to be alone. I want to be with you. But if I have to stay within the stench of that underground mire, for who knows how long, to be with you . . . " she clenched her fists and growled menacingly. She felt as though she was a monster. Looking at the stars, Raven screamed. Trembling, she looked to him as if he could fix this situation – make it all go away. He always had an answer for everything. If anyone in the world could right this, he could. But deep down inside, she knew better than to think this could be quickly solved.

Artemis watched on in apprehension at how this would play out. Raven's scream sounded primeval, feral. He could see she stood at a crossroad. Her eyes had lost every bit of light, as if it had naturally fled them.

"Then I will stay here and wait," Raven said, and looked to the mouth of the tomb.

"You will?" Artemis asked, surprised. Raven nodded.

"If by so doing, I can come to you, where you are, I will stay in this forsaken place; the price I pay for foolishness." Suddenly aware of the blood flowing and pulsing through his entire body, she shivered. "You smell good," she whispered, suddenly feeling as though she had consumed an entire bottle of what he had shared with her at the inn. Artemis threw her a look of concern.

"So, this is it then."

"What is it?" she asked, craving his blood like nothing she had ever craved before as the pulsing in his veins began to throb in her head. She suddenly felt famished.

"The moment when every Vampire makes that first choice."

"Choice?" She whispered, then shuddered. Artemis nodded.

"Yes, the choice that truly makes them the horror everyone else talks about, or the choice that takes them down the road hardest to follow . . . the road to self-empowerment." She thought about his words as the smell of his blood nearly quenched her will to refrain. Shaking her head, Raven slowly removed her hand and look at Artemis.

"That is a powerful sensation. Really powerful." Artemis smiled.

"Are you alright?" Raising his hand, he began caressing the side of her head. Leaning into his hand, she shook her head.

"No. Will you stay with me for a few nights before you go?"

"Of course I will," he replied, then pulled out something from an inner pocket. Kneeling before her, he looked up to her. Raven opened her eyes, curious as to what he was doing, only to find Artemis kneeling before her holding up an

exquisite ring. Her eyes widened.

"Raven will you marry me? She slowly took the ring from him, gazing at it in disbelief. In all this madness, she truly never expected this!

"Yes," she whispered, then handed it back to him. Artemis took the ring and slipped it onto her finger. He watched her, suddenly amused.

"Ravens love sparkly things, don't they?" She embraced her fiance, kissing him with her entire soul. When they parted, she looked at the ring.

"Yes, we love sparkly things. Thank you, Artemis. I hope I can bring you a lasting joy." Running a gentle hand down her wing, he smiled.

"The gratitude is mine. I hope I can bring peace and joy to you." Suddenly, without warning, she punched him in the chest, catching him off guard.

"Don't think I'm going soft. We still have a long way to go before we can relax."

"Yes, honey," he jested. She threw him a dark look, to which he lifted his hands.

"Peace," he stated, just before lunging at her.

After a solid workout, Raven held up her hands, signifying she had enough. Artemis rolled his shoulder, massaging it.

"Did I hurt you?" Artemis nodded.

"I regenerate." He wiped a bit of sweat from his forehead and stared at it. "You okay?" Raven nodded.

"I will be."

"Don't worry, you regenerate now as well. All vampires do. We Ardenoth are just better at it." He pointed at her, throwing her a half grin. "You're a lesser." She thought about his comment for a moment, then pointed at him accusingly.

"You asked a lesser Vampire to marry you."

"Ouch, I give," he chuckled.

"You better, fangs."

They talked on through the night until Raven started itching. Artemis noticed the sign of the coming of the sun before Raven perceived it. He instantly pointed at her scratching.

"That's the predawn warning. You need to be underground, and soon, or it will get worse. That's when your skin will begin to turn red and peel. Shortly after that, you will begin to burn -"

"Okay, I get it, I get it," she said, cutting him off and shaking her head. She threw him a slight smile.

Together, they descended a long set of stairs down into a large rectangular stone chamber. Each wall had an opening that continued into the underground structure, and into yet another chamber. Each of these chambers were linked with another hallway between them. It was foul, and Raven hated it. Once they were both well inside, Artemis turned on her.

"When I leave, I'll go back to the mages guild in town. I'm hoping to hire some help to speed this along. I hate leaving you here. I want your time here to be as short as possible." She looked to him as he placed an arm about her shoulders. Pushing his arm away, she held up a hand and looked to the exit hallway.

"Wait. I want to try something. I want to see if I can resist the sun." Instantly, Artemis cut her off.

"Raven, trust me, don't do it," he warned.

"Only for a moment," she said, quite determined. He grabbed her hand.

"Please," he begged. She stared at him for a time, and seeing panic rising in his demeanor, she sighed and gave up the idea. Slipping under his arm, she gave in.

"Okay, I won't." Letting out a breath, Artemis sighed in relief as slowly, steadily, she began to feel an unnatural heat creeping toward her from up the stairs. She avoided them, though the curiosity of how much sunlight she could

withstand played in her mind, enticing her to test it. Seeing her interest, Artemis pointed down one of the tunnels.

"Maybe we should set you up in the chamber farthest back." She thought about it.

"Okay," she replied half heartedly, still watching the stairs. Soon, they were both in the center back chamber amidst a pile of chests, sacks and other items. As they stood there looking at the mess she had created, Raven's chest felt cold. She felt trapped, though there were three halls leading out of this stone room. She felt like she was being abandoned, left behind, separated from the entire world. Never in her darkest imaginings did she ever think there would be a worse place than home. Now she knew there was.

"Artemis, if you go now, you would be back more quickly," she whispered with great reluctance, instantly regretting her words.

"Yes. You would not be here as long. What do you want me to do?" Hugging him, she thought about it for a long while. She felt safe with him; she always had. She did not like giving up her only security. At length, after waging war against her own mind, she gave in.

"Go. I'll be fine." He kissed the top of her head.

"Okay, I will go with all the speed I can. I will not sleep or rest until you are safe . . . I promise." Holding her tight, he reassured her again. "I will not rest." She let go of him and touched her heart with two fingers, then placed her fingers over his heart. He did the same, then kissed her.

One moment she was enjoying herself immensely. In the next moment, she found herself alone, in an ancient tomb of a dead Revenant. Bringing her hand up, she touched her mouth.

For a time - she knew not how long - she stood there, watching the hallway Artemis had departed through. She wanted to follow him; stay with him. Yet, that was not to be. Waiting would have to be her lot, and in a place she dreaded and loathed. Wrapping her arms about herself, she looked around. Maybe he would

be quick.

Maybe.

Amidst Artemis's belongings, she spotted a short broom, which she used to sweep out the back chamber. If she had to stay here, at least she could keep it as clean as possible. After finishing the floor, Raven set the broom against the wall, laid out her bedroll and laid down.

As she lay there, she felt something beneath her. Curiously, she pulled back the top layer of the bedroll, revealing a short blade in a scabbard. Picking it up, she gripped the handle with one hand, the scabbard with the other. With care, Raven pulled the blade loose and looked at it in wide-eyed wonder. The blade was crafted from blackened steel, and was set into a leather-wrapped handle.

“A fine looking blade,” she thought to herself. It was twice the length of a normal dagger, but not quite long enough to be considered a short sword. Exploring the bedroll further, she found the belt and slipped it through the scabbard, then fastened it about her waist. The tip of the scabbard had two thin, finely woven ropes which hung from a loop. It took a few moments before she realized what they were for. These, she tied around her leg, just above the knee. Making a few adjustments, she drew the blade. She had never used a sword, or any type of weapon in her life.

Looking down, she wondered if she hadn't laid out his bedroll, instead of hers. On closer examination, she realized it was his sleeping gear. Well, she would keep the short blade on hand, and practice until she became comfortable with it. Raven was alone now, and just might need a weapon. She laughed at a funny thought that came to mind. What if adventurers came to this tomb to win the prize and glory of her treasure by killing the Vampire within? Carefully, Raven sheathed the blade and sighed, as it gave her little comfort. Laying down on Artemis's bedroll, she rested her head and quietly wept, smelling him on the cloth. She felt so alone, and wondered if she would be forgotten.

The pit in the center of her chest, where her heart once beat, tortured her relentlessly; a constant reminder of her impulsive nature. Looking up at the stone

ceiling, tears slid one after the other down the side of her head and onto the bedroll. She had made two very serious mistakes lately. One, she had gotten Vampire blood on her and had become infected. The second mistake was the one she wished she had not done. She had destroyed Artemis's magical Storing Sack. It felt as though an unquenchable flame had been lit within her chest. She thought about this pain for some time before a thought came to her. She was being punished.

Even though the hand of exhaustion lay heavily upon her, sleep was far away. Closing her eyes, she pretended to sleep. This lasted for a long while before a noise down one of the hallways startled her. She sat up, looking to the middle hallway that reminded her of a gaping mouth. There was nothing there, unless it was a rat, or soil filtering down through a crack in the stone. This place was sick. Whatever its former inhabitant really was, she knew it had tainted the entire structure, cursing it with its vile existence.

Slowly laying back down, her eyes clouded with tears. Now she was the monster that others hated and hunted. She was in a tomb, undead, and merely existing.

"I am not a monster," she whispered, gritting her teeth. "I am not a monster," she continued to repeat the same words over and over until she felt a change in the air coming from the middle hallway. Something was different.

Rising like a shadow, Raven silently approached the middle hallway and stretched out her wings, loosening them up. Cautiously, she moved in, then stopped before coming into the entrance chamber. Warily, she neared the bottom of the stairs and looked up, no longer feeling that intense heat. It was no longer day. Up she advanced, until reaching the top of the stairs. Outside, the air was cool and enticing, compelling her to go out.

Stepping out into the open night made her feel free. Looking up, she realized flight was impossible without taking a great risk at injuring herself. Then again, what did she care? Artemis said she would regenerate. Walking around the

opening, she climbed a small hill that rose up from behind the entrance. Once at the top, she gazed into the canopy above for an opening. At the topmost part of the hill, she found a break in the trees that would allow her to fly into the night sky.

She waited, listening, feeling for any signs of danger. Sensing none, she leapt upward and shot up through the opening with ease. Once up into the sky, Raven turned a full circle, scanning the area. There was a light off some distance away, and so she headed for it. She had nothing better to do.

After a short flight, she spotted what appeared to be a campfire, around which she could see the glow of warm blood running through the bodies of multiple humanoids. Curiously she descended, circling above the fire, closing in on them, but keeping a distance, so as not to be seen.

As she watched, she noticed they were running around in the campsite without ceasing, and in a chaotic manner. She thought it odd and so risked a closer look. As Raven flew in, the realization of what was happening horrified her. They were under attack by large humanoids! Without hesitation, she dove directly into the campsite as she awkwardly drew the short blade, nearly dropping it.

Singling out one of the large humanoid creatures, cornering a woman up against the side of a wagon, she dove, slamming into its back and burying the point of her sword into its spine. It fell against the woman, who screamed and fell to the ground in terror. Without hesitation, Raven leapt from the monster's back and vanished back up into the night sky. Quickly, she dove again, striking another down, then another. Again and again she flew in on wings of death until only one enemy remained, standing by the fire, bellowing in rage.

Raven circled about the area counting the fallen. To her great surprise not one traveler had perished, though some appeared wounded. Apparently, these people were to be taken alive. To what end, she knew all too well. It sickened Raven to think about it.

The last of their attackers had a child pinned to the ground by her hair with

its heavy foot, thwarting her escape, as it bellowed out a challenge. Circling once more, she made the decision not to attack it directly as the girl might be trampled in the fight that would commence.

Diving in, Raven landed, pretending to crash badly. As she hit the earth, she pitched forward, slamming into the wheel of the wagon. She lay still against its spokes for a moment, wishing she hadn't gone so hard into the dive. She was new at this. Artemis had already prepared her to some degree, but practice is what she needed.

As the brute's attention turned to her, she tried to rise up, but faltered, crying out in pain as her right wing dragged the ground. Instantly, it charged, bellowing out in fury and rage, quickly closing the distance between the two. Closing her eyes, she listened with senses heightened by a curse she wish had never been. As it drew close, Raven felt its heartbeat steadily pounding louder and louder. Gritting her teeth, Raven bent her knees, listening to its blood – a feast – calling out to her. Within two lumbering strides, she sprung up and beat her wings once, just hard enough to flip over to the back-side of her foe and land, just evading its grasp. Bellowing in rage it spun about, only to be met with the point of her blade through its right eye. With a grunt, it backhanded Raven across the face with a force that caught her off guard. Both hit the ground, as if dead.

A snap in the side of her head brought Raven back to consciousness with a cry. She could feel the broken bones in the side of her face knitting together, and, at that moment in time, learned of one curse every Vampire had to deal with. As she attempted to rise, the unhealed bones in her face grated together, forcing her to the ground with a cry. She waited for a few moments as those about her stood in silence, watching on, but not coming to her aid. Again, she tried to rise, but faltered as more bones snapped back into place. Arching her back in agony, she felt her cheekbone come together at the jaw, just above her upper teeth. By sheer willpower, she managed to get into kneeling position.

She tried to speak, but her jaw was broken. Again, bones fit together in an untimely speed, torturing her without mercy. Looking up into the night sky, she could see millions of stars. Recalling the time she eagerly searched the darkening sky for those first three stars, she began to weep.

"Artemis!" she screamed as her vision blurred for a moment, then slowly cleared once again. Again and again, pain struck her like lightning as her face healed from that heavy blow. Soon, it was over, leaving her quite shaken, but mended. Kneeling upon the ground Raven panted, as if she could not get enough oxygen. Over the next few moments, her breathing calmed.

"Next time, I duck," she thought to herself, shutting her eyes, relieved it was over. After a few moments, Raven sensed a small humanoid figure approach her from the front. Quickly, so as not to frighten this helpless child, she struggled to sheath her blade, fumbling to find the opening of the scabbard with the weapon's point. As she finally slid the blade into its resting place, she felt a small hand touch her.

Opening her eyes, Raven beheld a most beautiful, and a most filthy, girl child standing before her. Not knowing what else to say, Raven smiled without parting her lips.

"Hello my little friend. Are you hurt?" The child's tears threatened Raven's emotions, but she recalled Artemis telling her to subdue and control her feelings. If she could master that, she would become more powerful. This tiny girl looked truly terrified, yet Raven noticed how brave she was trying to be.

"Are you scared?" Nodding in silence, the child reached up and picked a leaf from Raven's hair. "I am too. It's okay to be scared, but it's going to be alright," she whispered as she began brushing the girl's face off, and straightening out her hair. As they worked the debris out of each others hair, Raven felt all the others close in around them. A hand rested on Raven's arm, then another on her shoulder. Soon everyone in the camp surrounded her, placing a hand on her in silent gratitude for saving them. After a few moments, Raven released the child

and stood, looking around at each of them.

"Are any of you hurt? All of them shook their heads in silence. Raven smiled, grateful to know they were whole. That is when she heard a few of them gasp. Instantly, many of their heartbeats quickened. Realizing she had given away the nature of what she was, her smile faded. As she looked around, taking in their sudden fear, she witnessed them backing away.

"I am a monster. Forgive my intrusion." Turning, she walked away. Crouching, she raised her wings. Just as she was about to take to the night sky, the flames of the fire extinguished, and all the people vanished . . . all but one. Startled, Raven looked around, only seeing the little girl.

"What is this?" Raven whispered. The child shook her head, then pointed at her.

"You have been judged worthy," she whispered. "Come here." Suddenly terrified, Raven didn't know what else to do but go before the child. As she stopped, she knelt down, so she would not be looming above her. The child embraced Raven and kissed her on the cheek. Closing her eyes, she tried to fight off a sudden emotion that quickly won her over. Tears streamed her face as a feeling of warmth and peace filled her mind, and spread through her entire body. For the longest while she absorbed the presence of this child, basking in the comfort she shed.

"Am I dreaming?" she thought.

The physical touch of the child lifted from Raven, as if the small girl had turned to air. Opening her eyes, she found herself kneeling in a clearing out in the forest. She felt no trace of life about her, saw no wagon and no campfire. Standing, she looked around one last time before launching into the night sky, thoroughly confused.

Dawn was but a short time away, and so flew back and landed on the hill. She did not come down, but sat and pondered on what had just happened, and the possible meaning of it.

"Judged worthy to stand," she whispered. "What does that mean? Am I going mad?" Maybe this was the side effects of her decision to help Artemis back to the campsite.

Instantly, Raven leapt off the hill and glided down, landing before the entrance to the tomb. A look of absolute regret washed over her countenance, just prior to her warily stalking back down the stairs and into the back chamber.

Looking at the pile of items, she began picking up the most valuable and carrying it all outside to the side of the hill. Once all she had brought them all out, Raven began to dig. She did not stop digging until she began to itch. When she knew the dawn was coming on, she buried the items in a shallow layer of dirt, until she could no longer see them. Retreating down into the darkness of the tomb, she waited impatiently for the sun to go away.

As Raven waited for night, she looked through all the many items, finding large rolls of leather which would be useful. Setting them aside, she looked for anything else to help her complete the burial of her Vampire's belongings. She did find a full-length shovel, a pick and a hand-shovel. Grateful for the tools, she waited out the day, staring at the entrance to the tomb impatiently, hoping travelers would not come along and find what she was hiding. As she waited, she could hear the wind blowing, the animals and insects going about their business, torturing her. It seemed forever before night came, before she was allowed to go outside.

Raven dug up the items buried the previous night and set them all on the ground outside the hole. Using the pick to begin excavating a larger hole, she worked throughout the night.

As she progressed, she thought about his reaction to her foolishness in destroying the sack. He had not become cross. He did not take anything with him. His soul concern was for her, and her alone. She smiled at the thought, then threw the pick aside. Grabbing the shovel, she began to remove the loose soil.

At last, late into the evening, it was ready. Laying out a leather roll in the bottom of the hole, she placed the items within the pit, with the exception of the chest that had given her the black orb. She thought it might be useful.

Soon the more valuable items from the sack lay upon the leather skin. She placed the other leather sheet on top, then began burying the hole. Just before she felt that familiar itching, she finished. Grabbing the tools, and the chest, she headed back down into the tomb - her prison.

Seven more days passed. Each night, Raven took to the night's sky, and each day she stayed within the back chamber of the tomb. Each day that passed caused a deepening sorrow to well up within her. Where was he? Was he alright? The worst thought that began taunting her, was that he no longer loved her, and had decided to leave her there.

Another two weeks passed. Raven did not come out of the tomb, but lay upon the dusty bedroll, weeping bitterly. Staring at her engagement ring gave her some hope in the beginning. Now it mocked her hope and began to devour her moral.

She decided against using the chest with the swirling mists in it, recalling Artemis's warning that it was unpredictable and dangerous to use. Excavating the pit, she placed it with the other buried items, and then buried it again.

Mostly, Raven slept now, caring less and less about anything but dreaming and rest. Laying upon his bedroll, she simply waited, slipping into nightmarish dreams where Artemis was abusive and hurtful. For nearly a full moon, Raven lay there, waiting, waiting, endlessly abiding the dark and stench of that horrible place.

He never came.

One evening, she decided to go outside and wait for the morning to take her away. He wouldn't come take her away, but she knew the sun would. At least something wanted her.

As she came out of her tomb, she frowned at the night. Maybe she would give it more time. Maybe there had been complications. Within, the faint urge to take flight kindled, then instantly died. Slowly, Raven returned down into the darkness, and lay on his bedding, weeping herself into an unconscious state.

Two more weeks passed, then another two. Raven's determination to wait for Artemis began to grow. She waited in numb silence for many more days than she could keep track of. Each day, she made a scratch on the wall of the tomb with a sharp rock. Soon, she had to use another hallway to continue making marks so she could count they days.

Day and night began to mix, both coming and going together in an endless blur. She abandoned his bedroll, as it began to shred and come apart. The remaining items from the Storing Sack began to collapse and crumble to the stone. Not wishing to see it, she slept in another chamber. The only things she kept were the sword and the ring, both of which did not decay. So many days passed by, she began to forget why she wore the ring, or who gave it to her.

One day she dreamed men came and tied her up with strong chains. She begged them to kill her, and so they did. When she awoke, Raven was crushed.

She wandered her home endlessly, waiting, waiting for something that had, long ago, eluded her mind . . . something fading from the edges of her memory.

Many more days than she could count passed, and she began to forget her dreams. There was something about dreams she yearned for, but, trying to recall,

she simply forgot what it was. Had she remembered, she could have easily gotten out of this nightmare. Too distracted by the moment, the wait, and the loss of her love, Raven missed the very thing that would have cured her situation. Such is the state of a broken, deadened heart. Raven knowledge of who she was began to slip into the Darkened Abyss of forgetting.

Raven lay on the floor touching her teeth, wondering about them.

"I hunger," she whispered. Rising, she went out and hunted. That night she caught some travelers heading to the city. They were easily taken, and their blood gave her life and energy . . . in fact it rejuvenated her spirit and will . . . she awoke screaming in horror. After a time, she laid back down on the stone floor and refused to open her eyes, even when she was asked to.

"Raven, open your eyes. What's wrong with her?"

"How long has she been here?"

"Too long, I fear. But it couldn't be helped. Circumstances were out of my control."

"Ah, she has truly despaired. Her mind has forgotten everything, or is forgetting at the last."

"Is there anything that can be done?"

"I'm afraid to say, lest I give you false hope, sir."

Raven stirred, hearing voices in her dream. There was always a lie attempting to give her hope just before dashing it. She shut them out and fell into blessed slumber once again. This time, she dreamed . . .

. . . a man came to her and bowed. She looked at him distantly, not willing to care.

"Do I know you?" she stated indifferently, seeing he would not leave her alone. The man nodded.

"Look upon me carefully, Raven." Shrugging, she stretched her wings out.

"Someone," she faltered, not able to think, or care.

"Didn't we take a rowboat across a lake once?" he whispered, watching her intensely.

"Sometimes," she mumbled, suddenly confused.

"Did you count the three stars, then see what you wanted?" Raven clenched her fists, a sudden memory unearthed.

"Why would you do that to me . . ."

Raven opened her eyes and looked up to see a man; so familiar. Slowly, warily, she touched his hand.

"I know you," she whispered. He nodded.

"Hello Raven," he stated, watching her every move. Sitting up, she looked at the ring on her finger. She stared at it for a while, then looked at him, a tinge of recognition growing in her mind.

"Where did . . . why did I . . ." despair flooded through her entire being. "I'm a monster," she wept.

"You are Raven, and have had some bad things happen to you. But, you are no monster to me." She slowly stood, and as she did, a thick layer of dust cascaded from her body and wings, showering the stone floor, causing a wake of dust to roll outward in all directions from where she stood.

"How do you know . . . my name, my name" she whispered, horror gripping her mind.

"Do you know my name?" he asked. She stared at him unblinking for a long while, provoked by his question. Finally, it dawned on her.

"Artemis?" she whispered, then looked at her ring. "You gave me this."

"A thousand years echoed in her ears, but she ignored the voice.

"I'm not needed, wanted." Artemis shook his head.

"I need you. I want you. This is all my fault." She looked up at him, not believing anything that was happening.

"You left me." Holding back his emotion, Artemis shook his head.

"Are you still the Raven I once knew, or are you now someone else?" She touched him on the cheek, then slid her hand across his face and neck.

"Are you real?" He took her free hand.

"I am real. This is not a dream." She narrowed her eyes dangerously at him.

"Prove it," she hissed. Instantly, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her tenderly. When they parted, a look of shock beset her face.

"I love you more," he whispered, tears forming in his eyes. Raven ran her fingers through his hair, hesitated for only a moment, then embraced him tight.

"Did you come to take me away?" she asked, feeling suddenly panicked.

"Yes, if you still want me." Brushing her face across his, she nodded.

"Please don't leave me," she sobbed, "I don't want to be alone anymore. I want to go with you, my home," she desperately begged, sending up an inhuman cry. "I can be wanted. I can prove to you I am useful. Please don't leave me in my tomb. I can be alive again." Her words cause him to break down with sudden emotion. He could bare her condition no longer. Fighting strong emotions, he wove his fingers through her filthy hair, massaging the back of her head and neck.

"You are wanted, Raven. Please come with me. We are engaged." She raised her hand and looked at the ring, exposing fangs with a panicked smile. This is what the ring was for. This is what it was!

"You still want me?" she whispered.

"Always, yes," he replied without hesitation. Raven's eyes began to roll back.

"Take me home," she sobbed, before losing consciousness.

Opening her eyes, she slowly blinked the haze from them. Gripping a handful of something soft, Raven focused upon what lay within her fist. Studying it, she remained ignorant of what it was, until she finally recalled what covered her. It was a, “Quilt”, she whispered. Frowning, she slowly sat up, looking past the base of a bed she found herself upon, her attention suddenly upon a large hearth set in flawless stone.

It took her no time at all to remember it as a scene of agony as though she had dreamt it long ago. This place harbored in memory her first taste of death. As Raven’s mind caught hold of a scene long ago, nearly beyond the edge of remembrance, another hatched within her mind. Even though the recollection played out before her waking mind, as though she was peering through murky waters, she perceived it.

“Vanity,” she whispered, turning her attention to the right. There, against the wall of the chamber it set. She had sat there once, only once before. An ornate silver brush lay upon its surface. Slipping out of the bed, she noticed a set of traveling clothes which lay across the back of a chair. They looked so familiar. There were three full-length dresses laying neatly upon the end of the bed as well; one black, another white, and the third, royal-blue.

Walking over to the vanity, she looked in the mirror, then down at her hands. Looking on them in wonder, she noticed just how perfectly clean they were. Sitting down, Raven took up the brush and began running it through her hair. She could not remember the last time she was privileged with such a luxury, and it felt wonderful. She then wove two braids, one on each side of her head, then fixed them at the back, letting the joined section of the braids hang at the back of her neck. Once finished, she froze. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she exposed her teeth to reveal fangs. Running her tongue over them, she frowned, recalling a scene so very long ago, when first she earned them.

"Monster," she hissed with no more than a whisper. Suddenly self-conscious, Raven realized she was not fully dressed. She stood and walked over to the bed. For a time, she scrutinized each dress, finally deciding on the black one, though the red-leather traveling clothes were tempting. Still, she liked the dress. Slipping it up and over her head, she let it drop, then secured the buttons at her wings; not an easy task. Its length and fit were perfect, as if tailored specifically for the dimensions of her physique.

As she readied, Raven noticed she was perfectly clean, as if she had taken -- what was it called? It had to do with water, but she could not recall what it was. Giving up on the word, she walked to the door of the chamber and tried the handle, half expecting it to be locked. It was not, and yielded to her. Slowly pulling the door open revealed a grand hallway, startling her. The entire scene before her was filled with life-size paintings, magnificent carpeting and flawless furniture.

Looking to the end of the grand hall, Raven's eyes fell upon a set of double-doors. It was odd, yet it was as if they called to her, becking her approach. As if in a dream, she made her way through the hall and rested a hand on the door's large handle. Hesitating for a long while, she stared down at her hand, then steadily twisted the handle downward. Gently she pushed the door, causing it to swing inward on perfectly silent hinges.

Peeking through the doorway, she saw what appeared to be a social gathering room. A great fire-pit at its center was burning bright with fresh wood, giving warmth to the great chamber. Beside the fire-pit, Artemis stood warming his hands. As Raven silently entered, he turned to her. When he caught her eye, he threw her a warm smile.

"I knew you would pick the black dress. I hoped you would pick the red traveling clothes. Still, knowing your prior situation, the black suits you well." He beckoned her come to him, his eyes filled with a strange expression.

"Sympathy," she thought. She hesitated only for a moment, then slowly,

cautiously, neared. Wide-eyed with fear, Raven stopped, looking up at him. She wished to say something, but couldn't get herself to speak.

"Do you like the dress? I do." Looking down, she ran her hands down over her shoulders and arms, as if suddenly cold.

"Yes," she whispered, not knowing what else to say, or what to do. Reaching up, he ran a hand down her long black hair.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered, obviously stricken. For the first time in a thousand years, she felt the unmistakable feeling of flattery. It was something new, but felt good.

"Thank you," she said, her tone of voice subdued.

"You are very welcome here. Are you hungry?" Raven frowned, trying to remember what that meant. Blood? No, he meant something else. A side door opened just then, quickly revealing an aged man carrying a silver tray. In silence, he came and set it upon the raised stone of the fire-pit. Without a word, he bowed to each of them, then retreated. Once the door was shut again, Raven looked at the contents upon the platter, suddenly realizing what he meant.

"Food, of course." She picked one green grape from a bunch and slowly put it in her mouth. Biting down instantly sent an overwhelming burst of flavor that spread though her mouth, instantly causing her to gag. Panicking, she raised a hand to her mouth.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she almost begged. "Forgive me." Artemis produced a cloth from an inner pocket of his trench coat and handed it to her.

"It's alright. Just spit it in the cloth." She took the cloth and spit the grape into it, then folded it so it would not fall out. When she looked back up at him, she noticed his expression had changed to that of admiration. The memory of the ring on her finger, and why it was there, sparked her curiosity. Raising a hand, she looked at it.

"Are we still engaged?"

"Do you wish to be?" She nodded, tears beginning to form in her night-dark

eyes.

"When will we be married?" Artemis took the cloth from her and set it on the tray. He then walked a few paces to a chair, turned, and beckoned her to join him. Coming to him, she sat on the chair directly across from where he sat.

"Raven, this needs to be planned out. When would you like to be married?" She thought about it, trying to keep sensible, even though her soul screamed that none of this made sense. Everything was so strange, as if it was not real. Maybe she was dreaming again. If this was a dream, it would be the first time in a long while.

"I don't know. I'm trying to get everything straight in my head. When you said food, I did not know what you meant. What do you think?" Artemis looked visibly relieved.

"I would marry you today, if you wished it." Raven tried to smile, but failed.

"Then I want to marry you today," she tested him. Artemis grinned.

"Then, Raven, tonight we will be married, if this is what you wish." Raven nodded.

"I remember the stars. I remember . . . I want you to be happy." Artemis stood, walked over to her and knelt down. Taking her hands in his, Artemis kissed them. Before he could say another word, she had a question that nagged at her like young Vahkrin Imps.

"Artemis, how long I was in my tomb? It seems so long, but I cannot tell." Artemis sighed, squeezing her hands.

"I knew we would have to talk about his. You were there for nine-hundred, ninety-eight years." She noticed he watched her carefully at this point, as if expecting something.

"How many people did I hurt?" Artemis became visibly uncomfortable.

"Why do you wish to know something irrelevant such as-"

"How many!" She challenged him, her eyes narrowing, her countenance

changing from her normal demeanor to that of dire menace. Quickly, came his response.

"None. You never hurt anyone." She looked at him sternly, then relaxed, her face softening.

"I thought I had. Maybe just dreams." Artemis touched her cheek.

"You are the dreamer, remember?" The statement confused her. Looking into his eyes, she held them with the will of her own inner power.

"You are hiding something from me," she flatly accused.

"I assure you, I am not. That's why they left you alone, Raven. That's why you weren't hunted. You saved people many times. There were so many reports of a winged female rescuing travelers from brigands and certain creatures. So, they let you be." Raven let out a sigh, visibly relieved.

"It was my worst fear, that I would become a monster." She looked down at their joined hands, suddenly needing to know something. "What happened to you?" Pain instantly twisted into Artemis's face.

"I was hunted and taken into a dark place far worse than your tomb. It took me almost a thousand years to find my way out. When I escaped, I came to you straightway, fearing you would no longer be there."

"Can you describe it?" At her question, he visibly paled, even more so that his natural complexion.

"Yes," he whispered, a haunted expression etching into his countenance, but said no more.

"Will you, now?" Sighing heavily, Artemis gave in, a disturbed expression overshadowing him.

"Darkened Abyss." Artemis paled as he touched the side of Raven's face and closed his eyes. "There is no way to describe it. But, I will show you, so you know." Raven instantly stiffened, becoming rigid and horrified. After a short time, he withdrew his touch.

"You needed to know the truth. I'm sorry you had to witness it." Raven

leaned forward, embracing Artemis.

"Okay, I know you speak the truth. I was the lucky one." She kissed him more than once, then bit the side of his cheek, inadvertently drawing blood. Instantly, she pulled back.

"Forgive me, I didn't mean to bite you so hard." As if it had not happened, he grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet.

"Come, I want to show you something. I'm sure you will like it." She gave him no further doubt, nor resistance.

"Am I in trouble?" He laughed.

"No." Breathing easier, she watched in curiosity as Artemis guided her through a secret passage, concealed by a sliding bookshelf at the south wall of the chamber.

Downward they descended into the depths of his castle. As they worked their way down, Raven looked at the stone of this place, touching it with her free hand, feeling its coolness. In a way, it reminded her of her own tomb, yet more lighted and clean. It did not harbor the stench of death, as did hers'. Coming to the bottom of what seemed an endless, spiraling stairwell, Artemis lead Raven through a stone alcove and into a large chamber filled with things she did not understand. Stopping, he let go her hand and turned to face her. Holding up both hands, he looked about the area.

"This is where I explore new things . . . . new ways . . . secrets." Pointing to the middle of the floor, his eyes brightened. "The engravings you see at this chamber's center are actually glyphs of power. They are used for many things. Come, I'll show you." An abrupt feeling in her gut stopped her cold in her tracks.

"It's alright, you can just watch from there," he whispered. "There is no need for fear while you are here with me in this, my laboratory.

"Thank you," she whispered in return as Artemis walked out onto the large circle of runes and turned to her.

"Long ago, I built what you see with my own two hands, fashioning every

stone piece and Glyph." Becoming interested, she took a step toward him, then stopped, feeling that warning sensation nagging at her insides.

"What does it do? I mean, will you show me something?"

"Yes. In fact, I brought you down here to use it on you. Well, that was a very bad way to say that." He sighed and clasped his hands together. "I have set the glyphs to make you immune to sunlight." Shaking her head, she looked at the foreign engravings upon the surface of the stones, doubting. Holding out a hand, Artemis beckoned her to him.

"If you come into the circle, we can try it." Still as stone, she narrowed her eyes at him, now more than suspicious.

"How did you have time to set this up?" She inquired, watching his expression closely.

"It has been here a very long time," he said, walking back to where she stood. Taking her by the hand, Artemis gently squeezed. "Never mind. I see you are unwilling. I would never force you." Squeezing his hand in return, she looked about the chamber, pacified. As she did, an instant bone-jarring pain filled the side of her face, causing her to fall to the stone floor in a dazed shock. Shaking her head did not help to stop the room from spinning and warping. The room began to dim and her vision blurred as she fought to stay conscious.

Rolling onto her back, Raven looked about, her vision quickly beginning to regenerate. Yet, it was too late to defend herself as Artemis jumped on top of her, raising a fist to strike her again. Raven shielded her face with her arms as blow after blow rained down upon her with a speed she could not defend against. Shock and panic flooded her as he mercilessly pummeled her. Her mind began to haze, and her thoughts dimmed.

"Artemis, please!" She begged, hoping he would have mercy on her. Ignoring her pleas, he continued striking her until, slowly, Raven let go of hope, consigning herself into darkness wherein Ogrin and Krisha pointed, mocking and laughing her to scorn.

Raven awoke, coming slowly to consciousness to stare up into a night sky graying with the onset of dawn. A shooting star blazed across the heavens above her, then two more. Blinking in confusion, she looked at the fading stars, wondering what she was doing outside her tomb.

"Get up," came a familiar voice, though she could not quite place it. Turning her head, she saw a small girl standing close by. She looked so familiar, yet the thought of who she was eluded her memory.

"Get up." The child stated bluntly. Slowly, Raven stood, balanced herself, then made her way over to child. She knelt down before her and failed to speak due to the pain in her entire face. Suddenly, she remembered her from long ago. The attack on the camp she had stopped the first night of her being entombed. Reaching out, the small girl touched her face.

"You have been judged worthy to stand." With her other hand, the child pointed toward the city.

"Go to him. Find him before he reaches the gate." A warmth spread through her face and neck, quickly washing down through her entire body. She felt the pain and confusion flee, replaced by health and a clear mind.

"Go now," the child whispered. "Go."

Please, who are you?" Raven inquired. But the child vanished in the blink of an eye. On the night air came her small voice.

"In time . . . in time."

Raven leapt to her feet, crouched, then leapt into the air. With all the speed she could muster, she shot toward the gates of the city, not deviating from a straight course. Over the tips of the trees she sped, looking for him. She knew exactly who "him" was, and why he needed to avoid the city. Bending her will upon her wings, Raven pushed on, looking to the edge of the tree line for any sign of Artemis. She was getting close now, and had to be careful not to let the gate guards see her. Circling about, she scanned the area for her fiancé, taking in the

road and every shadow.

Just as she thought she was too late, she saw him emerge from the trees, running out onto the road. Without hesitating, Raven dove. As she neared, she judged the ground with perfect precision, landing before him with an impact that shook her to the bones. Painful as it was, she slowly stood as two daggers flashed into his hands. Upon recognizing her, the daggers quickly sheathed.

"Raven, what are you doing!" Panic filled his voice as he glanced up at the gray light of morning, then back at her again. Walking to him, she stopped, blocking his path.

"Come with me." She grabbed his hand and pulled him off the road into the cover of the trees. Once within the tree line, she let go, just as the noise of horses could be heard in the distance. Tilting her head to the side, she froze.

"The horses," she stated, bearing her teeth in their direction.

"I hear them, Raven." Raven shook her head.

"They know what you are; what I am. We need to go. They come for you. I can't explain now. Artemis, do you trust me?" Nodding, he motioned to the sky.

"You are out in the gray of morning. You should be burning. I don't know what is happening, but, yes, I trust you." Raven grabbed his hand and pulled him deeper into the trees. Startled at the sound of breaking limbs, she stopped and looked back.

"I hear them, Raven. Just keep moving." Again, she began to run.

"Raven, as much as they now dislike me, they hate you. They will kill you. They will kill you as fast as they can. I can guess where they would send me." Raven despaired.

"Artemis, I know where they sent you. I've seen it. Can they find us in here?" Artemis threw her a worried glance.

"Yes, and they will, unless we evade them. A group like that will always have one or more Forest-Knights for tracking. We can't get away unless we can somehow throw them off our path." Raven looked back, suddenly afraid. She

stopped and turned. Artemis stopped three paces past her, looking back.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to give them the surprise of their lives."

"Use that a last resort. Right now if you do this, it will confirm our presence in the area." Submitting, she reluctantly turned back and sprinted on. Where they were headed, she had no idea. When there was an opening in the trees above, Raven took to the sky, scouting out for anything she could report. One landmark that stuck out was a mountain not too far in the distance. Descending, she landed on the run and pointed ahead and to the right.

"There's a mountain that way. Nothing else of significance. Artemis, would Iron Toe betray you? It was evident to me, you and he have known each other for quite some time."

"No," was all the reply he gave, veering to the right, following her lead just as strange howling sounded behind them in the distance. "This group is good, really good. We still have a good lead on them, but with Spellhounds, that advantage will be taken from us quickly."

"Spellhounds?" Raven exclaimed, looking back in sudden fear. Artemis nodded.

"They are exactly as their name sounds." As another clearing opened up to them, Raven shot up through the canopy, then instantly back down after an arrow whizzed past, clipping her right wing.

"Okay, no more flying. They're shooting arrows. I did happen to get a glance, and we are very near the mountain." She pointed. "That way!"

After a lengthy dash, they made it to the side of a sheer rock wall and stopped. Again, howls broke out, now dangerously close. Artemis grabbed Raven's hand and followed the cliff, keeping it on their right.

"I'm going to destroy those mages!" he menacingly growled, his eyes darkening. She could feel his wrath, but this time it did not paralyze or overcome her as it did before.

"Wait, look." Raven pointed to a place where there was a triangular split in the cliff. Quickly, they made for it as the howling seemed upon their heels. Once at the opening, Artemis ducked inside, turned and waved her in.

"This goes back quite a ways. Let's try it." Stopping, Raven turned, silently enraged at being hunted.

"Raven, you don't get it! Their pack is deadly. I've traveled upon all the continents of the Earthen Plane, and within many realms of Utaemia. Raven, we can't win this, I can feel it. At least within this cave, we stand a chance." Artemis stepped back out and grabbed her hand, but withdrew as she gave him a warning look not to touch her. Surprised, he withdrew.

Taking two steps away from the cliff's side, Raven closed her eyes, instantly focusing for the space of time it took to inhale, hold it for a moment, then slowly exhale.

"Rumbling creeps from every pore,  
The darkened skies can hold no more.  
Biting, gnawing, stinging swarm,  
Relentless as the sun is warm."

Opening her eyes, she felt a mighty shift in the air all about her. As if something touched upon her from a distant world, she drew in a breath of astonishment as power filled her being. For the second time, Raven's eyes illuminated with a golden hue, through neither she or Artemis beheld it. Soon after, a droning sound filled the air, faintly at first, but increased to a roar within a moment's time.

Crouching, Raven gave any archers a smaller target to strike as she waited in eager anticipation for the conflict. After a tense wait, a Spellhound broke from the edge of the trees with a snarl, locking its attention upon her as it began to stalk forward, hackles raised and bearing razor-like teeth. Raven licked her teeth,

narrowing her attention upon this formidable adversary.

"Come, take me down," she whispered, focusing the effects of her spell upon it. It must have heard the challenge, for it instantly charged. As it covered half the space between them, Raven willed the cloud of insects to overwhelm it, instantly halting it. Within seconds the mass of insects dispersed leaving mere shreds of her attacker.

She glanced up as a winged creature flew overhead. Ignoring it, she watched the tree line as duel howls split the air. Two more Spellhounds came into view. Two more Spellhounds were dispatched. An arrow struck the cliff, just missing her head as a bowman on a war-cat charged forward. Another arrow was loosed missing its mark as she rolled and stood. Instantly both man and beast were screaming within a mass of insects which steadily stripped the flesh from their bones. A few moments after, her insects dispersed, revealing half-devoured victims upon the ground.

Movement within the forest drew Raven's attention to a robed figure flying through the trees. Giving him no time to cast, she willed everything onto him. Instantly he was engulfed. Raven saw him maneuver to evade her spell. This one would be more difficult to catch, giving other enemies the chance to join in the fray to turn the tide against them. Snarling like some unnatural animal, Raven leapt into flight with all speed, drawing Artemis's blade, and made for an area of the woods near the mage. Wishing her mass of death to drive him to a certain point, she made for that area, meeting him head-on. He simply could have retreated to wait for the others, but did not.

"Arrogance," she hissed as she met him head on. The look of surprise on his face made her grin, even as she struck him across the neck as she tucked her wings tight, rolling past. The smell of blood that instantly filled her senses brought on the power of bloodlust. Ignoring that wonderful scent and call, she circled back, reaching out with her senses, feeling for more adversaries.

The one at the cliff's edge, she ignored -- that was Artemis. There was one

more directly above her now. Only one more, and by the ease it took to dispatch them, she decided to engage. Shooting upward, she willed her massive swarm to attack. Breaking up through the canopy of green, Raven was astonished at the sight before her. Upon a leather-bound Griffon, she beheld a fully plated humanoid. All her hoard attacked as she rolled and shot back down, thinking it best not to engage in the griffon-rider's element. As she descended, the Griffon's screams rolled like thunder as Raven maneuvered back down through the treetops, forcing her way through both leaf and limb, not caring what hindered her.

Once at ground level, Raven pulled out of her descent and shot for the opening at the cliff's wall. As she landed, she saw Artemis watching her in open astonishment.

"Remind me not to make you angry," he said as she neared. Giving him a dark glance, she turned focusing on how her mass swarm fared against the rider and his beast.

"Griffon-rider," she called out. "Solid plate. I don't think I can take that one," she warned, even as a sudden crash, splintered the tops of the trees. Down the Griffon fell and struck the ground, thrashing about and screaming as her insects devoured it. Just as the Griffon crashed, the rider leapt from his mount, rolled, stood and charged the two. It was as if he had trained for such falls. His expertise and coordination not only impressed Raven, but struck fear into her unbeating heart. Before the knight could reach Raven, Artemis pulled her back with no gentleness, intercepting him, two daggers flailing and slashing with a speed that Raven had never seen.

As the two engaged in battle, Raven focused everything she had on the Griffon, taking the time to dispatch it. As it finally collapsed, she directed her mass upon the knight, causing him pain, but doing much less, if any, damage. Raven noticed the Knight fought well, so she abandoned a full on assault, and focused the smallest of the insects around his head and into his visor.

Artemis dodged every stroke of the knight's blade, countering with precise

dagger strokes, both not gaining the advantage over the other. Raven watched on, a sudden fear filling her. This foe was astonishing at combat. Both Artemis and the Knight fought on. Even the darkened wrath of her Vampire was ineffective against this one.

Splitting her attention between the two and the forest, she watched the area for further danger, but there was none. This must have been the scouts preceding the assault.

As the battle raged on, Raven began to fear for Artemis, for the Knight was not faltering, and looked to be gaining the advantage. Something had to be done quickly. Leaping into the air, Raven willed the largest insects of her swarm about the feet of the Knight. Shifting to her will, the mass tightened, hooking their legs together like a hive of bees protecting their queen.

Within seconds the Knight stumbled, giving Artemis an advantage he took without hesitation. Stomping the Knight's blade to the ground, he kicked him back. Quickly, the plated Warrior raised his hands, yielding to defeat. Without hesitation, Artemis stopped. While Raven would have finished him off, Artemis spared him.

"Finish him!" she hissed. Raising a hand to her, Artemis halted her.

"Raven, release him, now!" he commanded, catching his breath. Taking in a few breaths, Artemis pointed toward the forest's edge.

"Leave us in peace. We spare your life this time." The Knight nodded as Raven landed behind him with murderous intent. With a stern gesture, Artemis shook his head. Knowing better than to cross him, she reluctantly stepped away. Abandoning her design, Raven set her insects to the edge of the forest, creating a swarm wall. After setting up the defense, she flew to the side of her fiance, waiting to see what would happen next.

Slowly, cautiously, the Knight stood, holding out his hands, then slowly reached up and loosed his helm. Pulling it free, he labored to catch his breath. Raven noticed he was Elf, yet his skin was black as ash. She had never seen this

race before, and it hatched a sudden curiosity within her. With his helm removed, she knew he was now an easy target. Even as tempting as it was, she refrained.

"In the name of Vannar, I yield to you, worthy adversary. You have honor, which thing I was told you lacked." He looked at Raven.

"How come you to be in the sun?" She shrugged.

"I believe a small girl granted me immunity." she stated. "I was 'judged worthy to stand'." Her words seemed to astonish the man.

"She did this for you?" Raven nodded, still wanting to kill him. It would be easy, yet his last question intrigued her.

"Do you know who she is?" He shook his head.

"That is forbidden. Only she can tell you that. What wonders dwell within the bounds of Utaemia! I am truly astonished. I had no idea. Please, forgive me." The Knight then bowed formally, placing the right palm of his hand over his heart.

Raven was shocked as Artemis bowed in return, his daggers vanishing from each hand. He then picked up the Knight's blade and brushed it off. Walking over to him, Artemis formally returned his blade, point facing his own chest. Raven froze in horror as the Elf gripped the hilt of his blade. What was Artemis doing? He was putting himself at the mercy of their defeated foe! Yet, soon enough, her fear was put aside as the black-skinned Elf sheathed his blade.

"Thank you sir." Artemis bowed slightly.

"My name is Artemis, and this is Raven, my fiancé. It truly is a great honor to meet a Knight of Vannar."

"Thank you sir. My name is Solenti, and it is a great honor to make your acquaintance, though the circumstances be dire." Solenti then turned his attention to Raven.

"I am truly glad to have failed in killing you. I will investigate those who sent me to dispatch you. I can see you have a good heart. Otherwise, the she-child would never have judged you thus." Raven tried to smile, but failed.

"Apology accepted, sir." Raven suddenly had too many questions.

Securing his blade with a leather strap, the knight glanced back over his shoulder.

"One day we may meet again under better conditions." He looked at his dead Griffon and frowned. "I would get you out of here, but my mount is slain." He thought for a moment.

"Of our raiding party, there are six more of my brothers and sisters. Go through the cave. There is a passage at the very back. It will lead you to safety, if you survive the trials within. I will change this situation." He through Raven a curious look. "You harbor a white aura I did not see during our conflict. I see she is with you, now." Raven looked at Artemis, then back at Solenti.

"What does that mean?" Solenti turned as the baying of a Spellhound interrupted their conversation. Artemis placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We need to leave, now." Reluctantly, Raven let Artemis pull her into the opening in the cliff as she stared at the Knight. Before she lost sight of Solenti, she saw him bring his right fist to his chest, just over his heart, then turn away.

Reluctantly, Raven followed Artemis, desiring to know more of what Solenti knew. Due to Circumstances, there was no time, and it frustrated her. Many others were coming now, one of which held the power to cast her into the Darkened Abyss. She thought it irony to know more about such a dread-filled place, by the hand of one who knew less than she did. The profound truth in all this was, Artemis taught her something he himself had never experienced.

"A thousand years . . ." Raven heard an echoing whisper upon the air, halting her dead in her tracks.

"Did you hear that?" Artemis stopped and listened.

"No, what did you hear?" Had she heard a voice, or had it been in her head? She placed a hand upon her stomach, not feeling well.

"Nothing. Just . . . nothing. Let's keep moving." Concerned, Artemis held out a hand, which she took, then continued deeper into the cave. He glanced back, his eyes falling to her mid-section.

"Why are you holding your stomach? Are you wounded?" Raven dropped her hand, looked at him and shrugged.

"Can I get sick?" she asked him.

"No, which highly concerns me. For now, we have to find the passage at the back of this cave." On they pressed until the cave split, forming two tunnels. Stopping, Artemis looked down one tunnel, then the other.

"Well, there is nothing to be done now, and no time to waste. Let's take the right passage." Gritting her teeth, she forced herself on. Frightened, she felt something take hold of her, biting at her insides.

"I hope it's the right one," she said. Artemis shook his head, throwing her a worried look.

"Why would they be after us?" he wondered aloud as he jumped up on a large portion of the collapsed tunnel.

"I only know the warning came from the girl child," Raven answered, again

hearing a distant, echoing voice call out to her.

"Raven, Raven . . . ten centuries . . ." She spun about, looking back, expecting to see some dark apparition following them, hunting them. To her relief, she and Artemis were alone.

"Of that, I am grateful, but this kind of hunt is launched against those who have broken severe laws. You and I have done neither. Raven, what is wrong?" Nearing him, Raven latched onto Artemis, glancing back over her shoulder.

"Artemis, I'm hearing a voice saying ten centuries, and, a thousand years." Disturbed, he looked at her, but said nothing. She thought about what he had just said.

"In a thousand years, I've never gone to the city. Never." Confused, he looked into her eyes.

"Raven, what are you talking about?" Raven reached up and gripped the lapel of his trench coat with both hands.

"I never went to the city. Artemis, I broke no laws." The desperation in her voice caused him to flinch.

"I should not have asked such a question. Forgive me." Raven felt her gut clench, but resisted reacting to it.

"You are just worried, that's all. Think nothing of it." She saw the relief in his expression.

"Thank you," he said. She squinted at him, suddenly glad to see him again.

"You are welcome, milord." Giving her a curious look, he reached up and felt her forehead.

"Nearly a thousand years? Enlighten me, please."

"Please, later. There is something in this cave, and I want out." Nodding, he lifted her up onto the large slab of stone he stood upon. Again, her insides tortured her, this time more painfully than before.

"Raven . . ." that hollow voice echoed again, as if someone was speaking to her within the shadows close at hand. Looking around, Raven's eyes widened.

“Leave me alone,” she whispered, “go away.” Artemis gave her a look of concern, but said nothing about it.

“Let’s go,” he whispered, touching her shoulder. Startled, Raven came herself.

“Please,” she said, then grimaced.

As they jumped down and moved further into the tunnel, she felt sweat began to cascade the back of her neck and back. It was though a fever was quickly setting in. A sudden pain bit into her stomach again, causing her to wince. Sweat began to dampen her hair.

Soon they both stopped, finding themselves at a dead end.

“Oh no,” Raven exclaimed, and looked back. “Do we have time to go back?” Artemis pointed, shaking his head.

“No, it’s okay. We took the correct passage. Look. Here the tunnel ends, and here,” he pointed to a large set of stone-carved doors, barely visible in the gloom of the cave, “our path begins.” He looked back, instantly seeing Raven's troubles. Sitting down on a rock, Raven pointed at the door before them, then looked over her shoulder into the tunnel, half expecting something to happen.

“Please, see if you can open it. Let's get out of here before we are discovered.” Artemis shook his head, kneeling before Raven, but she persisted. “Please, Artemis, I wish to leave. Then we can figure this out.” He brushed her dark hair away from her eyes.

“Okay, okay. Hang on.” He stood and ran to the door, scrutinizing it with keen, experienced eyes. “This door opens inward. I suspect it is quite thick, and for a reason . . . to keep what is inside, inside.” A wave of intense pain shot into Raven's mid-section, causing her to cry out and fall to the stone floor. Yet, as much pain as she was experiencing, Raven held up a finger, stopping Artemis from coming to her.

“The door, Artemis, the door!” she cried out, gritting her teeth as she felt the cold stone buckle and twist beneath her. Sucking in air, as if she was suffocating,

she began to weep. "Get us through!" She begged, her eyes suddenly illuminating with a pale-green light.

Artemis's eyes widened in disbelief at what was happening. After a moment, he turned and began running his hands over the surface of the doors, and the rock all about them. In earnest, she watched him, and as she did, her vision took on a new change as the veins in his body came to her attention. She could see his beating heart pumping blood through every last blood vessel in this entire body. Enthralled, she ignored the vanishing of his skin and flesh. He was delicious to her, and smelled incredible.

Pain knifed through her again, just as she heard a loud grinding sound. Even before the opening of the stone doors ceased, Artemis was at her side. Scooping her up, he carried her in haste through the opening.

"Hang on Raven," he told her, his voice filled with panic. Laying her head against his chest, she felt an irresistible craving for him, for blood.

"No!" she growled. Artemis threw her a worried look and entered ten paces into a large stone hallway and stopped. Shortly thereafter, a grinding sound filled the tunnel once again, followed by a boom that shook the area as the great doors shut them in.

Raven's pain became more intense, as if a wolf were eating her insides. As her agony escalated, she felt Artemis's heart beating like thunder, calling out to her. In the back of her mind, she knew this was wrong. With a wavering sense of defiance, she resisted the insatiable appetite pulsing through her mind.

"I . . . am . . . not . . . a . . . monster!" she screamed, pushing out of her fiance's arms. Falling to the stone floor, Raven shrieked like some unnatural, wounded animal, distancing herself from him as if he were a deadly disease. Artemis advanced and knelt by her, quickly touching her left temple.

As she felt Artemis make contact with her, she instantly beheld images of Ogrin and Krisha during their travels. She saw Artemis stealing a kiss from her, the great spider, the Gargantuan Preying Mantis and many more scenes, all

flashing through her mind, ending with the gifts she had opened in Iron Toe's inn.

"Raven, hang on. Don't give in to it." He wiped his face and let out a quivering breath. "You have Vampiric Sickness. Fight it. It will pass." Raven locked eyes with Artemis and froze, appearing like a cornered animal. Shaking badly, she moved into kneeling position and tried to relax. With a quivering hand, she touched her heart with the first two fingers of her right hand, then reached for him, trembling violently. Artemis knelt before her, meeting her touch. He repeated the same and touched her chest, just over her heart. As he did this, a single tear escaped Raven's left eye, slowly rolling down her cheek, as black veins began to spread in all directions from her burning green eyes. With considerable effort, Raven clawed at her chest, gripping so tight she sunk the tips of her fingers deep into her own flesh.

"Not a monster," she forced through grinding teeth.

Artemis knew better than to hold her. He watched on as the sickness raged on within her body, helpless to do anything but observe.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, emotion threatening to overtake him. She stared at him unblinking. Lifting her free hand to her head, she froze, still as stone. All movement ceasing, as if a basilisk had gifted her with its deadly breath. Artemis watched her with growing fear.

"Raven? Raven!" he yelled, but there was no response. Quickly, he pried her fingers loose from her own chest, freeing her hand. Focusing on her self-inflicted wounds, he waited. When she failed to regenerate, panic struck him like a blade.

"No, no, no, no!" he cried, pulling her into his lap and smoothing back her hair. "This can't be! Here, take what you need!" Artemis produced a dagger and quickly slit his own wrist.

"Take it!" he cried, raising his bleeding wrist to her mouth. "Take what you need. Please, Raven . . . don't leave me, not now, not after all we've been

through." But, try as he did, she did not respond. Artemis held her, desperately, not knowing what to do. Placing his forehead upon her's, he began to silently mourn her passing.

For a long while he held her, weeping bitterly, holding her . . . regretting. He was about to rise, when Raven abruptly convulsed, startling him. Instantly, she struggled out of his arms, pushing away from him, spitting and wiping his blood from her lips as she landed upon the cold stone floor of the dungeon. Crawling away, she shot him a look of disbelief, even as Artemis moved back, not knowing what to expect.

Moaning in agony, her eyes slowly dimmed, then focused. Instantly, the wounds on her chest began to close, and the veins of black receded back into her eyes, slowly fading away. Groaning in pain, she turned and looked at him, her attention drawn to the pool of blood staining the floor before them.

Slowly she stood, noticing fresh blood on the front of her dress and wings. It smelled so good; the aroma was amazing. Confused, she wondered where her red-leather outfit had gone. This did not make any sense!

Distracted by the smell of crimson life essence, she convulsed and spit again. She tried to brush it off but stopped, realizing she was only spreading it. Holding out her hands, she stared at them in silence, seeing her palms and fingers painted in fresh blood.

"I thought you would die if I didn't," Artemis hoarsely whispered, outwardly horrified at what he was seeing. Raven slowly looked up at him, shivering, as if suddenly chilled by hoarfrost. Slowly she shook her head, throwing him a look of dismay.

"I am Raven," she growled, desperately trying to control herself. Artemis watched her every move, how she breathed, waiting, just waiting. Like the scent of blood in the air, she could taste his apprehension . . . his fear. Looking down at the pool of blood at his feet, she licked her lips, yet refused to move to it.

Seeing the battle raging within her, Artemis stepped between her and his own pool of crimson staining the stone between them. Raven looked at her hands, a look of worry etching into the slender features of her face. Slowly, she began wiping them off on the sides of her dress, ridding her hands of as much blood as she possibly could. After a few moments, she cautiously approached Artemis.

"I am not a monster, Artemis, I am Raven. Nothing will change this truth. I am still me!" she stated with conviction. Her words stung him to the core of his soul. Never before had he seen such control. Looking into her eyes in disbelief, he simply shook his head.

"There has never been anyone like you, milady. Throughout the ages, to my knowledge, none have successfully retained their humanity in your situation. How you have done this is beyond my comprehension. Yet, here you are." She smiled weakly as her eyes began to roll back into her head.

"Help me," she begged, then began to falter. Her strength was fleeing her mortal frame, and she found it impossible to stand. Taking her up into his arms, Artemis began walking through the stone corridor. Raven laid the side of her head against his chest, as if listening for something. Raising a hand to his heart, she weakly raised her eyes to him, and resolutely whispered, "I am no fiend. I am Raven." Gritting his teeth, Artemis shook his head, desperate to keep his emotions under control.

"I've made a fine mess of things," he said, his voice on the edge of breakdown. "We should not be in this predicament. You should not be a Vampire. We should be enjoying ourselves out in the sun. I've taken away the prime of your life. In the place of life, I've given you unnatural hunger and darkness. I caused all of this. Why don't you hate me?"

After traveling a little ways into a well-laid stone tunnel, he took in their surroundings and decided to sit down and give Raven some rest. As soon as he made her comfortable in his arms, he kissed the top of her head, shedding tears of guilt and regret into her hair.

"You should not be here," he lamented. "What have I done?" Raven stirred, looked up at him and shook her head, managing a brief smile.

"Don't think like that, Artemis," she whispered. "I made the choice, come what may." Struggling, she reached up and placed a hand on the side of his face, gifting him with the most loving smile he had ever seen. "Here, with you, I am more happy than I have ever been." Leaning his head into her's, he closed his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he forced his emotions under control.

"Well, when we get out of here, I'll take you somewhere special." Raven nodded, then closed her eyes.

"Where?" she asked.

"I can't tell you. It's a surprise," he lamented.

"Don't be sad, fangs, I'll be fine, I promise. There's more to me than you know. It's been so long, how could I not know a trick or two?" She abruptly punched him in the chest. It wasn't much of a punch, but she thought he got the message. It must have worked, because she felt him begin to calm down and relax, if only a little, and this brought her joy.

She felt her strength slowly returning, but continued to rest. What had just happened caught her completely off guard and confused her. Still, it was over now. What she was enjoying, even in the darkness of a dungeon, was the attention he was gifting her with. Before meeting him, she had never known what real caring and love was. Now that she was getting used to it, she craved it all the more. It was healing to her. She still hated and loved the charm that flowed from him, but that was okay. Closing her eyes, she grinned.

"I'll beat you at your own game." He smirked without sound and shook his head.

"Just get better." She thought, when she became a Vampire, all his natural attraction would be easy to handle. She was obviously mistaken. He was a formidable charmer, unmistakably handsome, and harbored solid honor. All-in-all, at this point, she was winning, even in the midst of falling.

Though odd, the time they spent in that stone hallway was enjoyable. Still, she knew it had to end if they were to get out the other side. The thought came to her of their hunters following them into this place. Yet, still, she was content to stay. Relaxing, she fell into a dreamless sleep.

When she opened her eyes, Raven slowly stretched. Artemis held her as she stretched from wing to toe, holding her so she could get the best advantage out of it.

"Welcome to the land of the conscious. How do you feel?" he inquired. Looking to him, Raven threw him a warm smile. The look on his face was priceless. Yes, she was winning.

"Did I sleep long?" He nodded.

"For about a day, I guess." Raven's eyes instantly focused, as if he had just pinched her.

"What? I'm so sorry, Artemis." He chuckled as she sat up.

"I'm not," he stated, biting his lip. She laughed quietly, snaking an arm about his neck.

"Can't we just stay right here for a few more days?" Artemis made no motion to get up. She noticed he seemed content right where he was.

"As long as you want," he replied, leaning his head back against the stone. Raven closed her eyes again and melted into comfort.

For the second time, she awoke. This time she stretched and got to her feet. Artemis stood up and greeted Raven with a look that made her crazy.

"How long was I out this time?" He shrugged, as if it mattered.

"Oh, not long. Honestly, if you need to continue resting, do it. I would see you at full health and energy before we move on. After all, this is a dungeon."

"I'm good, unless you need to rest," she said, rising up on her toes and giving him a brief grin.

"Always," he stated boldly, beginning to play with her hair. She peered down the hallway of the dungeon.

"I wonder what's in here?" Artemis shrugged.

"I'm hoping for good things." Raven smiled, thoughts of diamonds, rings, necklaces, and lots of gold playing out in her imagination.

"Me too," she stated, greed tainting her voice.

Until far into the structure, the corridor remained consistent with no side chambers, leading them deep underground. There were no torches to light their way, but they needed no such thing. Artemis led with caution, strictly alert and attentive to their surroundings. After a while, he pointed to an alcove not far ahead on the right. Raven paid careful attention to what was happening. She hoped they could get through this place, then do something together . . . something fun.

Thinking on it, Raven knew that Artemis had no recollection of just how much time she had spent in that horrid tomb. For him, it was merely a walk to the road outside of town. She did not wish to talk about it, though she yearned to share the grueling experience with him. Raven was torn, and her memories, though mostly buried away, began calling out to her, torturing her waking mind. She ignored it.

Artemis stopped before the alcove, carefully spying out the area through the opening, remaining watchful and silent. With growing interest, Raven waited, a sudden impatience plaguing her. Artemis scanned the borders of the alcove before slipping inside. She followed behind, yet not too close. They entered into a corridor that spanned only a little ways before opening up into a roughly hewn room of no small size. Nearing, Raven heard the sound of what she could only describe as boiling water. Artemis motioned her to stay, which struck her as humorous. Nearing, she wrapped her arms about him and nuzzled his back from behind. Shaking his head, Artemis turned, leaned down, setting his mouth near her ear.

"Please be serious," he whispered.

"Okay," she whispered back, looking past his shoulder. She wanted to see what was inside. Within, scattered throughout the chamber, were set pools, each a distinct color. No two were the same. Quickly, she slipped passed Artemis and stopped at the right side of the opening, pressing against the rock and peering

inside, suddenly eager. Artemis stayed near, pressing in close into her.

"I beg you, Raven, please follow me," he whispered. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Okay," she stated, as if she had no care in the world. Not knowing why, Raven felt a rush of excitement, probably due to this being the first time in hundreds of years that she shared something with another. Either way, she was more than happy to be here, even if she smelled of drying blood. Sighing, Artemis set his forehead against the side of her head.

"Okay, let's continue," he stated, seemingly exasperated, but then stopped. "Raven, I've seen death in places like this. It will kill me if I lose you." Feeling the seriousness of his mood, she sobered and stepped back, letting him lead.

Artemis looked into the chamber, then cautiously moved forward, descending three roughly created steps into the room. Raven watched him study everything before silently signaling her to follow. Following him, they advanced. Relaxing his guard halfway, he sighed, curiously taking in each and every pool.

"Taste one to see what it does?" she inquired, biting her lip.

"I'm not sure. Look around and see if you can discover any clues about these pools. Just be cautious. And Raven, do not taste them."

"Okay," she said a little too excited. He gave her a serious look.

"I'll be careful, promise," she assured him, a tinge of soberness in her voice. Making her way through the many pools, she ended up at the far back wall, stopping beside a one that appeared to be reflective, polished silver. Actually, all this was quite boring to her. Where was the gold, the diamonds that sparkled so beautifully, and all for the taking?

Raven looked into the silver pool, suddenly entertained by herself in the reflection. She raised an eyebrow, raised a hand to her face and knelt, cautiously leaning over to see herself more clearly. As she stared at her reflection in the pool, she became suddenly enthralled by what she looked like. The woman gazing back at her was in need of a hot bath. She exposed her teeth and raised a finger,

touching her fangs. Lowering her hand, Raven sighed.

"Look at you," she said, a critical tone in her voice. How could someone amazing like him love something as ugly as you? You destroyed the Storing Sack, so deal with it. You got that time in the tomb due to your own stupidity. By the way, you owe him a new magical sack." Raven narrowed her eyes threateningly at her reflection.

"I know that. Don't you think I regret it?" Raven closed the distance between her and her image mirrored in the pool.

"He will never forgive you. And it will become a constant sore point that will eventually make him love you less and less, until he hates you. Then he will beat you into blackness, but this time there will be no help to heal you . . . no one to carry you back. You will spiral down into blackened madness forever." Raven snapped her teeth at her reflection.

"Liar," she hissed, "You liar!" Her reflection smugly looked her up and down.

"Vampires like you don't have a soul. When you die, it's over. You forfeited your next life for a fling!" Raven couldn't believe what she was hearing!

"I will kill you for that!" Raven began to lunge at her, but Artemis calling to her, stopped her dead cold.

"Raven!" Freezing, she stood and spun about, catching his look of disbelief. A cold set into her chest, like ice that would not melt. Now, she knew she was in trouble. Without explaining the unexplainable, she walked away from the pool's edge, but not before casting one last hateful glance at the liar. As she passed by Artemis, she pointed back without looking.

"Don't look into that one. She's a liar," she accused, leaving Artemis with a blank look etched into his face. Continuing on, Raven made her way across the room, hoping he was not following. Glancing back, she was relieved to see he was not.

Stopping at the edge of a pool of crystal-clear water, she looked into it,

instantly spotting a scroll-case at its bottom center. Crouching, she tried to see how deep it was. It looked to be six or seven feet -- not too deep.

"What's in the case?" she whispered, thoroughly intrigued. She looked around to see Artemis looking at something a ways off. "Well, only one way to find out," she whispered. Glancing back to see if he was watching, she quickly slipped into the water, dived down and grabbed the scroll case. Quicker than ever, she lunged for the surface and rolled up onto the side, tucking in her wings to protect them. Jumping up, Raven looked at the pool. Satisfied, she stole a glance back at Artemis to see him running toward her in great haste. Spreading her wings a bit, she shook as much of the water from them as possible as she drew the scroll case behind her back with one hand.

"Are you alright?" he asked, highly concerned. "What happened?" Raven flung her hair back, pulling it out of her eyes with her left hand and shrugged.

"I slipped in, but I'm okay." She drew her wings in tight, trapping the scroll case against her left hip. Suddenly suspicious, Artemis gave her a narrow look and pointed.

"What is in your other hand?" Showing him her right hand, she smiled, rolling her eyes.

"Nothing." He shrugged.

"Raven, don't play Karritch Gleighdor with me. The wings, spread them out." Raven smirked and walked up to her vampire.

"Search for yourself, fangs." Raising an eyebrow, he bent and lifted her lip with a thumb.

"Pick another nick name, one that doesn't also apply to yourself. It's getting old," he bent close, "like you." Stunned by his sudden behavior, Raven shut her mouth tight and stared at him in disbelief, not knowing what to say. Slowly, he took her wings and pulled them outward. Throwing him a look of innocence, she smiled, then pouted.

"You don't trust me anymore, do you?"

"Not with this. You're up to something." Her eyes widened in astonishment.

"You're the one whose hiding something, not me," she stated boldly, backing away, not able to conceal a look that compelled him to advance on her. Continuing to retreat, Raven had to turn for fear of falling in the pool. The rock wall of the chamber stopped her retreat. Artemis placed a hand on her shoulder to keep her from getting away. In defiance, she stiffened up her chin and glared at him.

"I don't have anything," she retorted. She was telling him the truth, for she had slipped the scroll case into the pocket of his trench coat. Her dark eyes shaded over to an even darker blackness, even as Artemis's fangs extended. As quick as a snake, he wrapped his fingers about her throat and squeezed. Bending forward, she kissed him hard. For that, he slammed her head back into the stone wall. Pain ripped into her skull as she felt it crack.

Without hesitation, Raven sent him flying back with an uppercut to the soft area under the base of his jaw, aiming for the red pool behind him, but missed, much to her annoyance. She wanted that scroll back! Leaping at her choking fiancé, Raven landed on him with all the force she could, feeling multiple bones snap in his chest beneath her feet. Gagging, he reached for her neck, but she easily slapped his hands down, gripped him by the throat, and squeezed without mercy.

"You think I didn't learn anything while I spent a thousand years in my tomb?" Raven struck him with an elbow between the eyes, then two more times in the chest. With each strike, she felt bones break. Stepping off to the side, Raven hurled him with all her might against the wall by the pool of clear water. Snarling, she gave him no time to do anything but spit up blood. She flew at him, landing on him. Artemis groaned and struggled beneath her, trying desperately to get control.

"I am not your toy! You left me to rot in that tomb! I hate you!" she snarled viciously. "Find another!" Pulling off the ring, Raven threw it at his head, then

attacked him with such fury and violence he stopped moving.

"Die! Just do me a favor and give up the ghost! I . . . hate . . . you!"

Grabbing him by the hair, she dragged him into the pool. Blood instantly tainted the water, slowly making it hard to see him weakly struggling.

In one moment, Raven was bent on his destruction. In the next instant, it all vanished. All the hatred, all the malice and contempt simply fled from her, leaving Raven in shock and horror at what she had just done. Panicking, Raven quickly pushed him up and out of the pool, then jumped out and dragged him away from the edge.

A pop at the back of Raven's skull drove her to her knees, causing her to groan in pain. Once the pain subsided, she leapt over Artemis, landing by his head. Trembling, she placed a hand over his heart. It was faint, but it was beating. For a while, she watched him, more than thankful he was Ardenoth.

His screams lasted too long as his bones and muscles reattached. Horrified, Raven watched as his natural regeneration pieced him back together without sympathy. At last his breathing stabilized and his heartbeat returned to normal. When his eyes slowly opened, she withdrew her hand from his chest, noticing her missing ring. Panic was instantly replaced with dread as she began a frantic search for it. Raven found it at the edge of the pool, but did not put it back on. Holding it tight in her fist, she panicked as Artemis slowly stood and turned about, watching her in silence. Ever so slowly, Raven walked over to him and opened her hand, revealing the ring. Emotionlessly, she looked at it, then back at him.

"I . . . I . . . oh no," she whispered. "I don't deserve you after what I just did . . . what I said." Looking down, his eyes fell to the ring. Slowly he took it and looked at her. She felt so much emptiness, so much guilt, for what she had done, she simply backed away, turned and fled the chamber.

Raven looked left, the way they had come in. No good trying to leave through a one way door on the wrong side. Turning right, she ran down the main corridor, memories beginning to assault and torture her. She ran until she came to

the end of the long hall. Before her were three sets of stairs – one straight ahead, one to her left, one to her right. As she stopped, a chill fell upon her without warning. So bone-chilling was this cold, it drove her to the ground. Something was near. She could feel a dread presence, terrible to bear.

"Let me out," she whispered.

"Never, not ever," came a cold reply. Suddenly terrified, she looked to each of the openings and struggled to move back.

"Who are you?" she whispered, her voice quivering in sudden apprehension. "What are you?" It was then, she felt the cold, death-like chill of some unseen presence that grew stronger with every chilled breath she took. "What have I done?" she lamented. She thought of Artemis, which gave her an idea. Since she was doomed, it made little difference what she did at this point.

"I'll make you a deal. Let my companion go and I'll stay with you forever." Maybe she could at least save him. She had to try. After a lengthy pause, that chilling voice came to her once again.

"You would sacrifice your freedom for another?" Raven began to shake with cold. She nodded.

"Yes. He deserves it after what I did. Even though it wasn't me, it was." Raven waited to be taken as a powerful presence began to invade the stairs directly before her.

"Never before have I met one so fearless, so noble. Darkchild, I accept your offer," invaded its terrible, echoing voice. The presence grew stronger and stronger as it, whatever it was, approached, the stairs before her filling with a green light that slowly invaded the area. Raven felt the power of this being grow stronger and stronger as it neared. It had called her darkchild. Why?

"He is the honorable one. He is kindness. He is my love in this world. If he leaves me, all that will be stripped from me, leaving only senseless, hopeless rage. It would be better that I stay here, deep in this place, away from innocent people. I am ready to stay if we have a deal." Through a long silence, Raven waited, but

she was not alone. Coming up behind, Raven felt the beating of his heart. As he neared, a terrible dread stole over her, silencing her completely. A flash of sickening green light, turned to sudden darkness, took Raven into shadow and pain, where she could hear the distant sounds of screaming.

In a daze Raven awoke, her eyes slowly focusing until his face came into view. Raising a hand, she touched the side of his head. Guilt flooded her mind and heart as he looked upon her.

"Raven, I slew it. You distracted it deeply with your foolish offer. I heard what you said." Raven felt empty, truly empty. There were no words she could speak. She tried, then abandoned the attempt. She also found no tears to shed. There were none left; only emptiness.

"Raven, what's wrong? If it's what happened, remember, I attacked you first." He smoothed her hair back, throwing her a smile. She looked at him distantly, then turned her head away. "No, no, please don't go away . . . don't do this, Raven." Artemis turned her head back, so that she faced him. Resting his fingers lightly against the side of her head, he closed his eyes . . .

. . . Raven found herself sitting at a table at the Iron Toe Inn. She looked around at the many patrons, and observed them interacting one with another as their stories, tales and gossip filled the common room with constant voices. Music filled the air by a group of five talented bards, masters in the craft of setting the tone of an inn ever-filled with the comings and goings of locals and travelers alike. It was a strange tune, but she liked it. Happily, she tapped a foot to the melody as she sat, waiting. One of the serving girls looked her way as she passed by and stopped.

"What are you waiting for miss?" she stated with a smile, then continued on without waiting for an answer. Not long after, another waitress asked her the same question. Confused, Raven focused on the music and began tapping the tips of her nails upon the table, focusing her attention on the music. Iron Toe spotted her and smiled from behind the bar. From across the room he shouted the exact same question, throwing her a nod and a wide grin. Startled, she looked away, hoping they would stop. They did not. One of the men at the bar turned and raised a mug,

as if toasting her.

"What are you waiting for?" He turned back to the bar, laughed heartily, then quenched his thirst with what drink remained in his mug.

"What am I waiting for?" Raven thought aloud as the front door to the inn burst open, revealing a winter storm raging outside. It struck her as odd that no one else in the inn seemed to take notice of the flurry of snow invading the entrance. Raven began to shiver, hoping someone else would close the door. When it seemed no one else would, she stood, made her way toward it, baffled as to why no one else was feeling as cold as she was. When she reached the door, she pushed it shut, then watched the last of the flakes gently fall to the floor to begin melting.

The music of the bards beckoned her to come and sit down. The melody they now played captured her senses in a most pleasing way. Taking in a deep breath, Raven sighed, then shook the melting snow from her wings. Returning to her seat, Raven was openly shocked to see five gifts upon the table, all wrapped in plain brown paper, all bound in twine. As she stared down at them, memories began to open to her; memories created so very long ago. For a time she became lost in recollection, reliving the scene in which she opened them.

Startled, Raven turned, nearly crying out as the front door abruptly flew open again, this time crashing into the wall. In a growing panic, Raven looked around to see every last patron and worker simply carrying on as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Looking over the crowd, she began to panic, her anxiety rising. This was unreal, unnatural. She had to get away from this inn. Something was wrong, and she could feel it in her bones.

Snatching up the gifts on the table, Raven retreated out the open door of the inn and into a raging blizzard. Instantly, the snow began to cover her hair and wings as she stopped in the center of the main street. Looking back to the inn, she got her bearings and ran with all the speed she could. As she pressed against the storm, the cold began to slow her down as she called out for Artemis, Krisha and

Ogrin.

Heading for the front gate, she endured the cold as long as she possibly could, and finally arrived to lean on the front gate of the city, breathing hard and shivering. She caught her breath then yelled for them to let her out. As she called out, Raven realized the storm was drowning out her voice. The guards did hear her. Looking about revealed a side gate, used for those coming and going during the night hours when the front gates were locked. After pushing on it for the third time, it opened to an wind of intense chill that struck her full in the face. Gasping, she raised a free arm to shield herself from the onslaught of the storm . . .

. . . sucking in a breath of air, Raven came to. She gripped the packages tight in her arms, shivering from the intense cold. She was freezing, and not because of the place she was in. Simply, Raven had brought the effects of the blizzard back with her! Artemis was looking at her with a most confused expression as Raven shook her head to get the thick layer of snow-pack and ice out of her hair. Gripping the packages tight, she tried to stand, but the movement ignited great pain through her body, forcing her back down.

Artemis gently picked her up and moved her away from the snow and ice she had shaken to the dungeon floor. He then preceded to brush her off and began clearing her wings of snow and ice. Once finished with her wings, he moved her to yet another dry area within the dim structure.

All the time he tended to her, memories of what transpired in that chamber, the one with the pools of colored liquid, slowly came back to her. A deep-set guilt began to gnaw at her insides, igniting shame. Averting her eyes, she could not bear to see what his expression would reveal. He probably hated her.

Artemis combed out her hair with his fingers until it began to dry, all the while keeping as close to her as possible. He was warm and that helped to calm the chill plaguing her. She braved a glance at Artemis, who was collecting water from her feathers with his hands. She watched him shake the beads of water off,

then wipe them dry on his clothing.

In an attempt to start a casual conversation, she said, "I don't like snow. Realizing she could barely talk, she turned to the five packages she held, knowing the content of each. A thousand years ago, Artemis gave them to her for her birthday. Looking at them, she began to weep as a blackened depression began to overwhelm her. Artemis instantly noticed her mood.

With badly trembling hands, Raven tore each and every gift, opening them one by one to retrieve a full set of traveling clothes. As she removed each piece from the wrappings, she could not help but see his wonder at what was happening. Distracted as he seemed, Artemis continued his attention to her wings. As she carefully laid out each article of the first gift she had ever received, he began speaking to her softly.

"There was this normal-looking, wooden table in the center of the room. We all gathered around it. At the center of the table we stared at a coin set perfectly at its center. We talked about the coin for a time, not knowing what it meant, or if it meant anything at all. In the end, we decided to take it up and flip it onto the table. I volunteered to go first. I picked it up and flicked it with my thumb." A disturbed expression invaded the Vampire's countenance as he continued his story.

"I remember it spinning through the air and falling. I must have gotten the wrong side of the coin, for as soon as it settled, a flame shot from it, scorching the ceiling. The flame grew, consuming the table, taking on the shape of a Pyrran Phoenix. I alone survived." His last words were filled with regret and sorrow as he continued tending Raven.

"I've lost many comrades in places like this. You see, dungeons are built for a reason. It is not common to find an old structure, especially one underground, one like this, that has naturally attracted creatures into its chambers and halls. No, these places are most always built for a purpose. Sometimes those purposes play out at a terrible price for those brave," he threw her a haunted expression, "or foolish enough to enter." Shaking the water from his hands, Artemis continued.

"You and I are not to blame for what happened in the chamber of pools. You need to know, while we are here, what you say and do, I don't take seriously, unless, of course, you do or say it on your own accord." He stopped and looked at her for a time.

"Some of the things you do and say, like when you show me affection, or when you say you love me, or tease me, I keep for myself. I hold onto those experiences and memories, treasuring them. What else matters? Nothing. Raven, if I built a dungeon, the first power I would set into it would be to turn all who enter against themselves. That is the easiest way to destroy trespassers." Raven looked at him, tears cascading her face.

"I love you so much . . . more than my own life," she wept, her chin quivering badly. Grinning from ear to ear, Artemis laughed for joy. Pulling her into a tight embrace.

"That I can hang onto. But you must know something." Raven looked up at him, more tears spilling from her eyes.

"What's that?"

"I love you more." Resting her head against his chest, Raven let out all her emotion, sobbing and shaking to the point of being out of control. After a long emotional moment, she slowed down, then finally stopped, getting control of herself. With astonishing affection, Artemis wiped away her tears.

"Hey beautiful, once we're out of here, where would you like to go? You name it, I'll take you there." Looking at him for any hint of hesitation, Raven found absolute conviction in his offer. At that point, she felt as though she was falling in love with him for the first time. The last time she felt this way was nothing compared to her feelings for him now.

"Well," she choked and stopped, calming herself, "I would love to walk barefoot along a tropical beach. I've always wanted to do that. Then, after that, I would so much enjoy doing it again and again with you holding my hand. Right now, that seems the best thing in the world to me. What do you think? What would

you like to do?" Artemis thought about it. At length, his eyes brightened up like two stars.

"I would love to walk along a tropical beach barefooted, but only if I can hold the hand of the woman I love. Then, after that, I would very much enjoy doing it again and again and again and again and again. Right now, that seems the best thing in the world to me. What do you think?" She felt like smiling, yet could not get herself to. In all seriousness, she looked him over, especially taking note of his eyes.

"Okay," she timidly replied, feeling hope for the future rekindle. She looked at the red-leather outfit.

"Then it is settled," he stated as a matter of face. "We will go to paradise and enjoy ourselves until you wish to leave."

"Until we wish to leave," she whispered, liking that idea very much. "I could go for that. But if its up to me, then we won't be leaving for quite some time." Wrapping her arms about his neck, she squeezed.

"I could go for that too," he whispered.

"Let's get out of here," she said in a determined whisper.

"I see you retrieved your outfit. You know, your ability as a Dream`Seer is quite amazing. Do you realize the possibilities of what you can do with such a power? I hope you don't abuse it." She thought about his comment in all seriousness.

"I won't. The bigger the thing, the more exhausting it is. Best to do little things, and only as needed. Each time I do it, I can feel a part of me shrivel, for lack of a better word. If I take it slow, I can keep on going with no harm done. Artemis, when you left me in my tomb, I was so distraught, I failed to realize something. I could have gotten myself out." Shaking his head, Artemis kissed Raven.

"I should have said something. I'm so very sorry. Now, to change the subject. If I'm not wrong, you want to change into that outfit."

"You are not wrong, sir." Letting her go, he continued drying her wings. She looked at her traveling clothes for a while as he continued his attentions upon her, then took her traveling shoes off and put the boots on. She started with the boots as a warning she was changing. Quickly, he walked a few paces down the corridor away from the stairs, and stood with his back turned toward her.

In reality, at this point, she didn't care if he watched. Then again, she did. As she began to change, Raven wondered when they would talk about being officially married. She hoped it would not be long. Raven continued, discarding the once beautiful silk dress; now in ruins. Taking her boots back off, she slipped into the trousers, then put them back on. She then slipped on the tunic and buttoned the shoulders about the base of her wings. She then tied the cape about her shoulders and slipped on the gloves. Wearing this outfit made her feel better, reminding her of a very happy time in her life, so many hundreds of years ago.

She did want to know one thing: Who it was that created the hunting party? Who was responsible for all this? Whoever it was, Raven felt like killing them. It was probably Simeon. Whatever the reason, it had been a diabolic act, and would surely be returned upon their heads with vengeance.

Slowly, she gathered up her old clothes, folded the dress and put it in the corner next to the wall. She set her long since decayed traveling shoes on the dress, stood and turning her attention to Artemis as fresh tears spilled from her eyes. She looked at him for a moment, thinking what a good man he was.

Silently she approached and raised a hand to touch his shoulder. She hesitated, then lowered her hand and walked slowly around him. Turning, she faced him. As soon as he caught sight of her, his mouth dropped open in obvious admiration.

"Raven," he whispered, "you look amazing. Are you going to be alright?" Raven shook her head as she placed her right hand over his heart. She wanted him to hold her, but she dared not imply anything. She tried to speak, but could only choke as a flood of sorrow escaped. After a few moments, she shook her head.

"Please forgive me. I am so, so sorry." Artemis, not quite hearing all she said, watched her lips carefully. Not understanding, he placed a hand slowly to the side of her head, resting the thumb of his other hand over her eyebrow. Gently, he tilted her head back.

"Relax, I'm just checking something." Raven tried to be as calm as possible while he gazed down upon her. As he looked into her eyes, she rested a hand upon his arm, waiting in anticipation, wondering if something was wrong.

"Well, I don't see anything out of the ordinary. I'm supposing your lack of being able to smile is do to the traumatic presence of that undead thing you nearly gave yourself over to." In all seriousness, he looked her up and down. "The first time through any place like this can be quite a dark experience. They should not, but many blame themselves for the bad things which happen in such places as this. It's the nature of the beast." She tried to smile again, then gave up. Artemis placed a hand to his chin, thinking. After a few moments, he slowly pulled out the ring.

"It would be my great honor if you would allow we to put this back on your finger." She looked at it, nodding slowly, feeling a smile she could not convey as the ice she felt in her heart began to melt away. Slipping the glove from her trembling hand, she held it up, fingers extended. Artemis held her finger steady and slipped the ring back onto her finger, then smiled happily.

"Thank you," he whispered. Feeling relieved, Raven looked at the beautiful diamond set into the band of white-gold. Slowly, she wrapped her arms about his neck, embracing him. To her great joy, she felt him return the same affection.

"I love you," she mouthed. His eyes instantly lit up in response, relieving her of her greatest fear; losing him.

"A wise and most beautiful woman once said we should leave this place. I agree." Pulling back, Raven nodded. Running his fingers through her hair, he looked toward the stairs.

"You are going to be alright. What happened was the key to this dungeon. We head straight down and through. There may be traps, or I am a fool, so I will

lead." Taking her hand, Artemis led her to the stairs.

Traps. She didn't like the sound of that. Artemis looked back at her.

"I'm hungry. What about you?" Raven agreed. Some food would be nice, but she was not hungry for human food. She was hungry for what flowed within the living. Her head began to swim at the thought of his blood. He saw what was happening and let go of her hand.

"Bad choice of words. You alright?" Raven turned away and leaned against the stone wall of the dungeon, setting her head against her forearm. Just when she began to feel better, something like this always happened. "I am not a monster," she silently reminded herself. The bloodlust faded quickly, leaving her shaken, but in control. How many times did she have to go through this before she mastered her greatest weakness? She had never taken another's blood. She never would. Turning, Raven composed herself and return her attention to Artemis.

"Ready?" He asked. Reaching out, she took his hand and nodded.

"Ready."

As they descended the steps, Raven quickly noticed there were no walls to either side. Carefully they moved down stair after stair after stair, taking them into a long and tedious descent.

At length, Raven spotted the bottom. When she finally did see the floor, she wished she had not, for strewn upon its surface were the many bodies of those who had not made it through this part of the dungeon. Their faces, twisted and frozen in the pains of death, caused her to mentally shrink.

"Be at ease, Raven. The thing that caused all this is no more." Raven took courage at his confidence, but stayed close. She wanted to be out of here more than anything. She suddenly smirked, causing Artemis to throw her a strange look.

"Finding something funny?" Instantly, she lowered her eyes and shook her head. He stopped, a sadness flashing briefly in his eyes. "I would love to see you smile. I hope you haven't lost your spirit." Raven pointed at the bodies they were walking through and cleared her throat.

"I'm scared, and I'm a Vampire," she jested. Artemis grinned and then laughed.

"That is funny. We are supposed to be the terror." Raven closed her eyes and focused on being calm. She needed to not only repair the damage she had caused, but find out what was happening to her. When she was sick, it was not vampiric sickness, she knew that to be true beyond any doubt. She heard every word Artemis had said while he thought she was dead. No, something was changing in her, and it scared her. She had felt her insides tear and adjust . . . evolve. She could feel how she was different, or becoming different. She tried to ignore it, but even now she knew impending change was closing in on her again. Instinctively, she knew she was about to become . . . more.

She did not wish to hurt anybody, but what if she changed into something that could not resist – something that wanted to hunt, and without remorse?

Regret began to gnaw at her. Raven glanced up at the man who so openly adored her, and it began to weigh heavily upon her that she should tell him. He needed to know. Artemis was her family now.

"I'm changing," she whispered. Artemis frowned.

"In what way?" Raven hesitated, feeling that if she told him, he would shun her. Still, he needed to know.

"I feel as though I am in a cocoon. Artemis, I'm scared." Artemis looked at her, then checked her eyes as he did before.

"Open your mouth, please." She did as he asked. He checked her throat, her gums and teeth. She waited patiently as he did what he needed to do, hoping he would find nothing.

"Well, I do see something. You have grown another set of fangs behind your main ones. They are not hollow and are smaller. And, on the bottom, an identical set. They are, without a doubt, the most well built structured Vampire teeth I've ever seen." She frowned, staring at him as he touched her fangs.

"Incredible. Look, whatever you become, whatever you are, just remember who you really are, okay?" She snapped at his finger. "Raven, you are hurting my hand." Shocked, she let go, not realizing she had taken hold of it.

"I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize, young lady." There was more, and Raven needed to tell him.

"Artemis, In the past hour, I've felt something coming on . . . something within me," she whispered despondently.

"Okay, so let it happen. Embrace this change. Accept whatever you are to become. Raven, I will support you, whatever the end may be. I hope you understand that." Raven placed a hand on his chest.

"I love you." She watched her Vampire melted with happiness.

"I love you more." His words invoked hope in her.

"I love it when you say that," she said. "I am in your debt . . . I am yours."

Artemis smiled.

"No. I am in your debt . . . I am yours." Slowly, Raven stretched up and ran her lips across his cheek, not quite touching him. When she got to his mouth she kissed him gently. Feeling him wrap her in that familiar embrace, she gave herself to him, embracing him tight.

Change always comes at the most inopportune times. As she melted against him, she felt her wings catch fire, or that's how it suddenly felt. Pushing away, Raven clenched her jaw, trying not to scream. She staggered back two steps, then fell to her knees. Curling her trembling wings, she wrapped herself within them, hiding from Artemis. She didn't want him to see her . . . what she might become.

"Raven, what is it? Raven!" She could hear him just fine; he did not have to scream! Touching her wings, she felt as though she had caught fire! To her dismay, feathers began to fall to the cold stone, like autumn claiming the leaves of a forest.

"No, no, no!" she cried in dismay. In a few moments every one of her beautiful feathers had come loose. After they had all dislodged from the arms of her wings, she stared down at them in shock and horror. Reaching down, she took up a handful and threw Artemis a look of utter despair.

"Oh no," she whispered, her voice trembling. Artemis stood looking at her, his eyes wide. He was speechless. Opening her hand, she let them fall to the cold stone floor of the dungeon, a growing panic building up within. What would she do now? She was hideous!

Then, suddenly, a thought hatched within her mind, an idea. Raven looked back up the stairs, her eyes shimmering briefly with a golden light she did not see. Raven then made the decision to flee back the way they had come, hide forever in this forsaken place.

As she was about to flee, to her amazement, feathers began to grow in where the others had fallen out. Each new feather was identical, yet made of what felt

like metal. Each feather was as sharp as freshly broken onyx. The most striking feature of her new feathers was their deeper-than-night shade, like the void of space in which no light can shine. As the last feather grew into place, the feathers which fell to the dungeon floor burst into flame and were consumed.

In wonder, Artemis looked upon Raven. Though she had not seen the golden light shimmering within her eyes, he had.

"I knew you were special," he said in an almost reverent whisper. Shooting him a dark glance, she thought to revile and tear him to pieces for saying such a thing. Catching herself in such a mind-set, she felt suddenly shamed. He wasn't the enemy. He wasn't the enemy!

"No! You love me! Don't you?" Freezing like a sudden chill had turned him to ice, he looked upon her as she felt moisture cascade down her face. Running a hand over her face, she looked at it to see it covered in pitch-black moisture.

"What is this?" Raven lamented. "Artemis, am I a monster? What is happening to me!" A new sensation burst forth within her wrists, working its way up into her palms and fingers. Again another change gripped her in the pains of transformation. Raven watched and waited as pain struck her fingers, as if they had all been caught by the ill placed stroke of a hammer. Holding up her shaking hands, Raven's eyes widened, and she half expected the ends of her fingers to crush by some unseen force. Growling like some creature from the Underworld, she gnashed her teeth at the pain in her hands, but refused to give in to the torture, or show any signs of weakness to whatever was doing this to her.

Steadily, each fingernail turned white as snow and stretched past the tips of each finger and thumb. As they slowly lengthened, it was as if an invisible knife whittled her nails into perfectly sculpted sharp points. By the time it ended, all the nails of her fingers were polished and slightly curved. Raven remained kneeling, feeling yet another change coming on. She desperately looked to Artemis

"Help me!" She cried out, but stopped his instant approach with a quick gesture.

"It is not finished," she warned as the whites in her eyes began to darken. The retinas of her eyes slowly shaded as well, soon leaving the entirety of her eyes as black and lightless as the feathers of her wings. As they lost all color, Raven's perception of her surroundings enhanced, even beyond vampiric ability.

Beholding him, she tilted her head slightly, as if straining to hear some distant sound. Perceiving his feelings and intentions, by the way his heart worked and labored, she abruptly perceived his love for her. In this, she found peace of mind.

It was over, and this time one of the changes was without pain. For that, she was grateful. Slowly, Raven stood and took a step toward Artemis feeling unbalanced. Instantly, he leapt to her side, supporting her. Glancing up at him, she tried to give him a smile, anything to show him gratitude. The way his heart worked within his chest screamed of his undying devotion for her. There was nothing else to read. He had no concern for his safety, or his own life. Everything she read in him told her he was genuine. After the visit to his castle, she was relieved to know he was, now, still himself. What he had become was cruel and without conscience. Such can be the effect of the Darkened Abyss. But that had never been. Confused at this insane turn of events, she looked to him.

"It's over," she sighed.

"How do you feel?" Resting against him, Raven took in a deep breath, then let it all out at once.

"I'm so glad you are still you," she stated.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked, confused.

"I'll tell you later. Not now, not here. I will not forget. Did I ever say I love it when you talk to me?" She looked at him in earnest, as if he could solve all her problems.

"Yes, you did. Wow," he whispered.

"What . . ." she inquired. "What is it?"

"You are incredibly beautiful."

"Really, am I really?" Artemis chuckled.

"Indeed, milady, you are. Are you mine?" Setting both hands on his forearms, she craved his attention more than ever. She also felt his natural charm gripping her more acutely, now that she could read him more easily. It wasn't fair, but she accepted it, not caring anymore. He had won, and that was that.

"I am, sir. Are you still mine?" Rolling his eyes, he gripped both her wings and stretched them out, looking at them.

"Of course, always. Now, show me what you can do with these new wings of yours." Letting go, he stepped back and watched.

"My new wings," she thought, suddenly curious. Extending them upwards, Raven crouched and jumped, beating down hard. Instantly, she found herself lifted twice as high as before, and twice as fast, taking her by surprise. For a time, she flew about, getting used to them. At length, she tucked her wings in tight and dived toward Artemis. Before striking him, she expanded and cupped them to catch a good amount of air. With far more ease than before, Raven dropped down inches from him. It was pleasing to her that Artemis had not flinched in the least at her sudden landing.

"You still trust me," she accused. Pressing against him, she reached up and ran her nails down his right temple, jaw line and neck, surprised to feel his skin as if touching him with the flesh of her fingers.

"Artemis, I wish -," she faltered and hugged herself.

"Do not regret your choice. If we both regret the past, we miss out on the present. We have both made choices in which we could have done better. Yet, what is done is done. Think about it Raven, we have each other." Immediately, Artemis began playing with her hair and smelling it. She saw his point, but many things which had transpired hurt deeply. He did not know just how many experiences she had been forced through while in that accursed tomb. In some instances, she willingly . . . no, that was over now.

"I am not a monster, Artemis. I am Raven."

"Of that, I am sure. You know, even for not bathing in so long, your hair smells good." Biting her lip, she shook her head at his constant infatuation with her hair.

"Well, I dipped it in a pool of water. That had to help." He laughed and put an arm about her shoulders.

"And what a bath it was. In our diaries, we will go down in legend for the tales we will write. We should take on the path of a Bard and sing our own praise!" She shook her head vehemently at the idea. Pulling her close, he squeezed her tight. He was so familiar. To her, this had been a long time in coming, and it felt too good to describe. Black tears slid down her face as she began to weep without emotion.

"Whatever you wish, I will endeavor to do. What do you want right now milady?" Now he was talking formal to her. It made her feel like she was something; like she was important. He was kindness . . . a light in the existence of her dark. She thought about his offer for a few moments.

"Well, first I don't want you to stop holding me. I need to finish that kiss I was enjoying so much." Smiling brightly, Artemis moved before her, embracing her tenderly, allowing to her to finish that interrupted moment. Closing her eyes, she gently ran her teeth over his jaw line and up across his cheek, ending at his lips, which she gently kissed, this time without interruption.

"So funny . . ." she whispered as she kissed him.

"What?" Artemis inquired, obviously enjoying her.

"Such a romantic place for this," she said. "Can I ask for something else?"

"Yes, of course, name it."

"I wish to get out of here. Then I wish . . ." she held up a hand, showing him the diamond ring.

"Then let us leave this dark place. Raven, I wish I had a mirror, so you could see yourself. The changes which have molded you, have done so in your favor. You are more beautiful than ever. I am simply stunned. I'm not sure what

these black are, or why. Still, you are stunning to behold." Flattered, she planted the most passionate kiss on him she could, and she felt it. Truthfully, it wasn't very difficult to do. When they parted, she looked at his mouth.

"Thank you sir," she said with more control over her emotions.

"I have to do something before we go," he said. Parting, Artemis walked away and began the gruesome task of searching the entire area for valuables. She watched him gather a few things up, but couldn't tell what they were. Truthfully, she didn't care.

Studying her feathers, she took one in her hand and frowned. It appeared as a normal feather, but was solid. She recalled them making only the normal sound feathers do when in flight. Sighing, she gripped a feather in her hand and pulled, letting it slide through her fingers. She was not cut, and that came as a pleasant surprise. Still, she needed to know one more thing. Sighing, she watched Artemis and waited, becoming rather bored at what he was doing.

Holding up her hands, she studied her nails. They were modest in length, but coming to such a point would attract attention. She knew she had to hide them from the eyes of the simple minded. She probed her new fangs with her tongue, exploring them. Had Artemis not mentioned them, she would never have realized the change until she had a mirror . . . or smiled at a peasant. Such a thought invoked a vivid image of what that would be like, and it nearly made her laugh. That would be fun, she thought to herself. Sighing, she began straightening her hair, wishing she had clean water and rose scented soap.

She felt a sudden urge to be far away where no one would ever be hurt by her. Watching Artemis, she felt another heavy weight added to her heart. He could've walked away. He could have been free of her, yet he stayed. She was completely charmed by him. Indeed, she was thoroughly taken by him, and not just due to his innate ability to charm. He was a good, loving man. Artemis was her will to remain Karritch Gleighdor, no matter the changes in her.

Wearily, Raven wiped her face, and meditated on the consequences of her

choices. She needed her own will, independent of his, to be herself. She wanted so desperately for him to love her, and not because she was, as he said, beautiful. Definitely not because she was now more like him. No, she wanted him to love her, because of who she was. Who she was . . . Raven shuddered. She had to tell him. This secret would set upon their relationship like dark atrophy and decay if she kept this one secret. The thought frightened her, but she had to be like him . . . honorable.

After finishing his macabre work, Artemis returned. She did not see his approach, as she had fallen into a light asleep - one of her habits picked up over the course of nearly an Age. A gentle word brought Raven out of sleep. To her dismay, she saw him a little distance from her. She knew he was being cautious. Yet, the look he gave her ate all the worries away.

"Meditating, or did you really fall asleep?"

"Both, I suppose." She stood and looked at him, suddenly curious.

"I need to know something," she said anxiously, beginning to ring her hands.

"Anything," he replied. She stretched out her wings, walked over past the stairs and turned to the solid stone. For a moment, Raven stared at the rock face of the stairs, then, in one swift motion, brought her right wing back and slashed the surface with her largest flight feathers. Upon contact, sparks showered across the floor of the dungeon as pieces of stone split from the surface.

Stepping close, she ran her fingers through the slash mark, taking in the damage she had caused. Biting her lip, worry twisted into her expression as her mind set upon Artemis. "Maybe I should not do this", she thought, then turned and looked at Artemis, who walked over and ran a hand over the damage she has caused. By the look she saw on his face, it was obvious, he was impressed.

"You know," she said, trying to be logical, "that's a lethal strike on an ordinary foe." Looking at her, the right side of his mouth curved upward a bit.

"I'd say that's a lethal strike against more than just an ordinary foe, Raven.

That's amazing." She frowned, not liking it. Reaching out, she took his hand.

"Artemis, please slide your hand down the edge of one of my feathers. I need to know if you can be cut. Just, please, be careful." Understanding what she wanted, he reached out, gripped a larger feather and pulled, letting his hand slide down its razor-like edge. As soon as he did this, she grabbed his hand and looked at it.

"No wound," she whispered, relieved. This meant her allies, whoever they might be in the future, would be safe if she accidentally hit them during a close combat situation.

"Satisfied?" he asked. She had to know more. Stepping back, she struck him across the legs with her wing, making contact so that if he was cut, it would not sever his legs. To her relief, he and his trench coat remained undamaged.

"Well, that's a relieve", she said. "Artemis, what do I look like? Really." Sighing, he raised a hand to her temple and closed his eyes.

"Let me help you with this dilemma . . ."

. . . Raven found herself sitting before a familiar vanity, looking into the mirror. Raising a hand to her face, she stared, scrutinizing everything about herself. Her eyes disturbed her greatly, as did the nails. Bringing her wings about her, she looked at them carefully. No reflection of light, and a loss of their second color tone, was the only thing different with her feathers. She used to have the slightest shade of deep bluish-purple in them, only revealed by light. Now, it was gone. She frowned and looked down at her nails.

"Maybe the gloves would be the answer for that," she thought out loud. She felt tired and looked back at the bed. Standing, she faced the bed, and began to unbutton her tunic at the shoulders, intent on taking a good long rest. It would be nice to sleep . . .

. . . Raven came to herself as Artemis broke contact. Standing there, she

realized he had stopped the dream-state out of respect for her. She knew he beheld everything she did; he always could.

"You, sir, are a gentleman, truly. There is no one like you in all the world." Artemis sighed.

"How do you know that? Have you met everyone in all the world?"

"No, but some things, I just know. And this I am sure of."

"Thank you, Raven. That means more to me than you know." Sighing, she lay the side of her head against his shoulder. She could read his heartbeat. It told her he was at peace, even amidst the husks of the slain in this horrid place.

"Will you put me to sleep again?" He looked at her and nodded.

"Of course. May I ask why?" She nodded.

"You may, sir." Placing a hand on her head, he let go of her and pushed hard, nearly knocking her to the floor. The only thing that saved her from the fall was the wall of the stairs leading down into the center of the chamber. Catching herself, she spun around to face him, a wicked look playing across her face. Quickly, Artemis held up his hands.

"All right, all right, why do you need to go to sleep?"

"Because I can do us both a huge favor right now. I stink, you stink . . . we stink. I can cure that little problem. It would only take a few moments." Understanding dawned on her vampire's face. Sitting down by the stairs, Artemis held out his arms, beckoning to her.

"Alright, come here. Get yourself comfortable. I'll not have you sitting or laying on this filth infested floor." Raven settled into his lap, turned and nestled against him as he adjusted her for comfort.

"I love this," she whispered. Artemis shook his head and smiled. "Is it possible to feel like I've gone to the Seven Havens, being in a place like this?" She closed her eyes, listening to the music pumping within his chest.

"Just sleep is all I need. No visions. I will do that part."

"Sleep it is then." As he lifted his hand, she caught hold of it.

"You sure you want to do this to me? So you know, I could forge a marriage for us. It would be easy."

"If that is what you wish, but you better include that tropical beach."

"Tempting, but I'll keep it simple." Letting go his hand, she allowed him to place his forefinger and thumb on each side of her head, directly over both temples. An instant weariness fell upon her, taking her immediately into slumber .

..

. . . Opening her eyes, the first thing she did was focus on bringing Artemis into her dream, a dream state without form. Within the blink of an eye, Artemis appeared beside her. Looking around, he seemed confused.

"Where am I?"

"In my dream. Look." She pointed, and as she did, there formed a door within the mists of gray that lead into a house coming into being. Once the small house was formed, Raven looked at Artemis, as if she was proud of herself.

"Go in and keep to your left. I will do the same, but keep to the right. Within, you will find a hot bath and soaps waiting for you."

"How is it that you recognize me here, and yet slowly in the first dream I entered?" She rolled her eyes at him.

"That world is highly distracting. That's how I made it. This house is just a simple creation. Let's go get ourselves cleaned up, shall we?" Impressed, he looked at her, then to the door. After a moment, he entered the house. She watched the front door of the house silently shut. Waiting for bit, she bit her lip then followed after.

Entering, she beheld a simple, unadorned hallway . . . nothing special. At the end were two doors, one on the right, one on the left. Walking to the end of the hallway, she stopped and rested a hand on the door handle of the left door.

"It's only a dream," she debated. "Yet real," she continued, as if countering herself. She hesitated only for a moment before her hand slipped off the door's

handle. Turning, she entered through the right door into a plain room with no furniture. At the center of the chamber stood a hot bath with soaps and towels. Turning, she looked across the hall, then forced herself to shut the door . . .

. . . Slowly, Raven opened her eyes, blinking the haze out of them, a feeling of mild exhaustion weighing down upon her, yet only for a few moments. Even something as simple as a private room with a hot bath taxed her strength, though not enough for concern. Looking up at her fiance, she noticed him watching her.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hello, young lady." She stood, turned, and held out both hands, which he took. Pulling on him, she helped him to his feet. Nearing, she smelled his neck and hair.

"You smell good . . . food," she jested. Rolling his eyes, Artemis began running his fingers through her now perfectly groomed hair.

"You do too. You know, Being a Dream'Seer has its advantages. For instance, you could probably wipe another's memory while in the dream world." Raven stepped away from him and looked about the area in disgust.

"Yes, I can," she said, narrowing her blackened eyes at one corpse as a disturbing memory flashed in her head. Rejecting the image in her mind, she sighed and looked around, forgetting the image that now harbored on the edge of her mind for a moment before slipping away. It was like waking up from a dream quickly forgotten. She knew she wished to tell Artemis something, but failed to recall what it was. It was important. Frustrated, Raven watched Artemis walk over to the chamber's exit doors, which lay not ten steps directly before the last stair. They were tall and wide, crafted from what appeared to be oak wood. He stopped and looked at them in silence as Raven slowly walked over and rested the side of her head against his shoulder.

"He is a perfectly honorable man," she thought. Wrapping an arm about her shoulders, he looked down at her. "I was tempted, but, like this accursed bloodlust

I harbor, I will not give in to desires I know will lead into dark paths." Leaning down, Artemis kissed her gently on the outside corner of her right eye, instantly making her insanely crazy.

"Tropical sands," he whispered.

"Indeed," she replied, then waved a hand about the area.

"You know, when we are married, we should make this our home. I have such fond memories of our time here together." She pulled away, breaking the spell by which he was beginning to bind her with.

"All right, all right," he quietly laughed. "It's former resident is no longer the owner, so I guess it would be up for grabs." He once again turned his attention to the large set of double-doors, pointing.

"Again, a one way door. It is amazing how well preserved it is." Raven thought for a moment.

"I guess termites - bless their little souls - would not survive the presence of the undead you slew, thus the doors were safe." She slipped deep into thought as Artemis poured over the framework and wood with a keen eye and a gentle touch.

"Artemis, we must get an undead pet to keep the termites from infesting the little cottage we will have." Glancing at her, he pointed.

"That will be your job." She pointed at herself in mock surprise, then feigned resignation.

"Ah, yes, quite true. What was I thinking?" Artemis chuckled, moved directly before the doors, looking into the chamber. Turning to face the doors, he began walking back toward the stairs, scanning the ground carefully, as if looking for something. Raven waited, suspecting that she was not going to like what he was doing. At length, he returned and stopped before the exit. Holding out his hand revealed seven tiny darts.

"This door is trapped." She looked at the finger-sized darts in his hand, grimacing. In her opinion, they were too small to be lethal, unless laced with poison. This thought did not encourage her.

"Well, is it still?" she inquired, suspecting what his answer would be. "You are holding darts. Do traps reset themselves, and do darts just magically appear in the mechanism of the trap already set off?" He nodded, much to her dismay.

"They can by the doors we open. If the heavy front door to this place was the cock mechanism, I suspect the trap at these doors has been reset, and more darts loaded into it. I'll wager we can easily push these doors open. Let's not be standing here when we open them." He took one dart and held it up, studying it. "We do not want to be hit by one of these." Pointing, he motioned her to the side, then looked at her for a moment.

"I'm going to push them open and get to the opposite side, across from you, which is over there." He pointed. "You ready?" Clenching her hands into fists, she nodded, a sudden warning gnawing at her gut.

"Yes." Artemis turned and placed a hand on each door. He looked at her, winked, then shoved them open. Quickly, he spun to the side and crouched as darts whizzed out of the corridor beyond the door, striking the stairs in a hail of death. Raven heard the faint, yet distinct, sounds of clicking behind her. The same clicking also came from behind Artemis and directly from above. As if cold water had been thrown in her face, she hissed and launched forward, tackling Artemis with no gentleness, driving him to the floor and bringing her wings over them, shielding them both as best she could. No sooner had they hit the floor, there came a whirring sound. Desperately, Raven strove to save him, taking great care to position her new wings as shields for them both. Darts rained down upon the area from all sides, striking her wings, glancing off them without their intended effect. Within the space of three breaths it ended. Artemis struggled and turned over, looking up at her.

"Thanks for that," he said. Raven jumped off him and shook her wings, discarding three darts which had stuck in her feathers. Standing, Artemis looked around, seeing at least a hundred darts littering the stone floor. Shaking his head in silence, he threw her a silent look of relief.

Passing through the now open doors revealed a well crafted hall with many sconces lining the entire length of the corridor upon either side. As they moved forward, Raven noticed the sconces had fresh, unused, torches set in them. She thought it odd that such an ancient place had unused torches. Had no one ever made it this far? The knight of Vannar knew there was an exit to freedom here, so he must have gone through this place, or knew someone who had. As she pondered this, Raven felt a warning in her gut. It did not feel right in this hall.

"Wait," she whispered. Artemis looked at her.

"I know what you are thinking, Raven. I've seen this type of thing before. I suspect those torches are the triggers to something. I do not believe they are real." Raven grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"It's not the torches." He froze, staring at her.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Give me a coin." He reached in a pocket, pulled out a copper piece and handed it to her. She looked at it and frowned.

"Cheapskate." Artemis shrugged.

"I'm saving the good ones for you."

"Good save," she stated, pacified. Turning away, she faced the hall and rolled the coin down its length. As it traveled the floor, she watched it with widening eyes, as if expecting something. Suddenly, it vanished through the floor and was simply gone.

"That's what I thought," she stated victoriously, and wondered what might be revealed if the bottom were visible. "So, how do we get across that?" she inquired, hoping he had a plan. Artemis shrugged, as if he had no idea, and walked past her, following the exact path the coin had rolled, stopping where it had vanished through the floor. Kneeling, he inched his way forward, until his knees were at the brink of the fake floor. Artemis slid his hands along the edge until his fingers vanished over through the illusion before him, followed by his

hands. Adjusting onto his stomach, he lowered his head down through its deceptive surface. Raven gave him a strange look and puffed air out through closed lips.

"Now, that is the strangest, most weird, thing I have ever seen," she stated as she crept up, and crouched beside him. Artemis suddenly slid into the floor, vanishing. It was so sudden, she had no time to react. When she realized what had happened, Raven panicked.

"Artemis," she whispered anxiously. "Artemis?" Laying on her stomach, she moved forward to look through the floor just as his head popped up, startling her.

"There's a stairway that leads down directly in front of you." Holding out a hand for support, he waited, throwing her a reassuring look. Carefully, Raven spun around into a sitting position and slowly, cautiously lowered her feet down through what appeared as a solid floor. As her feet disappeared through the fake floor, her eyes widened. She felt the first step and then the second as she stretched her legs out. Artemis watched her progress with a patient smile.

"Scary, I know. You're doing fine. Just don't move to the left or right. You're okay." She through him a nervous look.

"What would happen in I did?"

"Come down the stairs and you can see for yourself." Narrowing her eyes at him, she bared her fangs.

"I hate this," she retorted. Artemis shrugged, then leaned forward, taking her head in both hands.

"Hold on, Raven," he whispered. She froze, looking around with only her eyes, wondering what he was doing. Taking both his thumbs, he opened her bottom jaw while raising her upper lip. Curious, she opened her mouth and tilted her head back for him.

"Absolutely beautiful," he whispered. "Raven, all your teeth are slowly beginning to form into points. As surprising as this is, I have to say you are no

Vampire." Pulling her head back, she frowned.

"What are you saying? What are you talking about? What if I'm turning into a monster?" Raven dreaded the answer he might give. She watched his facial expressions as she listened to his heart, reading his answer before he expressed it. This new ability was fast becoming a truth serum for her to use. If he lied to her now, and if he didn't have some hidden talent for eluding, she might very well catch the deception.

Brushing her hair into place, he leaned into her and placed his lips against her forehead for a moment. Pulling her close, he rested his chin on the top of her head.

"I don't know. I have a suspicion, but it would be better to express what I really think when I'm sure." His unwavering loyalty to her suddenly made her feel guilty. She never told him the truth that she purposefully infected herself. It had not been an accident. Maybe, someday, she would confess. Her conscience bothered her immensely on this secret. She had been desperate to belong to him, and had made a foolish choice, one she regretted . . . well, no she didn't. She regretted the deception.

"Well, what do you suppose I am - just a guess, I understand. Will you tell me that?" He laughed quietly.

"My beautiful avian dream, always so impatient. But, since it is you who are under change, I will tell you my guess. Remember, it's only a guess. I believe you are evolving into what is known as a Night`Wraith, an advanced form of Vampire . . . yet not Vampire. It's rather confusing to me also, so it's only a guess."

"I don't know anything about Night`Wraiths, Artemis. What do they do? What are they?"

"Can I think on that one?" She threw him a cunning expression.

"Sure, fangs. I was just asking questions to prolong the hold you have on me. She snapped her teeth at him.

"Always mischievous, even in dire circumstances. Truly, you are one of a

kind," he whispered. Turning, Artemis took Raven's hand and slowly descended. She held on to him, trusting he would guide her down safe. As they descended, she looked to her left, realizing why it would have been unwise to stray off the stairs. Looking down, she saw a space between the stairs and a stone wall. The worst thing about falling would not be the drop, nor the sudden stop at the end. It was the countless dagger-length blades protruding at an upward angle out from the wall's surface as far as the eye could see. One who fell off these stairs would be dead long before they stuck the bottom. It was appalling.

"What kind of a maniac builds something like this? I mean, why . . . what is the purpose of this place? It makes no sense at all."

"Usually, but not always, dungeons are build to protect something of value. While there is only one way in, there is an exit to this place, which tells me this dungeon serves as a defense against intrusion. I think it's a barrier." Raven didn't hear the last part of his explanation. She was wondering about his first statement.

"Do you think there is something of value here?" He stopped and looked at her for a few moments. She was very curious at what his answer would be.

"Im sure there is." he stated with conviction. A thrill welled up inside her.

"Do you think we could find it?" Smiling, he continued, leading her carefully downward, stair after stair after stair.

"I already did," he stated.

"Show me, please? I would like to see it." She pictured a diamond the size of her fist, of rubies and emeralds, of a priceless wand. She could think of many treasures which would be worth a lot of gold.

"I can't," he stated bluntly. She stopped, keeping a grip on his hand, hindering his dissension. Artemis sighed. "Raven, it's not something I can just pull out of my pocket to let you see." Rolling her eyes, she simply stared at him, not knowing what to say. Clearing her mind, she let out a breath.

"Okay, can you tell me about it? Describe it?" He laughed.

"You already know all that." Now she was thoroughly confused.

"Riddles," she whispered. He laughed again.

"Okay, I'll tell you something about this treasure. Then you have to guess okay?"

"Okay," she replied, feeling intrigued. Artemis thought for a moment.

"Here it is: Dark as night with a center of gold. So innocent, so young, so very old." He looked at her, waiting.

"That's it?" she asked.

"Hey, it was the best I could come up with on the spur of the moment, miss impatient."

"Okay, hmmm . . . I still don't get it." Artemis neared and began playing with her feathers, then touched her heart with two fingers. He then ran his hand through her hair and brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. Raven felt the urge to pin him to the stairs and search his pockets! Recoiling from the thought, she simply begged him.

"Please let me see." He laughed again, turned and once again began guiding her down the stairs. Anger surged within her, which she ignored. In silence, he led her down into shadow and gloom.

"Lucky for us we can see in the darkness," she thought. "Otherwise -" A deep growl echoed up from below, instantly halting their descent.

"Okay, time for quiet is over!" Artemis shouted. He looked down over each side of the great stairs, brandishing two daggers, then glanced back at her.

"Just back me up, okay? Like you did with Solenti. That made all the difference." She nodded, closing her eyes, meditating on all insect life in the area. To her frustration, there was not a single bug in this horrid dungeon. If only there were a few, she could do something, even if it was only a little. Mentally shrugging off the thought, she focused on the here, the now.

"There are no insects in this place, Artemis. I'll have to flank it." Artemis seemed disappointed, even as the sound of something ascending the stairs came echoing up from below. Artemis began to chant.

"Messula vis shassuru." His words were brief, and mingled with a snake-like hiss. "Reveal the reptile," he called back to her without looking. "I know you will ask later." He grit his teeth and pointed down the stairs. "I draw the reptile's attention onto me. Now, the sound of my voice enrages it." Now she understood what he was doing. He was drawing it's attack onto himself, taunting it!

"You need armor," she yelled as a white-scaled dragon came loping up the stairs into sight.

"Is that a -" "Dragon, yes. Very young, lucky us. Frost, cold breath! Don't get breathed on!" Without waiting, she leapt into the air, just high enough to arc over the beast. As she passed over, Raven noticed the tip of her wings grazed the stone walls on each side, giving barely enough room to glide.

The dragon didn't seem to notice her, or didn't care. As she passed over it, she wondered what such a beautiful creature was doing in such a dismal place. She landed twenty steps behind it as it leapt upward and snapped at Artemis with a fierceness that suddenly terrified her. Without hesitation, Raven sprinted back up the stairs toward its backside. Artemis backed up three steps, focusing, yet did not attack. He mumbled something she could not understand, then spit in the dragon's face, enraging it further.

Suddenly Raven realized what could happen here. The thought of it instantly threw her into a panic. If it killed him, he would be reunited with her, leaving Raven alone to face life. As she took the last few steps, Raven closed the distance between her enemy, pulling off and dropping her gloves.

"You will never have him!" she screamed in rage as her nails extended. Slashing at it, Raven cut into its tail, which threatened to dislodge her from the stairs, Raven connected, yet it's scale coat protected it from any real damage but the losing of a few scales. Killing this beast would take time, and time they did not have.

The dragon hardly cared about her as it clawed at Artemis's feet, tripping him back against the steps. As he fell, she despaired. Without thinking, Raven

launched up into the air with all speed she could muster. From above, she saw it bite down on him, then instantly jerk its head back, dragon and Vampire screaming in pain as they wounded each other.

Seeing its weakness, she dropped using her wings to propel her descent as the dragon's head came up, mouth wide open in a scream of pain. Focusing on its mouth, Raven plunged in, growling in fury, her claws biting deep into its unprotected throat. Her feathers instantly caused massive serrations all through its mouth and beyond. Vanishing into the dragon's throat, all she could feel was rage beyond common sense.

The sudden stop to her decent stunned her. All she could recall, before slipping into a daze, was a tumbling sensation. Struggling to be free, Raven pushed and clawed in a panicked frenzy, but the dragon's throat was much stronger than Raven, rendering in vain her efforts to fight her way out.

The world spun out of control, forcing her deeper and deeper into the clutches of darkness. She tried with all her soul to be free, but, in the end, her entire world came crashing to a sudden stop, sending her spiraling into night.

Raven awoke in a sunlit meadow filled with an endless army of flowers in all their variety. Slowly she stood and looked around, noticing all the honey bees busy working the flowers. Smiling at them, she knelt down before one particular group of pink flowers. While she admired their beauty, she caught sight of one bee which seemed to be looking at her. She thought it odd, and focused her attention on it.

"Are you looking at me?" she asked. The shock was in its answer, which she did not expect. It seemed to be saying something, for she heard its tiny voice, even though she could not understand what it was saying. Leaning closer, Raven put her ear to the insect.

"What?" she asked. The bee rose into the air and was quickly joined by more of its kind. Raven stood and stepped back, watching the bees gather before her in a growing swarm, forming themselves into the image of a woman. Raven had to move back a few steps as thousands of honey bees massed together in a shape she soon recognized. It was the image of the Locust Queen, her Jahtha and master. Instantly, Raven dropped to one knee before the Locust Queen, who was the source of her power.

"Raven," a serene voice was heard as the bees stilled their wings. "Raven, he will come. You must have training in order to defeat him." Raven's head spun dangerously as questions filled her mind. Yet, try as she might, she could not speak. She felt as though she were drowning. She had felt that sensation before on the eve of the third day when she stepped into unlife. Forcing herself, she looked to her queen and waited, her lungs burning from lack of breath.

"Raven, go to the female Witch known as Mitcheio. She resides in Gaunten, the Capitol City of the Zurkel Mainland. Say to her, 'Essence of Eternity'. She will save you from him. Don't give in, Raven. Don't give up." Trembling, Raven took in her words, focusing on them, remembering. It was as if she were suddenly thrust into the Arctic Northlands unprepared. Despair

threatened her as she tried to speak a single word.

"Where-"

"When you come into the sun, travel north, north, north . . . Essence of Eternity, Essence of Eternity, Essence of Eternity. I now send you back . . . remember my words."

Sucking in a deep breath of air, Raven struggled to be free from something that had gotten a hold of her. She fought in vain against it, lacking the strength to even lift a wing. Panting, she lowered her head and cried without emotion, her lungs burning like fire. Where was she? She could not feel anything but the burning in her chest, and she could not see.

After a short rest, she managed to clench her fingers. It took some time, but she managed to get some feeling back as she felt a tingling sensation in her thumbs that seeped up into her hands, followed by a deep chill that ran up each arm and into her chest. She felt strangely light headed as a deep, painful chill entered into her head. It reminded her of when she was a child and had eaten too much snow all at once. This was, by far, more intense and painful. Raven felt as though a ball of ice was lodged inside the center of her chest.

"Raven." A voice called out, as if from far away. She tried to speak, but could barely move her mouth. Her tongue seemed heavy, and she could only see a dark-gray lighting the outer border of her vision. Again, she struggled. After a long struggle, she began to feel heat begin to warm her. She stopped struggling and focused on the source of warmth. Where was she? She was doing something . . . something. The thought eluded her. What was . . . Raven clenched her fists slowly, fighting a force that fought against the effort. Again and again, she worked her hands, trying to get more feeling into them. The nearby warmth helped, but it was taking time.

Ink-black tears slowly ran down her temples and into her ears as she waited, confused and in a terrible, spinning daze. A shadow moved over her as she stared

upward without blinking.

"Raven." The voice came to her again. It was familiar, so familiar, like something she had forgotten . . . something almost remembered. She tried to speak, but only exhaled. When she inhaled, her lungs felt as though lava had entered them. She would have screamed, but, whatever held her immobile would not allow it. For a long while, Raven struggled. At length, she began to see in blurred, distorted images. Her thoughts cleared at a snails pace, and began to make more and more sense.

A blurred image bent over her, like some shadowy, nightmarish apparition. As she felt it make contact with her forehead, she desperately struggled to get away, but could barely move. As she struggled, the shadow seized upon her hand, not letting go. Panicked, she began struggling all the more, but could only writhe and mouth words she could not speak. Her body rebelled against her struggling, punishing her by shooting pain through every part of her body. With a deep moan, she cried out, but only for a moment before she lost consciousness.

When Raven awoke, she tried to sit up. She should not be sleeping on her back. Her wings could be damaged. A strong hand held her down, causing instant panic to set in. Instantly, her white nails extended.

"It's okay, Raven, just lay back." Hearing that elusive voice again, she retracted her nails and relaxed, trying to focus on the hovering, blurred image as it slowly came into view. When she saw him, she recalled his name and weakly gripped the hand holding hers.

"I know you," she whispered. Hanging his head, Artemis let out a sigh of relief, then broke down emotionally. She watched him, wondering what could have made him act so.

"Why do you mourn?" she asked without emotion. He smiled and then laughed through his tears, keeping a firm grip on her hand.

"I thought I lost the treasure I found." Flashes of memories came back to

her then. The cliff, the entrance, the doors and pools and stairs. The torches and illusionary floor. The dragon! Her eyes widened in shock, causing her to jerk once, as if suddenly startled. She pushed his hands away and struggled to stand. With his help, she managed to get up, though her entire frame trembled badly.

"Easy Raven. Even though you regenerate, being frozen isn't gotten over so quickly." Straightening up, she pushed his hands away and gripped his tunic, desperately hanging on. She struggled for a minute, slowly gaining control of her body. When she finally felt in control, she looked at him, tilting her head slightly, the dawn of realization slowly coming to her.

"I'm the treasure," she hoarsely whispered, shivering. "It's me." He placed a hand on the side of her head.

"You always have been, you stubborn, reckless girl. You always will be." She tried to smile, but settled for feeling it in her mind as best she could. The memory of the fight with the dragon flashed in her thoughts, instantly causing her regret and guilt.

"I'm sorry for what I said."

"What did you say that needs apologizing for?" Artemis asked. Tightening her grip on his tunic, she grit her teeth.

"When you pass beyond this life, she can have you. It's not my choice, nor is it my power, to say what she can and cannot have." Understanding slowly dawned in his eyes then.

"I see. You were not talking to the dragon." She shook her head, then coughed.

"The dragon was going to kill you. I saw it. And, Artemis, if you died . . ." she stopped, being overcome by the trauma of everything. Weakly, she fell against him. Scooping her up, he carried her over to a large boulder and set her carefully down against it.

"Please, think nothing of it. In time, all will be revealed as it should be. We never know what the future holds."

"Okay," she replied, not knowing what to say. Almost immediately, Raven fell into a deep sleep.

Slowly, as she came to consciousness, Raven could hear Artemis humming a tune that instantly made her feel as if she were far away on an important journey. The tune was absolutely captivating. Not wishing it to end, Raven remained still as if she were yet sleeping. Once he was finished, it seemed as though she was brought back to the present. Nestling into him, she sighed.

"So, you are a musician. I didn't know you had such a talent." Artemis remained silent, resting his chin on the top of her head. Raven thought about what she needed to do now.

"Artemis, I need to go to Gaunten, a city upon the Zurkel Mainland."

"Then I will take you there," he said.

"How far is it?" she asked.

"We will have to go north, book passage on a ship, sail across a sea, then travel halfway across a continent to get there. I'm not sure the exact distance, but it is a lengthy journey. I will see you there." He squeezed her gently. "I'm just happy you're alive." She pressed the side of her head against his chest, listening to his wonderful heart.

"Thank you. I'm glad you found me on Feryl Mountain. By the way, when did you get under me? I recall you setting me on the ground." Artemis chuckled, as if her question was funny.

"You needed the warmth, and you were sleeping heavy. Either way, this is all to my advantage." She looked up at him.

"Your advantage?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"You're such a Vampire," she mocked. Laughing happily, Artemis nodded.

"Oh, that I am, and no mistake." For a time they both relaxed in silence, each to their own thoughts. Raven owed him an explanation, even though he did not ask, and so she turned and faced him.

"I need to go see a Magician Witch named Mitcheio and speak to her the

words, 'Essence of Eternity'." Artemis cleared his throat, looking into her eyes, as if searching for something deep within.

"What," she inquired. Touching her wing, he smiled and ran a gentle hand over the feathers, still staring at her, the corners of his mouth slightly rising.

"So this is how you have been able to accomplish such swift growth. I think I begin to understand." Confused, Raven took his head in both her hands.

"You know?"

"I knew you were special from the moment I saw you, and I was right in my judgement, though my guesses keep falling short the more I learned. Raven, you constantly evolve. The spells you know have become innately part of you, becoming abilities . . . not just magic. This means they are no longer spells. It's more complicated than that." Raven frowned and rested her forehead against his.

"Why can't I just be me? I don't want to be something that constantly changes. It hurts, and not just my body." She lifted her hand, showing her fiance the ring.

"What ever happed to living happily ever after?" Blackness pooled at the base of each eye as she stared into his eyes. "I don't want this. I never asked for this, though the only thing I don't regret is who I fell in company with; who I fell in love with. I don't want anything more than us and our friends." A look of sympathy washed over Artemis's face.

"Raven, who you are from birth does not just change. Do you not see that? You can wish away all the trials and hardships, but those are what define you."

"Is this why that Gargantuan Preying Mantis took a liking to me?" Artemis nodded. "And the giant spider?" she persisted. Holding up her hands, she looked at her nails. "And these?"

"Yes, yes and yes. Your wings and your eyes as well." She wiped her face with her hands and showed Artemis her palms.

"Why the black tears?"

"I don't know. I do know your demeanor has drastically changed. You don't

smile anymore. You smiled a lot before we entered that dungeon. Now, you do not." She shook her head, feeling a pit of emptiness ripping at her chest from the inside as she recalled the words she had said, and what she did to him.

"I can be me, Artemis. Please, don't think I'm gone." Again darkness, in the form of tears, streamed from her eyes. "I'm Raven. Artemis, am I losing my soul? Am I turning into a monster?" Gently, her Vampire wiped the tears from her face, shaking his head.

"I do know that you are who you are. But listen to me, Raven, and listen well, you are not a monster – if what you mean by monster is a ruthless predator. I don't believe that for a moment. If you evolve, then you do. But you make the choice to become a monster, or the opposite. It's all up to you. No matter what you've been through, even the things you can't recall, or have chosen to forget, you are you. Get that in your head and keep it there."

"Then why can't I smile? When I cry these accursed tears, something is happening, and I know it. I just can't feel it. Can't I choose to be emotional, happy, smiling, free spirited, just as you say I can choose to be a monster or not?" She looked at him, expecting an answer she could hold on to.

"Raven, those are questions that would be perfectly directed at Mitcheio in Gaunten. You are looking to me for answers I am beginning to fear giving. I guessed you were a Night`Wraith. Obviously, I was wrong. I don't want to guess anymore. Ignorance is a dangerous business. Raven, I've lived a long life, but I've not every answer, and I've never experienced the likes of you."

"So, are you counseling me to make the journey to Gaunten?"

"Yes. If you don't, I do not think you will find all the answers you need. I realize I just advised you in this matter, but now I have a question. Where did you learn that you needed to go see Mitcheio? What told you to seek her out?"

Raven's shoulders slumped.

"The Locust Magician Queen," she whispered. Artemis raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Then let her counsel be your decision, Raven. Be patient. Take one day at a time. Think of it this way: On the journey there, you will get to see some sites most of your people never get to see in their entire life. The sea is beautiful, though not tropical, and Gaunten is a grand and glorious city. If you go, I wager you will experience so many more things. I mean, you do have a knack for mischief, and getting into trouble, so I'm sure that will spice up our travels and no mistake." Raven smirked and rolled her eyes.

"Like going down the mouth of a dragon?" Instantly, he burst out laughing.

"Why not -- you could make a hobby of it." She suddenly remembered something.

"Where is the dungeon?" she inquired. Artemis pointed over by a cluster of boulders not far from them.

"Did you want to go back in? He grinned.

"You're a funny Vampire, aren't you?" She retorted and snapped her teeth in his face. "No, but I lost my gloves in there. Artemis stood, set her upon her feet and held up a finger. Smiling, he slowly reached into his trench coat and pulled out a pair of red gloves.

"I believe these are yours, milady." Relieved, she took and put them on, then sighed.

"I want my heart to come back to life." Wrapping his arms around her, Artemis held her. She returned the embrace, looking up happily and biting her bottom lip as she stared at him.

"Let's take a journey, Raven. You never know what the future holds in store. I will stay with you, protect and watch over you. It's your choice, and I will stand behind everything you decide." Squeezing him as tight as she could, she nodded.

"I would like that. Thank you, and thank you for who you are. You make me feel wanted and safe. You make me feel worth it." His eyes sparkled with joy.

"You are welcome, Raven. Is there anything else? Did you still wish to go back into the dungeon?" Shaking her head, made a sour face.

“I just wanted my gloves back.”

Their journey north led them upon patrolled and heavily traveled roads. Artemis knew the way as if he had a well detailed map and compass in front of him. It was obvious to Raven that he had traveled to many places. Each night they camped, he held her close and safe. Raven never wanted to see civilization again, she was so happy. Yet, even during this time of rest and relaxation, a shadow of dread seemed to be hovering over her, waiting in the back of her mind. She could not pinpoint the feeling, and it pressed in upon her at times.

At one point, as they journeyed, Artemis hired a traveling provisions dealer to let them ride along. Raven knew Artemis had paid the man handsomely, due to his cautious nature melting away into happy whistling, which disturbed her ears; the man could not hold a tune! Still, this was far better than dragons and apparitions.

Raven never looked into the provision's dealer's eyes, nor travelers who they happened upon now and then. She wore her traveling gloves at all times and kept to herself, never speaking to anyone but Artemis - and then only in cautious whispers. Artemis was her spokesman, and he was good at it.

One moon's travel brought them in sight of a rather large port with ships docked and anchored. Men were unloading goods of every kind from two ships, and loading more items and provisions onto three others. Artemis led her directly to the docks amidst the hustle and bustle of business and trade. Raven was all in wonder as she looked out at the sea, staring at the diamonds glinting off the water. She pointed, completely enthralled.

"I wonder just how many gems must be in the water to make it sparkle like it does?" He chuckled softly.

"That's the sun reflect -" "I know that," she interrupted. "Spoiler." Artemis looked at her and smirked.

"I bet there is a mountain of gems beneath those waves," he continued. "We

should collect them sometime." She thought of laughing.

"But then the sea would lose its sparkling glitter."

"Well, we couldn't have that, now, could we?" he replied, leaning into her a bit. Sighing, she took his arm, gazing out at the site before her in all its splendor.

"No sir, we could not," she whispered in awe, taken in by a site she would never, ever get used to. Raven absorbed the scene before her, absorbing the beauty, savoring the serenity of the moment. "We could take the sea with us – keep it. That way we would always have it to fall in love with over and over again."

"I love your mind, Raven." She smirked, but did not reply. Artemis put his arm about Raven as two women passed by, smiling at him. As their eyes shifted to her, their smiles quickly transformed to scowls. Raven lowered her head, ignoring them. It made her secretly angry that they looked at him!

"Raven, your squeezing my hand pretty hard. Are you alright?" Instantly, she eased up.

"Oh, yes, sorry," she repented. Squeezing her hand back, he joined her in admiring the scene of nature before them. In all her life, Raven had never seen anything like this.

"I never want this to end," she whispered. Artemis smiled.

"You know, there are a variety of creatures in the waters, especially in the deeper parts of the sea."

"Do you think we will see any?" she asked with sudden enthusiasm.

"Most likely, yes. Every time I've journeyed across the sea, I have seen at least one significant creature. They are amazing, and can make you feel very small." Raven rested the side of her head against him and sighed, taking comfort in his presence.

Together they watched as the sun rose above the water's edge. Before the morning was spent, Artemis guided her down to one particular dock and pointed at a ship anchored at the dock. Men were busy unloading cargo by a road that ended

facing the ship. People were gathering about the stacks of wares and talking with ship hands who watched over their goods.

"Do you want to go on board with me, or wait here?" She looked up the gang plank and saw a few of the crew pointing at her and talking. She did not care for the looks a few were throwing her way.

"I think I'll wait here," she said, letting go his hand. Artemis raked his fingers through her hair.

"I won't be long. Remember, many of these people have never seen your race. They will stare and they will talk." He chuckled. "They might even talk to you. Just know I'm close by, and I won't be long." Artemis then gave her some money. "Here, take this. You can buy items right from the sailors as they unload the cargo." He then walked away and ascended onto the ship.

She watched him go, clutching the money he had given her. Raven looked around and saw a large cart being loaded with many smaller items of clothing. Looking at the money in her hand, she suddenly wanted to buy something. It didn't have to be significant -- just something. She had never done this before, and she wasn't about to pass up the chance.

As the cart began to move, she jogged over to it and began scanning the load. One crate caught her eye. She reached into it and pulled out a rectangular bar of soap. She smelled it just as the driver caught sight of her. Slowly, he came to a stop.

"It's rose scented," he stated factually.

"I like it," she said, inhaling the scent through her nose. She pulled out two and then snagged a backpack she almost missed.

"You're one of them travelers," he said, sparking a friendly conversation. She nodded, not looking up. "Well, if I were blessed to have wings like yours, I would be too. I hope you don't mind if I say this, but your feathers are exquisite." Raven thought about his comment and smiled. He was nice.

"Thank you sir. It does make traveling easier, though sometimes kind of

dangerous." He chuckled and got down off the cart.

"If I may recommend, you should get this as well." Raven looked at the item he was pointing to. It was a leather roll, tied with a thin leather cord. Curiously, she picked it up and turned it this way and that, wondering what could be inside.

"What is it?" she curiously inquired.

"Inside the roll are hair ribbons. Here, I'll show you." Holding out a hand, he waited, his eyes smiling. Setting it in his hand, she watched him place it on the top of a flat wooden box. Untying the leather strap, the man spread it out, revealing five lengths of embroidered silk, each a different color. They were amazing. Instantly, Raven was sold on them.

"I want this," she said with growing enthusiasm. He rolled it back up and handed them to her. "How much do I owe you for these, sir?"

"One silver piece, ma'am." Holding out her hand, she noticed she had only been given electrum pieces. Each electrum was worth one-hundred silver pieces. The man looked a bit nervous.

"Ma'am, I don't have the change for that." He pointed into the city. "If you come to my shop, I do." Pulling out one coin, she placed it in his hand.

"Keep a tab for me. I'll probably visit your shop before I leave. What is the name of your place?" After putting the coin in a leather pouch, he rolled up the leather, making sure each ribbon was perfectly flat, then handed it to her.

"Seaside Traders, ma'am." Suddenly, she liked him. He was all politeness and proper mannered. On that day, she discovered another man, like Artemis. Maybe they weren't so rare after all.

"Is there an inn near your shop?"

Yes ma'am, right across the street. It's called the Bard's Roost, and is one of the finer inns this city has to offer." Raven put the items in her new backpack and walked away toward another cart being loaded.

"Thank you sir," she called back as she distanced herself from the wagon.

The man bowed and got back up into his wagon. Behind, she could hear the wheels of the wagon begin to roll over the cobblestones as it moved on.

Curiously, she approached the next wagon, spotting a stack of snow-white furs near the mid-section. Stopping, she reached up and touched them, feeling how soft they were with her wrist. She wished she could take a glove off and enjoy the fur more, but that was impossible, and so decided to purchase one. As she was just about to speak to one of the two men loading the cart, the nearest man reached to his right, grabbed an arm-length stick, and struck her across the back of the hand. Recoiling from the pain, she cried out, holding her hand to her chest, eyes wide with surprise and shock.

"That's right little pigeon, get your filthy Karritch hands off my stuff . . . thief!" The two men burst out laughing as he pointed the stick in her face. "Scum, get away from the cart!" Jabbing her in the forehead, he laughed cynically and tried to hit her across the neck. Raven stepped back, shocked by the sudden attack. Without hesitating, she turned and walked back toward the ship as the two men burst out laughing even harder as they watched her retreat. Suddenly, Raven was afraid. She had to get away. Stopping at the bottom of the ramp, she looked up to the deck of the ship. A man coming down the plank looked at her with no real expression as he passed by.

She waited for a while, glancing nervously at the two loading their cart. Why did he do that? The pain had quickly subsided, but the memory was fresh in her mind. She knew her kind were hated by the Humans. Simply put, she should have been more aware. From now on, she would be more cautious. Raven knew her race had earned the reputation. By her own peoples actions, she had been attacked. She felt no anger; only disappointment at what had happened. There was no reasoning with prejudice that ran so deep.

Another reason she had to put them out of her mind, was that she feared to become emotional at this point. If she did . . . "no, where is Artemis," she questioned in silence. Placing a hand on the edge of the gangplank, she closed her

eyes as a scene flashed vividly in her mind . . .

. . . She stood in a circle of crimson liquid, her head hanging down, due to the lack of strength to keep it up. Again and again and again, she felt the agony of being whipped. She did not plead, nor give her captor the satisfaction of screaming. What little dignity remained within her, she kept for herself. As the whipping ceased, the shackles about her wrists unclashed, as if by some unseen hands. The moment they did, the floor beneath the bloody pool opened. As she fell down a deep shaft in the floor, there was no time to turn and identify the one who caused so much of her blood to pool up about her feet.

After falling for too long, Raven struck a surface, feeling many bones in her body break. Spitting red, she closed her eyes and waited for the torture of healing to begin . . . and it did . . . slowly. Within a day's time, she was herself again, with the exception of her broken, subdued, mind . . .

. . . shuddering, she came out of a sudden memory that caused her great alarm. She knew it was not just a dream, but something that had been forced upon her during her existence within that wretched tomb. It made her sick to suddenly remember it as a reality, and not a simple nightmare.

Looking back, Raven caught sight of two feeling the same furs she had. The men were showing them the furs and chatting warmly. Coin was exchanged for the furs, and something else from the cart. Pleasantries were exchanged, and the two parted. Another came and went in the same manner. As she watched on, a sadness began taking hold deep within her. Turning her back on the scene, she silently cursed the Karritch Gleighdor race for building such a reputation. It was no wonder her people lived in solitude.

One of the sailors appeared at the side of the ship and looked out into the city. He quickly noticed her and frowned.

"Diabolic scum," he muttered under his breath. She heard what he said, and

it made her want to fly away. She would have, but Artemis was on the ship.

"And this is just the beginning," she thought, feeling a heavy social weight beginning to tax her patience. Raven suddenly felt small, and socially outcast. Deep down inside she understood, but it still made her sad.

Artemis returned with a man who looked like he ate rocks for breakfast, lunch and dinner. He waved her up onto the deck. As she walked up the gangplank, she noticed the sailor watching her suspiciously. Once on the deck of the ship, she stopped by Artemis's side and took his arm, gleaning moral from his presence.

"Gladius, this is Raven, Raven, Gladius. He is the Captain of this vessel. He has let us purchase a ride to the southern point of the Zurkel Mainland, which will save us much time."

"Thank you sir," she stated without emotion. Giving her what seemed to be a look of approval, he bowed slightly.

"The pleasure is mine, young lady. We don't have much by way of a spare room, but I believe you can be accommodated for."

"Yes, he must eat rocks," she thought. His voice grated and rumbled like boulders in a landslide. Across the deck, a voice was heard among the men.

"Like the crows nest!" Laughter instantly broke out until the Captain shot a stern look their way.

"Get my ship scrubbed!" he snapped. A grumbling arose as the sailors scattered to do the Captain's will. Gladius took her by the hand.

"Don't mind the simple . . . just use them to further your purposes, understand?" Raven froze as he took her hand. She began to panic as he reached a hand under her chin and lifted her head up. "It's okay, miss, really," he rumbled. Trembling, she slowly looked up into his hardened, weathered, face. "You see? Some of us are not so ignorant as others. Please be patient with the simple minded of my men. Can you do that?" She glanced over at Artemis who winked,

remaining silent. Slowly, she made eye contact with Gladius. Through all his hard features, his eyes turned soft, smiling. Raven nodded, understanding.

"Yes sir."

"There's a good girl."

"If I can be of any service to this ship, I am willing to learn," Raven offered. The Captain pursed his lips, thinking on her offer.

"Maybe when we are out to sea, I'll take you up on that offer. In the meantime, you both keep out of the way until my men are finished with their work. When they are done, you may be where you like. My cabin and the wheel are off limits." She nodded, squeezing his hand.

"I promise to do as you say, sir." Letting her go, he rubbed his hands briskly together, throwing her a look of approval.

"I set sail in two days in the morning, just after sunrise. If you will excuse me, I have work to do." He nodded at the both of them and walked away. Raven looked up at Artemis.

"I bought rose-scented soap." Raising her eyebrows, she waited for a response in hopes he would keep her distracted from what happened. He took her by the hand and led her off the ship.

"Well, why don't we find an inn so you can put that soap to good use?"

"Sounds good to me," she replied, shooting a glance at the two men on the wagon. One was pointing at her.

"The simple," she thought to herself. The Captain was right. Those types of people were here to fulfill the purposes of the not so simple minded.

The two days at the Bard's Roost Inn was a dream of constant hot water, bubbles and meals for two. The comfortable arrangements of the inn caused Raven to completely forget about the provisions shop. Once she entered her room, she never went out. Artemis had purchased an adjoining room to give Raven the privacy she needed.

At first, she was nervous about being alone. Seeing all she had to do was open the door on her side, then his, she was pacified. Upon seeing the bathtub, she became impatient to use it. Each time it was filled, Raven tipped them with silver coins Artemis gave her. The silver kept her bath water nice and hot. Artemis took care of all expenditures, and brought meals into her room.

On the first night of their stay, after Artemis had gone to his room, Raven was immersed in her second bath of the day. Laying her head back, she closed her eyes, soaking up the heat of the water. It had been a long day, but there was still the entire night to enjoy the longest bath of her life. Of course, she had many baths in her life, but this one would top them all, she was sure of it.

Lazily adjusting her left wing, she looked up at the ceiling, feeling as though she were in the Seven Havens. The languid state she was enjoying abruptly ended when she raised a wing and noticed a feather come loose, greatly startling her. She watched as it slowly spun downward, like an autumn leaf breaking free of the tree it once grew upon. Down it spun until it landed on the floor next to the tub. Reaching over the edge, Raven picked it up and looked at it. Then to her dismay, another came loose and fell. A sudden pain shot through her chest, doubling her forward, forcing a scream.

"Oh, no, not again. Not here, not now!" she cried. "Please, not now!" As if in answer, she felt her chest tear open, causing her to lurch back against the wall of the bathtub, screaming and writhing in agony. Looking down, she stared in horror at the bones and muscle within her chest. In anguish, Raven tried to close the gaping wound with her hands as a sudden rain of feathers began to descend like heavy snowfall from her wings. After the last feather came loose, a thick membrane of leathery skin crawled and stretch across the arms of her wings, forming a bat-like membrane.

"Artemis!" She screamed as her fingers split at the tips. Talons of pure black slowly extended out the ends of her fingers, driving her white nails out to

drop into the bloodied bath water.

She looked down into the water, now stained red from a large amount of her own blood streaming and pumping from her chest. Leaping out of the bathtub, Raven headed for the door to Artemis's room and stumbled, falling to the floor.

"Artemis, help me!" Raven shrieked as her head cracked, causing her to spasm and twist upon the crimson stained floor. She felt a sliding sensation in two places on her head, directly over each eye. Picking herself up into kneeling position, Raven reached for the door leading to Artemis's room. As she grasped at the door, it moved beyond her reach stretching and bending away. A snap in her head caused her to fall backwards, screaming without sound. In shock, Raven lay dazed on the floor as blood pooled about her. After a time, she forced herself to turn over and began crawling toward the adjoining door. She had to reach it!

"Artemis, please, help me!" she cried out, her voice sounding unnatural. Raising a hand to her head, she felt something solid and quickly realized she had grown two hand-length horns. Looking about the room, her eyes focused, and she caught sight of a large mirror at the back of the room. She made for it, determined to see what the changes were. Painting a trail of blood across the polished wood, she struggled to the mirror and slowly stood. Horrified, she looked upon herself. She was hideous! Her skin was a dark-green color with pok marks dotting her entire body as if she had been showered by acid. Twisted, red horns curled back across her head, and her hair had become finger-thick strands of writhing tentacles.

Shuddering, Raven raised her hands, gazing in open horror at her talons. Beyond her raised hand she beheld her image in the mirror. Convulsing in shock and dismay, she beheld a bald head protruding from her chest, writhing and twisting, screaming without sound as if it struggled to be free of her.

"Artemis," she whispered, "I'm a monster."

With a violent jerk, Raven came to, sending bath water over the edges of the tub. Stifling a scream, she sat up and looked around, realizing it had been a nightmare, nothing more.

“Will this ever end?” she lamented.

“A thousand years,” echoed a voice through her room. Closing her eyes, she steadied her breathing, forcing herself to be calm, ignoring what she was hearing.

“It’s just a nightmare . . . it’s not real, it’s not real,” she stated over and over, trying to convince herself this was all in her head. Raising her hands, Raven opened her eyes to see white nails. Relieved, she sat up and checked to see if a head was sticking out of her chest. There was not, and her skin was its normal beige color. Feeling her head only revealed wet hair, not horns, and no tentacles for hair. Laying back, she looked up at a gold braided cord with a silver tassel. Reaching up, she wrapped her fingers around the cord, hesitated, then let go of it, deciding she would not call for service. What could they do in such a situation anyway?

Slowly, she slipped out of the bath, dried herself off, dressed in a hurry and grabbed a brush by the mirror. After working her hair over, she got out a black ribbon and tied her hair to the side. She liked the style, except for one detail. Quickly she fixed a braid at the end of her lengthy hair, to keep it from blowing everywhere.

After she was finished, Raven walked over to the adjoining door and opened it. Lightly, she knocked, hoping she wasn't disturbing him. The door opened a moment later to a pleasant smile her way.

"You look good . . . better than good. Did you get some rest?" Raven raised a hand dramatically, then dropped it.

"So, it's still early in the evening. I was wondering if we could go down and get a table. Maybe we could get lucky and hear a master Bard perform tonight." As

she finished her sentence, her thoughts turned to the appearance of her eyes, which compelled her to abandon the idea of going out. "Well, maybe not. I might draw unwanted attention." Artemis stepped to the side.

"Please, come in," he invited.

"Thank you," she said quietly, and entered the room, looking around. Turning, she gave him an odd look.

"It's the same layout as my room."

"Yes it is. Raven what do you need?"

"I'm sorry," she hastily repented, "I am interrupting you." She turned to leave, but was stopped by a gentle hand to the shoulder.

"That's not what I meant. I meant what do you desire, want?" She began playing with her left wing nervously, gripping and squeezing a handful of feathers.

"I don't want to be alone," she confessed, a single black tear slowly making its way down her cheek along the base of her nose. Artemis smiled as he took her hand and guided her to a padded bench at the foot of his bed. They sat down together, and as they did, Raven moved into him, enjoying his sheltering presence. Once comfortable, she lay her head against his heart and listened to the rhythm it made; how it spoke to her. Slowly, she slipped into a trance-like state as more than a great calm came over her. After a moment, she slowly looked up to find him watching her closely.

"What," she whispered.

"You are such a unique creature. I am so charmed by you." Her face twisted a bit. She slowly looked at his chest and placed one finger at the center of it.

"How the roles change. I'm the one who should be charmed." Artemis laughed.

"Quite so, quite so." It seems I have lost my ability to persuade you. Maybe I'm losing my touch." Raven shook her head slowly as she laid her head back against his chest again, listening, taking in everything about him. Biting her lip, she secretly glanced up at him.

"I can assure you, sir, Artemis will never lose his charm." She inhaled deeply, then let out a lengthy sigh. "Yet, I am not charmed by you. Maybe it is I who am getting over your ability to lure me in." Oh how she wanted to laugh with Artemis; share the evening together, yet it seemed, here, now, the way this conversation was going, this would end a bit . . . more. "I'm happy you let me in. Thank you," she expressed, pressing into him.

"You are always welcome milady." He squeezed her tight. Raven sighed.

"Artemis, I have a question. I need you to be honest with me, please."

"Okay, what is it?" Raven sighed again, this time feeling a great weight beginning to crash down on her as she turned and wrapped her arms about his neck.

"Are you the one who hunts me?" She froze, locking eyes with her fiance as he stiffened. The beating of his heart told her the truth, even before the lie escaped his pathetic mouth.

"Raven, why would I hunt you? We are engaged. Why would you ask such a question?" Slowly, cautiously, she pulled away from him and stood.

"The dream gave you away. You played them upon me unlike he would." He looked at her emotionlessly, not replying.

"Artemis, please tell me everything. I love you. Why not be honest with me?" She held the ring up, showing it to him. "I have no change of heart, no matter what your intentions are. Please, let me in. Let me know what is in store . . . who I really am . . . what my destiny is. Whatever you say, I will do, even unto the shedding of innocent blood." She came to him, dropping down in front of him, feeling a tension and great conflict burning nearly out of control within him. He was speechless. Another black tear escaped her left eye. "I am free to choose whatever path I will take, yes?" He nodded slowly, cautiously.

"Yes," came his reply, the trace of a deadly tone in his voice.

"Then I choose you. Tell me how to do what I need to do, to become what nature intended me to be. On the dock a man hit me with a stick, while you were

talking to Gladius." She shed more tears and ground her teeth like an animal. Artemis slowly stood, anger filling his countenance.

"I will kill the sailors for that!" he growled. "Nobody harms the queen, no body!" Raven stood and attached herself to him, wrapping her arms under his arms. She stood up on her toes and nuzzled him affectionately.

"You can't kill them twice," she whispered. His eyes jerked downward, locking with hers, only to be met with an intense, passionate kiss, instantly and fully capturing his attention. Once they parted, she gave him a tender, innocent look.

"I don't want to be alone tonight. Let me stay here with you, please?" At her request, she could feel his heart suddenly take on a different rhythm. He was taking the bait. Smiling, she pressed for more. His body temperature quickly raised as she felt his will steadily dissolve.

"If my queen commands it," he whispered, slowly raking his fingers through her hair.

"I do, please." Wrapping his arms about her, he began to advance upon her as she smiled . . . then drove her extended nails up through both his sides, driving them into every muscle and artery in his chest. Raven's demeanor suddenly transformed to that of something from the Underworld, a creature to be feared. She snarled viciously as he froze in place, only managing to groan. Stretching upward, she placed her lips upon the side of his jaw, then slid her teeth up his jaw line until she kissed his ear. Softly, quietly, Raven growled in primal communication, letting Artemis know this was final. It was over between them.

Pulling her nails out from his chest, she stabbed them into both sides of his neck before he had the chance to move or react, piercing every nail through him and into all the areas she needed to make this man her puppet. The strike was so clean and swift, Artemis did not shed a single drop of blood. Slamming her forehead into his, she hissed menacingly.

"I am not your queen!" she frothed, feeling a rage coming on she could not,

did not, wish to control. Rending him with her nails, she tore him asunder in seething violence, instantly beheading him. His body balanced for a moment, then toppled back the floor in spasms as a sickening green light poured forth from every wound she had inflicted. The light flowed through the room, circling her twice before striking Artemis's head. Within a few breaths time, it vanished, leaving Raven and her rage alone in her Vampire's room.

Without hesitation, she ran to the window, opened it and dove out, taking to the sky. In the heat of dire rage, she ascended, gaining altitude so as to get the best visual point of the docks below. Gracefully turning about in a full circle, Raven spotted her target. Like a dragon, provoked by a band of petty “dragon slayers”, she hurtled through the night, black tears streaming her face as terrible, unbridled rage and fear welled up within her heart and mind, altering her vision to scarlet.

She knew what had to be done, yet was she capable of what she needed to do? The answer was simple - there was no answer, and it did not matter. The fear and anger boiling up within her, far outweighed the oncoming, unavoidable conflict with Gladius, who Raven now knew as inhuman, disguised and cloaked in the flesh of a common man. The fact that she might lack the ability or power to take him on was thrown aside at the thought of forever losing her love.

She had never told Artemis her experiences within that horrid tomb, for fear of him rejecting her. It shamed her to think she had not been idle for nearly an Age. The image of a man, teaching and tutoring her in the power of the blackest of arts, and the love she also had for him, surfaced, flashing alive from a once buried and hidden memory. Ignoring a terrible scene - one she herself had led - she channeled all her fear and doubts into power, adding them to what abilities she possessed.

Circling the ship, she spotted and focused on the door of the captain’s cabin, then hurtled like a falling star for it in silence, all doubts and insecurities devoured by her will to destroy.

The impact was so fast and so intense, she barely felt the pathetic resistance of the oaken-wood as it gave way with a crash. As she slammed into the far wall within the Captain's quarters, she dropped, landed on all fours, turned to Gladius, who stood over the man she loved, and furiously launched at him, spinning her wings into his overly large body. His screams deafened her as she pressed the

attack.

"Die betrayer!" she raged, slashing at his eyes, intent on ending this conflict quickly. In one moment, as she thought she had him, she felt his fist catch her in the shoulder. The impact of his strike sent her hurling across the cabin, shattering a large hourglass before heavily impacting the far wall behind the captain's desk. Falling to the floor, she shook her head, listening to him bellow in pain and rage as he lumbered toward her. Raven knew it was now or die. Leaping as high as she could, she planted her feet against the wall next to her, even as Gladius charged. Using the wall as a leverage to launch into him with all her might, she met his advance, screaming in hatred, cursing him far beyond death and darkness. Both met head on, clashing in a fury of nails and fists.

For Raven, the battle carried with it the consequences of pain, suffering and darkness.

Gasping, Raven opened her eyes to the ceiling above her. The cabin . . . Artemis! In great pain, she slowly turned over and crawled to him, feeling too many shattered bones within her body. It did not matter. All that mattered was him. Looking up, she beheld her Vampire, tied to a chair, bloodied and broken. She screamed as her ribs snapped back into place, then turned to make sure Gladius was dispatched. Quickly, she turned away. Had she done that?

"Artemis, Artemis," she wept in panic, "Oh no, no, no, no, please breath. Don't you leave me alone . . . not now!" she broke down as she reached out trembling hands, not quite touching him for fear of doing more harm than good. As she stood there, helpless, she suddenly convulsed, a spasm ripping through her. Dropping to her knees, she felt her chest pop back into place. Forcing herself to stand, she reached out and touched his face.

Come on, you can do this!" All that luxurious bathing, and he was being tortured. She grunted in annoyance as her shoulder popped back into place. Growling like some cornered beast, Raven slowly placed a shaking hand on his heart, closed her eyes . . . and despaired.

Slashing the ropes that bound him, she picked him up and exited the cabin. The crew was standing in silence on deck as she exited the Captain's quarters, weapons drawn, yet frozen in fear. Snarling like some deranged animal, she challenged them all.

"I will kill every last one of you for this!" she screamed, her feral voice rising in the night. After setting her fiance's body upon the deck, she hurled into fifty-six men, sparing none.

When it was over, she landed by Artemis, bathed in blood and gore. Falling to her knees, she pulled him into her arms in disbelief. Again, she felt for a heartbeat, truly despairing. Weeping bitterly, Raven raised her eyes to the night sky and pleaded silently for Vannar, whom she did not know, to spare his life. Solenti had mentioned Vannar, and was his Knight. After a long while, she grew

wearied of begging. Looking into her Vampire's still face, she wept, her heart not only dead, but utterly broken.

"What am I going to do without you?" she managed through sobs of anguish. "I am lost, alone, forsaken, out of time. Why did we separate? What do I do now, Artemis? This wasn't the way it was supposed to be!" Raven embraced him tight, mourning the loss of her love. Into the deep of night, she held him, hoping beyond hope he would pull through this one, yet it was no use. As much as she yearned to bring him back, he was gone.

A terrible darkness began to well up within her as she thought of what she would do next. Go to Mitcheio? She didn't know the way. Maybe she was destined to be a monster. Maybe she needed to reap havoc on mankind, who had rejected her even before they knew who she was! Death had taken him, and so death would take them in blood and carn - she felt him move, set a hand upon her waist. In disbelief, she looked down at him, choking on her emotions in wonder and disbelief.

"Raven?" he whispered. She could not have heard a more sweet sound, than the sound of his voice calling her name.

"Artemis, you are alive?" He weakly nodded.

"If you call this alive, yes. Now I've had a new experience . . . what it feels like to be sent back. It hurts." She tenderly brushed the bloody hair from of his eyes, all in wonder and amazement. The look on his face, when his eyes focused on her, was one of complete surprise and confusion. Weakly, he tried to stand. Quickly, Raven helped him, being as gentle as possible. As she aided him up, she could feel how broken he was.

"Slowly," she wept. "Easy." Once on his feet, she wrapped her arm about his waist, steadying him.

"How did we escape Gladius?" he earnestly inquired as he squinted at her through swollen eyes. "I can't see."

"Artemis -" "Raven, how did we get away?" Raven shuddered at the

memory of the battle. Looking around, she took in the scene and scent of the carnage permeating her senses.

"We didn't," she wept. "We didn't get away." As his eyes cleared, he looked around the deck of the ship, then at her, grimacing. In his eyes, she could see the shock of witnessing her handiwork and now she would get lectured for it. She didn't care. They tried to kill her love, which thing she would never allow. She would kill ten-thousand for him . . . more!

"Raven, is Gladius dead?" He looked at her, gritting his teeth in pain, then choked, spitting up blood. Sinking to his knees, he groaned. "This is healing so slow." Raven steadied him, by wrapping him in her arms. Distraught, Raven broke down.

"You're back, you're back, you're back." He struggled, raising a trembling hand to her shoulder, trying to comfort her, but the way he did it made her even more emotional. She wiped the blood from his face, but only smeared more blood on his skin than she removed. Giving up, Raven gently held him, steadying her Vampire. After a long while, she took in a quavering breath and let it out.

"Yes. He's in there," she managed to say, and pointed at the cabin. Shaking his head, Artemis looked at her.

"You're a mess, young lady." Biting her lip, she grimaced.

"I've been busy." She turned her head away from him and spit blood out of her mouth. Artemis saw it.

"Is that your blood?" Shaking her head, Raven gagged once, then again.

"That is not normal blood. It is not Human. It's strange and loathsome to the taste." Rather spooked, Raven looked around, taking in each body of the fallen, eyes widening in sudden comprehension. "Artemis, this crew is not Human." She turned and spit again, feeling sick to her stomach.

"Go find water that is not on this ship. Wash yourself." Standing, she looked down at her best friend in all the world, yet bloodied and broken. He was healing slow, but he was alive. She knew he was dead. Looking up, she gazed

through the bloody haze in her eyes at the stars. In wonder, she thought about her prayer.

"Raven, go wash yourself," he said again, pulling her back from thoughts of Vannar, and of Solenti, the Knight of Vannar. Her prayer had been answered, there was no doubt.

"Okay, I'll be right back." Stepping back from Artemis, she crouched, then launched into the sky. As she ascended, blood rained down upon the surface of the ship's deck, showering Artemis. She flew to the dock and landed a few feet off the shoreline with a splash. Taking a step further out, the water instantly got deep, scaring her.

Quickly, she dunked herself a few times, washed her mouth out with sea water, then struggled back up onto the shore, feeling her gut tighten. She didn't need to see it to know a large shark was just off the end of the pier. Once she got onto the shore, it began to close in on the area where she was.

"No vampsteak' for you tonight big boy," she whispered in a shaken voice. Launching into the air, she flew quickly back to the ship and landed by Artemis, who was still kneeling in the same spot.

"Shark wanted to chew me," she feebly jested, trying to lift his spirits. Artemis chuckled, seeming a little more lively.

"I'd like to see any shark take someone who took out Gladius," he replied, then coughed and spit blood to the side. Struggling to his feet, he limped heavily toward the cabin. Raven slid under his arm, supporting him. The scent of Artemis's blood was beginning to make her euphoric. Shuddering, she banished her feelings. She recalled the first time she had helped him, like this . . . that was long ago. She snapped her teeth at the memory.

"At least you can't infect me a second time . . . well, a third time." Artemis gave her a curious look.

"When did I infect you a second time?" He flatly asked. She shook her head and sighed.

"Are all men so blind?" Seeing her implication, Artemis smiled and glanced up at the night sky just before entering the captain's cabin.

"Oh, I get it. Very clever Rav - Oh, you did kill him. How did you pull that one off? Do you know who he is, what he is?" Raven shook her head.

"No, and, no. He is dead, so I can't ask him. I hate him."

"Well, milady, who he is really doesn't matter now. He is, or was, a battalion general, just for your information, and you killed him." Raven kicked Gladius's head, not caring about the title Artemis had just labeled him with.

"Yep, dead," she stated, a cold tone in her voice that caught his full attention.

"Raven, he is Vahkrin." This meant nothing to her. Still, how things had played out, she quickly came to an assumption.

"He was sent to capture me, wasn't he?"

"Yes, and kill me. You are perceptive." Rage flooded her mind. Taking a deep breath, she slowly calmed down, mastering her emotions.

"You were at the inn with me. Do you know what you called me?" Artemis looked at her, suddenly very concerned.

"Did he touch you?" he half-snarled, his eyes darkening, then coughed through blood-flecked lips. Slowly, Raven nodded.

"Yes, he did." Artemis's eyes widened in sudden disbelief.

"Oh, Raven, I am so sorry." She raised her hands to the back of her Vampire's head and bared her teeth at him.

"I enjoyed it. As he wrapped his arms about me, it gave me the opening I needed to behead him." Shuddering, Raven set her head against his bloody chest. "You have to get this blood off you, Artemis, or I'm going to lose my honor." Startled, Artemis nodded.

"Of course, of course. I'm sorry. How thoughtless of me." Turning away, he looked around and soon discovered a barrel of water in the far corner of the cabin. Pulling off the lid, he motioned her over to him.

"I'm okay, it's you that is sending out the temptation to feed."

"Either way, come over here. She did as he asked. For the next while, Artemis washed her hair and clothing by pouring a mug of water over her head. Soon, she held up a hand.

"I'm good, I'm good, thank you for freezing me." Laughing, Artemis adjusted her hair. She noticed he was shaking. Taking the mug from him, she dipped it in the water and poured it over his head, then repeated it until he was free of as much blood as possible.

"Fangs, your hands are shaking. Are you okay?" He shook his head.

"If anyone ever touches you again, I'll obliterate their entire family line." Raven looked at him in surprise.

"No you won't." He rolled his eyes and shrugged.

"It's just the way I feel." Flattered, Raven looked at him and sighed. Reaching up, she smoothed his hair back and looked him in his eyes.

"I am yours, and I have never, not once, betrayed the moral code of honor you live by . . . we live by."

"That's why you are so attractive," he replied, admiring her. He touched his heart, then hers. Returning the same, Raven let out a sigh of relief and turned to the body of Gladius, taking in the large pool of Artemis's blood beneath the chair he'd been tied to.

"Now what?" she asked with a shudder. The aroma smelled wonderful.

"Let's search the cabin for valuables first. Gladius won't be needing them anymore." Artemis grabbed Raven and kissed her. It took her off guard at first. Then, after a moment, she melted against him, feeling him shiver. After a long and inviting kiss, she pulled back.

"You have the innate ability to choose the most romantic places to be sensitive, you know that?" Artemis ignored her, pulling her in again.

"Thank you for saving me." She bit her lip, feeling that vampiric charm setting in. Before she could react, he let go and began searching through the

cabin. Taking in a deep breath, she shook the feeling away and joined him. As she did, Raven fell silent and still, as if a stupor of thought had struck her. Artemis noticed it as he looked over a few maps on a table.

"What is it, Raven? Something weighs heavily on your mind, or I am no judge of character." Taking in a deep breath, she blew against her wet hair.

"Apparently, I am the 'Queen', " she stated in exasperation. Artemis thought about it for a moment, his brow creasing.

"Queen?"

"On the dock, as you were booking passage for us, I was looking at a beautiful white fur. One of the men up on the wagon grabbed a wooden stick struck my hand." Artemis instantly flushed crimson, but did not interrupt. She could see her story was upsetting him. "Artemis, it's okay. I walked away. Artemis, the actions of my race earned me what I got. Live and learn, right?" Slowly he nodded and put the maps down. Nearing, Artemis took her hand, looking at the back of it.

"See, he really couldn't hurt me, even if he struck me until he fell over exhausted. It hurt, but only for a few moments." Artemis took her hand and held it in silence, waiting for her to continue. It looked as if he were fighting off some mental attack, and she knew exactly what that was. He was holding back, silently hoping she would give him a solid reason not to break his code of honor. This rather compelled her to divert his train of thought. She knew he could easily track them.

"When I told that imposter in the inn what had happened, you - he - became angry and said you would kill the sailors. I thought it rather odd how you reacted." She placed a hand at the center of his chest. "It was disturbing when you said that nobody harms the queen. So I ask you now, what does that mean?" Artemis kissed her hand, amusing her. Even in a wrecked cabin, with a mutilated Captain on the floor, and the scent of blood driving her crazy, he was the romantic. She didn't care. They had such a moment amidst the dead before, so this was

nothing out of the ordinary. Artemis brushed a hand down the side of her head.

"Well, someone has taken notice of you . . . someone of significance, I suspect." Raven shook her head.

"But why did he title me with queen?" Raven fell deep into thought again and slowly withdrew from Artemis, trying to remember what it was she had remembered earlier. Looking about the area, she began taking things.

"You know, Allanna is the backup plan. If this failed, they would get me there, wherever there is." Artemis cracked his wrist, wincing in pain, and looked at Raven, throwing her a slight smile.

"I admire the mind you have forged in so short a time." She spit a long strand of her hair from her mouth.

"Kind of you to say, but I don't recall being nearly twenty again." She set her attention on Gladius and began searching through his pockets as Artemis closed his eyes and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Raven. I didn't mean to forget. Forgive me, please. To me it was a few hours. For you, an Age. I cannot imagine that." About Gladius's neck, she spotted a chain.

"Don't ever apologize for that, okay? While I was in my tomb, I learned and experienced more than I speak of. Most of it I forget just after remembering it, like illusive dreams." She shot a glance his way. "I think what happened to me was so traumatic, I bury it away. But it has been creeping up on me more consistently as of late. Even with all the memories, coming and going, I would do it a hundred more times so I could be here on this blood-soaked ship with the man I love." She grimaced, forcing herself not to gag. "Artemis, I think Gladius is changing." Walking over, he watched the body.

"If he's Vahkrin, it would have been wise to disguise himself. I wager it's a shape changing spell. It seems to be fading now," he said, suddenly very curious. She stood and began looking around for a stick.

"There's a thick, silver chain about his neck. I don't want to touch it. Do you

see something long anywhere?" Taking interest in her discovery, he soon spotted a quill and grabbed it.

"Let me. I'll take the risk." Quickly, he knelt by the lacerated body of Gladius, which steadily lost the appearance of a Human, and began to radiate a sickening stench. Raven's eyes widened in disbelief as it slowly changed.

"What is that thing? You said Vahkrin earlier." she recoiled slightly, her face twisting in disgust.

"Gorgonoth. It comes from the Underworld." Artemis slipped the quill through the chain and worked it from about the creature's neck. Raven stared down at the body of a creature, the likes of which she had never seen before. Its skin was a sickly green, its feet black cloven hooves. Bat-like wings began to appear beneath it. Raven's eyes widened as she was mentally taken back to earlier that evening when she - but that had only been a nightmare, not truth. Artemis held up the chain, upon which was fashioned a locket in the shape of a simple crescent moon. Curiously, he looked at it.

"Shall we open it?" she asked.

"Only without touching it. Some items are spellbound traps. We can't take any chances here.

"The price is never fair," she replied. Glancing at her, he made a face.

"You still need three baths and then another." She checked herself out and shrugged.

"I think I look good for the occasion," Raven jested, trying to raise his spirits.

"Oh, you do for maggot parties. It's a wonder your not covered in flies." She punched him in the side with a bit of force, then snapped her teeth his way, making him grunt, then abruptly laugh.

Kneeling down, she finished frisking the body of the Gorgonoth, upon which she found a pouch of gold and two rings. Both rings were bands of thick black-gold. One ring had a black diamond set into it, the other a red pearl.

Without touching its body, Artemis severed the rings from each finger and snagged the pouch of gold from her.

"Thief," she whispered. Ignoring her, Artemis opened the pouch and tediously placed the rings and necklace into it, never touching them. He then put the pouch into his coat pocket and ran a hand through his hair.

"There's more here than we can carry. We'll have to come back before it gets light. We will also have to find another ship to take."

"Why can't we just take this one?" she suggested. Artemis shook his head.

"Not enough deck-hands to properly man it." Raven's face hardened as he looked at her.

"Then find some. I'll clean up the mess." Artemis looked surprised and held out his hands.

"Okay, I'll go recruit. But, no promises." He ruffled her wet hair, throwing her a smile, then left the cabin. She watched him go and then hung her head, abruptly exasperated.

"I have a big mouth," she lamented. "But this is a really nice ship." Shaking her head in disgust, she gripped Gladius by a horn and managed to haul him out of the cabin and to the center of the main deck, where lay the others. Once there, she closed her eyes, picturing Solenti, and how brave and noble he was. After a deep breath, she began the most disturbing task she had ever undertaken, all the while cursing her mouth for running away all the time.

Artemis didn't leave the ship right away, but went below deck and searched every area large and small, checking for secret places where one could hide. He had to be sure the ship was secure before leaving Raven. Finding nothing, he located water and quickly bathed. After washing up, he found a room with a wardrobe. It didn't take him long before he came back up on deck . . . to find Raven carrying bodies out to sea, then returning for more. He watched her dispatch Gladius, which was no pleasant sight, then fly with part of him out to sea.

"If my own mother saw this, she would slap me senseless," he whispered, feeling a deep-set feeling of horror creep into his heart. He noticed each time Raven carried a body out to sea, it took her quite some time to return. "That's a good girl," he thought as she grabbed Gladius's head and launched back out into the night. Turning, Artemis casually headed down the gangplank and into the outskirts of the city.

Three more, and she would be done. Raven wanted this to be over; this was deeply effecting her, and in a most dreadful way. She wanted to leave, now. Grabbing another part of the former Captain of the ship, she flew quickly back out, keeping a lookout for danger. Once out to sea, she let it drop to the water's surface. This time, before it hit the water the head of a great sea creature broke the surface, snapping its crocodilian-like jaws onto the piece, catching it in mid fall. Throwing its head back it swallowed and dove back down. Startled, Raven ascended.

"Wow, you're a big one," she said, curious wonder taking her attention off the task at hand. "This might just be the break I was hoping for," she said, talking to herself. Gracefully twisting, she turned and sped back to the ship and grabbed the last two hideous reminders of the battle.

Leaping back into the sky, Raven instantly felt the weight of this abomination dragging at her like an anchor. With all her strength, she steadily struggled back out to sea. After hovering for a few moments, she let go of both pieces and watched in anticipation as they fell to the water's surface. As each hit the water, Raven ascended. The size of this creature was surprising, and she did not wish to take any chances. In no time at all, she saw it moving toward the slowly sinking body parts, creating a wake behind it as it glided beneath the surface.

"And here you come again. Magnificent!" She called out, then increased her altitude even more as it descended after the last two pieces. Raven watched

the behemoth vanish, then sped away back to the ship, satisfied that the evidence of the bodies had been taken care of.

As she flew, she resisted the urge to dive into the sea to get clean. She feared she would not be able to get back out, once submersed. If that creature was in the area, it would come for her as well. Once she landed on the ship's deck, Raven looked around, seeing too many pools of blood staining the deck.

"I really do have a big mouth," she lamented, then began searching for tools to get the mess cleaned up. In no time, she located a bucket off to the side of the ship by the wheel. Grabbing it, she began to haul bucket after bucket of water from the shore, dumping them on the deck.

With effort and patience - her one true nemesis - Raven was relieved to see progress. Locating a deck mop, she cleaned out the Captain's cabin first. She also fixed up everything within, throwing all broken items overboard. There was a broom on deck, near the captain's quarters, which she used to clean the floor with.

Soon, she stood on the deck of the ship, looking at it with approval. If Artemis did find deck-hands, they would never know the blood-shed and gore which had occurred before they arrived. Satisfied, Raven replaced the bucket, the broom and mop. All seemed in order. Looking to the city, she frowned and quickly launched into the air, flying back to the inn, steering clear of a group of twelve mounted night-guards.

As she entered back through the window, Raven cleaned Artemis's room. It wasn't difficult as the imposter didn't use anything, and had vanished without staining the room with blood. For that, she silently gave him gratitude. Still, she did her best to make it look as undisturbed as possible. She then entered her own room, turned and closed the door. Resting her head against the wood, she let out a breath. Reaching up, she locked it. Turning her attention on her room, she sighed and walked over to the once hot and comfortable bath and looked down into the water, cringing.

"I hate this," she whispered. Placing a finger in the water brought on a

dramatic shiver. It was cold, but there was no choice but to bathe. She smelled vile, and there was no time to call for hot water. It took a bit of doing, but, finally, Raven was bathed. She had used half a bar of soap to not only clean herself, but her traveling clothes and each feather on each wing. With the buckets used to fill the bath, she emptied the bath water out the window of her room. She then scrubbed the floor and tub clean.

Hastily, she packed up her belongings, making sure all was accounted for. She was ready to leave the inn. As Raven walked over to the open window, she glanced into the long mirror and stopped, scrutinizing her body. She turned sideways, then away from the mirror, looking back over her shoulder. Frowning, she shook her head and fixed her hair back, so it fell behind her wings.

"I wish I was pretty," she whispered. "I wish my eyes had color again." She touched her face, nearing her reflection and studying her skin. "What does he see in me?" Feeling guilty, Raven placed a hand on the mirror. "So much history to hide . . . so much I cannot tell . . . so much I cannot recall . . . so much I forget. Deception - I'm always keeping secrets. Then, before I know it, I hide those secrets from myself. Am I crazy?" She pointed at herself accusingly. "It's not fair to do this to him, Raven. It would not change anything if he knew more. Just tell him when you remember, then he can remind you when you forget. Then again, it would not change anything if I didn't." She opened her mouth and looked at her fangs. Closing her mouth abruptly, she shook her head. "Make the best of it. Things will work out . . . they will."

Smoothing down her wet tunic and breeches, she thought about her tomb, and the time she spent alone, so alone. It was like a bad dream shrouded in a thick fog. Staring at herself in the mirror, she tried to harden her heart, but eventually lost control. After a lengthy cry, she felt a little better. Grabbing a towel, she cleaned her face and eyes, then placed a stack of silver coins on the edge of the tub, along with a piece of gold.

“Whoever you are, when you clean this room tomorrow, I wish you the

best,” she whispered, wondering if she could have made a new friend had she stayed.

With all the evidence buried, and all tracks covered, she lamented, knowing she had to leave the bathtub behind. If there was anyway to get it out the window and onto the ship, she would have done it without hesitation. Her loss. Walking to the window, she slipped out, departing back to the ship.

Returning to find the ship still unoccupied was a relief. She would remain unseen by the crew, if Artemis could gather one. How many could he possibly recruit in one evening's time? The situation felt rather bleak.

As she waited for him to return, Raven sat on the railing of the ship and watched the moon sink into the sea. She loved the moon. To her it represented purity, and she liked that thought, even though she was a hideous monster.

"There really is no escaping it," she told the moon. "Look at what I did tonight. Sixty." She felt a hollow swell within her chest. Gazing at the large round orb in the sky, she mourned the waste of her youth, not that she remembered it. She knew she had been a child once, and it ate at her like acid to think she could not recall her beginnings. She was gaining back her memories, but they were dark histories of her past. Then, after remembering, those memories slipped away, leaving her frustrated.

"I should write them down," she said. "I suppose I might have been happy as a child . . . I can't remember anymore. No, I'm sure I was a happy child." Raven folded her wings around herself and hugged herself tight with her arms, feeling vulnerable and insecure. "I wish I could recall more. Knowing what a broom is doesn't really help." She lifted her eyes to the stars, thinking of Solenti, Knight of Vannar. At that thought, she began to weep.

"Vannar, you probably don't know me, but you know Solenti, the Knight. He's one of yours. I liked him the moment I met him . . . well, after we stopped fighting." She shifted anxiously and continued. "My name is Raven, and I was so impressed with Solenti, I decided to one day be of some use to you, if I can. If you are really out there, somewhere, I need to say thank you. I begged you to spare my love, and he is alive. So, you must have done that. He came back, even when I knew he was dead. Yes, you must be real, or he would not have returned. Thank you so much for sparing my life by giving him back to me. He is honorable, you know. Well, of course you know." Raven looked to the blanket of stars above her,

wondering what was out there. "If I could master what I am, and how to be better, truly I would love to serve you, like Solenti." A black tear rolled slowly down her cheek and fell into the water below.

"Vannar, sir, Artemis is wonderful, but I am so lonely for a friend," she whispered, a sudden desperation in her voice. "Maybe you could help me out on this? I would be so grateful." As she finished her prayer, to her delight, Raven witnessed seven stars streak across the night sky, vanishing into the horizon. Mesmerized, she wondered if it was coincidence, or Vannar answering her in his own way.

As it usually happened, the moment ended as Raven heard multiple footsteps coming up the gangplank. Instantly, she wiped her face, leapt off the railing of the ship and darted to the cabin, secretly watching a line of men file up onto the deck. There were thirty in all, followed by Artemis, who turned and held up a hand.

"You say you are all sailors. Show me what your skills are by your actions, and I will pay you all once we reach our destination. Talk among yourselves and pick your positions by your strongest ability to sail. I will be in my cabin when you are ready. Be quick, and if there be bickering or fighting among you, I will throw you overboard. Now, let's run a clean ship." All thirty men seemed excited, quickly huddling together as Artemis approached the cabin.

Retreating into the Captain's quarters, Raven slipped into the darkest corner of the room, waiting for him to walk in. Looking about the room, Artemis sniffed.

"I can no longer sense the beating of your heart, but I know you are here," he whispered. He looked to the back of the room, squinting at the door leading into another chamber he had not before seen.

"Raven?" he whispered again as he advanced to the door and opened it slowly, warily. As the door creaked open, she fell in behind him, following him through like a living shadow. Artemis entered a simple bed chamber that

contained a bed built into the wall, a large soft chair, and an oversized closet that blocked the view of more than half the bed.

"Luxury at its finest," he mused, then spun about. Raven saw his move before he made the turn. Crouching low, she slipped past his legs as he faced back out. Slowly, she rose up behind him as he looked out the door of the bedchamber.

"I smell rose scent, rather strong. You are near." After a moment, he turned back to be met with an attack he would never forget. After first, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, his daggers flashed into his hands. For a moment, Artemis froze, eyes widening in utter surprise. Raven opened her eyes, seeing she had succeeded in beating a thousand year old true race Vampire at his own game. She felt so "accomplished". The daggers vanished as quickly as they had appeared. Pulling her head back, she studied his face, as if reading him.

"I thought Ardenoth were harder to catch off guard than this." She let go and walked over to the open door. "Keep this door closed, my pet Vampire, for what lies behind it always remains the big mystery on every ship, didn't you know that?" The corner of his mouth curved up at one side.

"I do now. It won't happen again. Pet?" Raven shut the door and turned, giving him a stern glare.

"See that it doesn't, or I'll throw you overboard," she threatened him, a deadly and serious tone in her voice. "Or," she continued, "I'll have you walk the plank." Nearing, he took a handful of her hair, brought it to his mouth and nose and smelled it, inhaling deeply.

"If you did not bear the scent of rose, I would never have become aware of you. Even so, it would have been too late. You are becoming skilled beyond what experience should allow, and in a short time. I dare say, in a real battle, you would now give me a run for my money." Taking her left hand, he raised it and removed the glove. Looking at her nails, he smiled and ran his fingers over them, studying them with great interest. Raven's cunning instantly melted as she unwittingly leaned toward her fiance. Opening her mouth, she tried to express herself and

simply failed. Taking a deep breath, Raven reached up to the right side of his head and pulled until she could feel his breath washing over her. A cold spread through her chest she could not explain as she locked eyes with him. Three breaths, it took to get control of herself. Tilting her head slightly, she nearly made contact with him by way of a kiss, but refused.

"Short time?" Her eyes flashed with sudden intensity. "They say the eyes are the window to the soul, sir. I can see into your eyes. Can you see into mine?" Suddenly uncomfortable, he shifted. His subtle movement was slight, yet she perceived, by the beating of his heart, and the way he postured himself, he suspected she might attack. She especially took notice of the way he positioned himself -- he was opening himself up, giving himself to it.

"I cannot," he whispered, his heart taking on a rhythm that screamed out guilt, sympathy and regret. "I wish we never left Edge` Wood Forest. I took everything from you but nightmare." Gritting her teeth, Raven released his hair and began running her nails through it.

"Not all was darkness. Not all was loneliness. As the days pass, images flash before my eyes, like waking dreams, or visions, I don't know. I was not in my tomb for the full duration." Artemis began to say something, but she stopped him with a brief finger to his lips. "When I say I am a monster, I do not say it in ignorance, Artemis." She shuddered, recalling a very disturbing image . . . one she mentally fled from, then reluctantly returned to the present. "I will tell you what these images are as I experience them, if you will hear me out. If I do not tell you, I will forget." Giving Raven an odd look, Artemis stared at her, waiting. Raven could feel a terrible, dark fear beginning to rise up within him.

"Artemis, please, don't fear me. I am Raven." Confused, he shook his head.

"I don't care," he managed to say as he brought a hand up to his heart. "The depth is too much to pursue. I feel it. Whatever your images are, whatever you have done, I . . . don't . . . care," he said.

Raven's eyes widened as she came to the realization that, right now, she was

hurting him more than any weapon. She looked down, no longer able to look into his eyes.

"Tell me what to do, and I will do it, milord." She waited, terrified at what would come next, even as a scene of carnage flashed like lightning in her mind. It was unmistakable . . .

. . . Raven stood by an image wreathed in shadow and flame. Before her lay a woman upon a stone table, or what remained of her. Had she done that? . . .

Stifling a scream, Raven pulled her head back in shock, striking the door. Horror filled every part of her being as she raised blood-covered hands.

"I can't wash the blood off my hands! It won't come off! I'm sorry! I'm so very sorry! I don't deserve you!" she cried out in despair. All she could perceive was the scene before her, as if it were in the present . . .

. . . in horror, she turned toward the flaming shadow as it slowly turned toward her.

"You have done well, Ravenoth." She heard him speak, as a man speaks, yet his face was yet a mystery. More terrible than this, she heard her own voice, smooth as silk, respond.

"I am grateful milord. I'm so famished. May I feed now?" Reaching up, the being gripped her by the neck and pulled her into the flame and darkness of his being. She felt flesh touch upon her lips. Like a starving wolf, she instantly snapped onto it, drinking her fill . . . blessed nourishment . . .

. . . Raven's vision slowly cleared, revealing Artemis kneeling over her, holding her hands in his.

"Raven, Raven wake up. I've brought men aboard the ship. We are getting ready to sail. I see you found the bed." Blinking, Raven looked at him, suddenly

distressed, confused. She struggled to remember what she was dreaming, but, like before, it slipped her mind. Launching into him, she wrapped her arms about his neck, whimpering as ebony tears spilled from her eyes. Returning her embrace, he began to rock her gently back and forth, soothing and calming her.

"What's going on? Did you dream?"

"I must have," she wept, squeezing him tight. Raising a hand, she beheld no blood staining it.

"I have to get you to Gaunten. You need training. Otherwise, I fear the your gift will be too much for you to bear and wield." Raven pulled back, shaking her head.

"I don't know what is real," she mourned. "I feel so lost, Artemis. I don't know what to do, and it's getting worse." Taking her hand, he placed it to his heart, even as veins of black, like roots, began creeping out from her eyes, just under her skin. She could feel something beginning to change within her, and she did not like it.

"Do you feel the beating of my heart?" She nodded, bearing her teeth.

"Yes," she replied. "I feel it."

"Then, Raven, you hang onto it with all your might. Anytime you need to find an anchor to truth and reality, place your hand on my heart. It's real, and you know it. I know you do. You felt it before any of this happened. You felt my love for you, and you returned it. You cannot deny it, or you will be a liar and a deceiver. Do you understand me, young lady?" Desperately, she nodded, fighting off the dark beast raging within her soul. Slowly, those blackened roots creeping from her eyes stopped, then began to recede.

"Yes sir," she answered, shuddering. Embracing him again, she felt him wrap tight about her. He then began rocking her again and playing with her hair, as always. Everything Artemis did at this moment felt real, sincere, sure, and she grasped onto it all, not letting go.

"I have no doubt, you will be alright. Don't you ever give in, don't you ever

give up. Whatever nightmares you face, we will face them together." After a few moments, Raven felt the peace of calm fill her being, pushing away an internal darkness ever calling to her. Pulling out of his arms, she got up, composed herself, then slowly began pacing the floor. As she walked back and forth, he watched her.

"Tell me everything since I was taken by Gladius, if you are up to it," Sighing, she stopped and began telling him everything, including the dream. When she was finished, she lay her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes, grateful to be done. Artemis began massaging the muscles in her neck. It felt good.

"You know, I'm proud of you. You did exactly the right thing at the right moment. Thank you for saving me. I owe you my life." She looked up at him and tried to smile.

"I didn't save you, Artemis. It wasn't me. I heard of Vannar when you and I spoke with Solenti. Vannar was mentioned. I prayed to Vannar, know you were dead. I begged him to spare you. Artemis, you came back. It was not me that saved you." She waited for his response, which came quickly.

"I don't know what to say, Raven. Still, I am grateful to you for . . . I don't know how to respond to that, and I do not doubt what you say. Thank you for thinking about me. My words seem empty." He shrugged. "Thank you."

Pushing him down into the chair, Raven jumped into Artemis's lap and curled up against him, causing him to laugh.

"You sure are cuddly. Do you need my attention?" Placing an ear against his chest, she nodded, listening to the music his heart was performing for her.

"Please," she whispered, "I just massacred the entire crew of a ship. I don't feel so good." She pointed at her head. Stroking her hair, he sighed. After a while, he wrapped his arms under her, stood and slowly set her feet to the floor.

"I see. I'm sorry about all this, Raven. But, I do know this, you took part in saving my life. I am grateful for you. You need to know something. You did not

kill people. You ended the foul existence of sixty creatures, come from the Underworld to wreak havoc among us. They were the enemy of freedom. By doing what you did, you saved not only me, but the lives of many, that I guarantee.” Taking her head in both hands, he smiled. “Raven, you must realize that you prevented the creation of widows and orphans this night. And, Raven, if the High King was before you at this moment, he would honor you, you know not how. Solenti would have done exactly what you did.” Letting go, Artemis turned toward the door, then stopped and turned back. "I love you." Eagerly, she looked to him, loving to hear those words; loving to hear his voice.

"I love you more," she whispered in sudden triumph. Grinning, he rolled his eyes.

"I guess I set myself up on that one, line stealing Karritch Gleighdor."

"Yes you did, sir," she replied, sniffing and feeling proud of herself. Sighing, Artemis reached out and took a handful of her hair and smelled it. Shaking his head, he retreated to the door and opened it.

"I need to go check on the crew. We will be leaving shortly. As soon as we are sailing, I'll return. Following him to the door, she quickly fixed his hair.

Soon, Raven was alone.

Turning, Raven set her back against the door, eyeing the room she would become very familiar with over the next who knew how many days. Her eyes fell on the chest of drawers, pricking her curiosity.

"What are you hiding?" she asked the dresser. Refusing to answer, it stared at her without a sound. Closing in on it, Raven ran her hands across the top and slowly settled each hand on the two handles of the top drawer. Curling her fingers through the rings, she eyed the dresser suspiciously.

"Last chance before I'm forced to take action. No? Alright then, we'll do it my way." She shook her head and gently pulled the top drawer open, warily eyeing it. It was filled with tunics and socks. Carefully, she slowly removed each article of clothing, expecting something to spring out at her. As she removed item after item, fist-sized gems began to reveal themselves.

"Well, well, well, look what we have here," she whispered in amazement, her dark eyes wide and unblinking. Her hands trembled as she removed the last item of clothing from off the gems. Placing the clothing on the top of the dresser, she looked down, admiring the beauty in the drawer. She did not touch them, fearing they might be trapped or spellbound. Raven knew quite well, one of the status of Gladius would ever leave such treasures unprotected.

"So, Artemis, this is how you got so rich. Well, you must have taken many risks such as this to accumulate the wealth you have." Raven lowered her head, looking directly down over the gems. She noticed her hands were trembling and snapped her teeth at the sparkling wonder there for the taking.

"No, he can have these. I owe him for the loss of his Storing Sack." Slowly, Raven closed the drawer, then looked at the second drawer down.

"Now, for you." She pulled it slowly open. After it was pulled out no more than a hand's width, she froze. Inside, on the right, she spotted a wire stretched tight. Leaning down, Raven studied the wire as best she could. The steel strand was attached to the inside of the drawer, wound about a nail, firmly hammered into

the wood. She touched the nail, then ran a finger over the steel strand.

"Gladius, you simpleton," she whispered. Kneeling down before the chest of drawers, Raven pointed at the front. Directly behind the wood was the nail. Gently, she began to run her nail in a circle upon the wood. Within moments, she had worn the wood away, leaving a tiny trench-like circle in its surface. As wood fell like dust, and the circle grew deeper, she began to carve faster and faster, stopping only once to check the positioning of the circle in aspect to the nail within the drawer. Soon there was a snap, and a circular piece of wood, along with the nail, broke loose and vanished into the back of the drawer.

Raven stood and continued pulling the drawer carefully out, taking her time. Once the drawer was fully opened, she stopped and looked at the contents. A side pouch, a leather coin sack, a couple burlap sacks, a belt, a pair of gloves, dagger and one backpack. Biting the nail of her thumb, she wondered if any of these might possess enchantments or magic. Without touching anything, Raven closed the drawer, then moved to the third and bottom drawer. As she reached out to take the handles, she felt her mid-section tighten. There was something much more significant to this one; she could feel it screaming and biting at her gut.

"Aren't we up to something," she whispered. Adjusting her position, Raven placed her hand on the floor and laid down flat. She needed every angle possible before making any further decision on what to do here. On the bottom of the dresser, she noticed a symbol burnt into the wood.

"What are you?" she softly inquired. Delicately, she brushed her forefinger over the symbol, biting her lip. As she did, it illuminated with a soft red light. Once it began to glow, it did not dim. Quickly, she destroyed the symbol with her nails, ripping all of it out of the wood.

"There. Now, I suspect, it is safe to continue," she mumbled. Rising up, she slowly, cautiously, reached out and gripped each handle of the drawer, that warning sensation no longer plaguing her gut. Slowly pulling the draw out, Raven began to see a large book within. It was bound in high quality leather, dyed

midnight-blue. Upon the cover was a black four-point star. The bottom point stretched down the full length of the book, almost to the edge. The other three points stretched out to the top, left and right edges of the cover.

Fascinated, Raven observed the book, a feeling of curiosity welling up within her. She wondered if there were spells within this book. Gently, she reached in, slid her fingers under the tome and retrieved it. Shutting the drawer, she stood, turned and hopped up on the bed, making herself comfortable. Setting it before her, she slowly open the front cover, revealing the first page. As she looked down at it, her eyes widened in open astonishment.

"This is not possible," she whispered in disbelief. Upon the first page, in very large script, read the following:

Dear Raven,

I know this will come as a shock to you, but please, I beg you, read all of this book before you make a decision to put it down, or discount it. Do not throw away knowledge lightly. After you have read it, then, and only then, can you make a decision void of ignorance. We need you here in your rightful home. Again, just read. Don't be like the simple you walk among. There are only ten pages. The remaining leafs, you will find loose, and are spells to empower you on your way to discovery.

Raven began to fear she really was a queen. If so, it would mean separation from Artemis. It would also mean she had another life. No, she would refuse.

"A thousand years," she whispered, speaking the very words she heard echo in the tunnel before entering the dungeon. Had she forgotten all her experiences while in her tomb, or was she blocking them out? There was much she did not know. Maybe this book would enlighten her. With trembling hands, Raven slowly turned to the next page and continued reading.

Page: 2

You were taken from your crib as a newborn and transformed into the race of the Karritch Gleighdor. In the beginning, though we searched a million places, we could not find you. For years we sent out spies to scour the Human infested lands in vain. One day a report came back by one of your scouts. You had wandered into a woodland known as Edgewood. Your scout followed you as far as he could without being discovered. Without warning, you slipped from his sight for three moons. He was then forced to flee Edgewood, and barely escaped the wrath of a Druid Queen.

The memory of that experience slowly surfaced in her mind.

"I remember. I remember now," she whispered in awe. She read the page again, recalling the images, the scratching, especially the distant growls. How did she evade these scouts? It must have been the tree that caused her to sleep. Had it protected her from them? She read the third page.

Page: 3

Do you ever wonder why you are so gifted with your magic? You are the daughter of Tesha`Min, the wife of the ruler of the Shai`Tan, a people innately attached to the secrets of the supernatural mysteries within the planes. You are no exception, but I am sure you already know this.

"Tesha`Min," Raven whispered. "I am not the daughter of the race I thought I was born into?" She read on.

Page: 4

Your true name is Rasha`Vin, should you want to know. Whether you take on that name or reject it, it matters not. The pathetic Karritch have no insight to names and titles of any consequence. They are a scrounging parasitic race of which you

are so far above. They demeaned you, beat you, stole from you. One day, you may decide to make them pay for all the pain they inflicted your life with. Especially the man who calls himself Maven. You are so much more than he will ever be. If you decide to, you have my full support, however you wish to deal with them.

She touched the name of her mother, gently caressing the letters. Raven thought it odd that her true name was Rasha`Vin, and that she was raised by the Karritch Gleighdor, a race with the traits of the raven naturally imbedded deep within them. She eagerly turned to the next page and read.

Page: 5

When you were born to me, Rash`Vin, I placed a mark upon you, to identify you should you be lost. The mark is the star you see on the front of this book, and is located at the base of your spine. It is faint, but, if you look closely, you will see it. If you look for it while basking in moonlight, it is more visible. Under a blood-red moon this mark will appear also blood-red.

Raven needed a mirror. No, she would check later. All in wonder, she turned to page six.

Page: 6

Raven, you have a brother. He was here managing the affairs of the realm, as was his calling. He acted as a Steward for you, until you return - if you return. His name is Artemis. He is a good man, but has been lost to us. I fear he is either dead, or has been captured by an enemy. If Artemis is dead, you are then the last heir of this kingdom should we, your parents, die.

Raven slowly looked at the door leading into the Captain's quarters, a

feeling of cold dread washing through her. She raised her hand and stared at the engagement ring on her finger, shaking her head.

"Vannar, please help me," she hoarsely pleaded. She felt dizzy and light headed, yet forced herself to read the seventh page.

Page: 7

If the Humans discover your identity, they will destroy you. Rasha`Vin, you have valiantly fought the Humans, bringing many hundreds, if not thousands, to their deaths. You must never speak of this to anyone, even should you be blessed to locate your loyal brother. You are a fugitive.

She unsteadily flipped the page and continued . . .

Page: 8

Being royalty would make you a princess, but you are not. Three years ago, you came to us, whether in a dream, or without, we did not know. You begged your father for a husband, and to gain his blessing to rule your portion of the kingdom. Happily, he granted your wish. Within an hour, with no formalities, you chose the man you would betroth. his name is Valec, and he honored your request without hesitation. This is why you have the title of Queen. Then, after your wedding night, Valec came to us, reporting you had vanished again. Whether it was a dream or not, your father and I, as well as Valec, know that you came to us.

"No." Raven stated emotionlessly. "No." She turned the page, feeling numb and empty.

Page: 9

You have a way with insects, even when you should not. You are blessed with the Essence of Eternity, as I am. This grand ability will manifest in you, as it does

also in me. Whatever happens within you - to you - know it will be glorious.

Raven looked at the nails on one hand, then stroked her feathers.

"Oh, mother," she stated, feeling beyond confused. I do want to see you. Turning to the last page, she began to read.

Page: 10

I come to a conclusion on this last page. Do not despair because of the light of day. You can overcome it by focusing upon the Essence within you. If by my letters, you discern the truths about yourself, I am happy. If you decide not to believe, I will mourn your departure from our kingdom, and hope for your future return. Meditate upon evolving into more of what you can become, and know you will be astonished at the endless possibilities, some of which you may choose for yourself. The remaining spells, I hope you receive. Use them to increase your power. Keep control of yourself always. Master yourself and secure your future, wherever you go. If you wish me to come to you, simply tell me, beloved Dream`Seer. I love you more than life itself. I hope with all my heart to see you soon. Farewell for now.

Tesha`Min

Turning the tenth page, Raven began looking at each spell, amazed at what she was seeing. Quickly, Raven took up each one, and without hesitation read them one by one aloud, absorbing each. As she finished the last of thirty spells, she became weary. Exhausted, she took the book and snuck out to the side of the ship unseen. Quickly she threw the book into the sea, then fled back into the bed chamber, shut the door, climbed into the bed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Raven awoke to a gentle kiss. Wrapping her arms about Artemis's neck, she returned his affection with a return kiss he would never forget.

"I love you," she whispered as their lips parted. Slowly her eyes focused on him, seeing his smile.

"I love you more," he replied. "Prove me wrong." Raven slowly pushed him back, her eyes widening as she came to full awareness. She sat up and stood with her back to him, gathering her thoughts, sorting out the confusion spinning in her head.

As he wrapped his arms about her, she turned on him, secretly panicking. Looking into his eyes, she thought of ignoring that he was her brother. She would never say anything, not a word. No one would ever know, and she would care less.

"That's not fair. You are focusing your power of charm on me. You are -" She stopped talking and wrapped her arms about his neck, pulling her fiancé in and kissing him without hesitation. When she finally pulled away, she felt what was left of her heart despair. As if given news of the loss of a loved one, Raven broke down. Artemis looked confused and worried.

"Raven, what's going on?" Not knowing what else to say, she found herself telling him everything. It was impossible to keep anything from this man, even though she wanted to.

"You're my brother, Artemis. We can't do this anymore. As much as I love you, we have to stop." Artemis instantly let go of Raven, stunned and confused.

"Raven, where did you learn this?" She wiped her face and sat down on the bed. She wondered why there were so many tears without feeling. She knew her heart was breaking, but her heart was dead, and so she was numb to the emotion of true heartache. What difference did all this make if he knew where she found out? Did it really matter? He was blood-kin. Shrugging, Artemis sighed in exasperation, suddenly silent.

"I need to show you something."

"Okay, I trust you."

"Artemis, I need you to tell me if you see a birthmark, in the shape of a four-point star on my lower spine. I need to know." She pulled her tunic up, exposing her lower back. Artemis looked for it carefully, then nodded.

"Yes, I see it. What is this all about?" She lowered her tunic, dread creeping into her chest, like ravenous bloodworms. Sighing, she turned and faced her brother.

"While I was searching the dresser, I found a book . . ." She proceeded to tell him everything. When she finished, she threw him a devastated look. "You see, you are my family. You have been cursed to forget, but, trust me, we are both from the same mother." Artemis rubbed his face in silence.

"Where is the book?" he whispered, a fel tone in his voice.

"I threw it overboard. At first I wanted to keep it a secret, but I'm glad I did not." Artemis ruffled her hair, his attitude suddenly changing.

"You rest up. I have to go check on the men. I'll be back shortly to continue this conversation. Don't touch anything else, please. Let's do that together. There could be traps." She nodded.

"I guess I could use a bit more sleep. I'm exhausted." as she lay back down, Artemis tucked her in, squeezed her hand, then kissed her on the forehead.

"Get some rest. I'll be back." Watching him leave, Raven wrapped her arms about her head, covering her eyes.

Once out of the room, Artemis ran to the helm of the ship and ordered the ship turned about.

"All hands, listen up! I'm looking for a night-blue book on the water. The man that finds it will gain one-hundred pieces of gold. Those who do not find it, I will still give fifty. If we find it by nightfall, I will triple my offer for everyone. Instantly, thirty men were scrambling to get the ship turned about. The book was

found a half a day later after the command was given. Artemis paid them double what he had offered, and right away. There probably was never a more loyal crew upon the face of all the seas that evening. They began singing songs and taking turns dancing with the broom until the moon had risen to its zenith.

Startled from her sleep, Raven blinked in confusion for a moment as Artemis came into the room with the book she threw into the sea. Slowly, Raven sat up as a weariness tempted her to lay back down. Her brother sat down in the soft chair by the bed.

"You found it?" He nodded.

"Luckily. And, I'm glad I did. The book you found here is a very special one. You see the symbol on the front cover? Raven squinted.

"It's an eye," she stated, confused. "You found a different book?"

"Yes and no. This book is for me, Raven, not you. I found it. So, no, I found the same book. I am the one who fished it out of the water, and since I did, it's message is now for me, and me alone."

"So, what happened to the book I had?" His eyes lit up at her question.

"Ah, now we come to the point. You see, when this book changes hands, it also changes its message. It-" "What does it say now?" she interrupted. Artemis shook his head.

"I will not read it. Raven, this very tome has caused many lives to crumble into ruin. Some call it the Book of Deception, others call it the Book of Treachery. But it's real name is the Book of Lies." Raven slowly got up, lifted her tunic again and turned.

"Is the star still there?" Artemis looked carefully.

"It is not." Raven smoothed down her tunic, thinking.

"So you are-" "Not your brother." Raven gave him a fragile look.

"And I am -" "Karritch Gleighdor, and my fiancé." Raven pointed at the Book of Lies, as if it had just tried to kill her.

"That was the real trap. Gladius was no simpleton after all, though I'm glad I shredded his life from him. Artemis, we need to destroy that thing." Artemis stood, put the book down on the chair and took her hands.

"Let's go over everything that menacing thing told you, or, like a poison residue, it will taint your soul. If you are not careful, Raven, trust me, you will begin to think it back into your mind as truth. Once read, it is highly difficult to forget the lies. What is the one thing you read that you desire the most?" She thought about it, but not for long. Unnatural tears began to flow again as she struggled to answer.

"To belong to a family that loves me . . . I've always craved a family, especially an older brother to take care of me." Artemis's face saddened. Slowly he closed the distance between them, gently guided her into his arms. Just before holding her, he felt her hesitate, then give in. Gently holding her, he silently cursed the creator of the Book of Lies.

"Let it go," he whispered. "Tell you what, we are on our way to get you a master who will help you. Just now, as I embraced you, I felt your hesitation. So, here is what I propose: I will help you to your destination, then I will go. It seems like this book has permanently distanced your heart from me. I do not wish to be a brother to you, when I am not your brother. But to stay by your side without committing to you forever would kill me." Raven heard his words and instantly panicked. Looking up, she shook her head, her shadowy eyes widening in sudden terror.

"No, no, I want to be your wife. This is my entire plan; to make you happy, remember?" Artemis smiled and nodded.

"But are you happy with me?" Desperately, Raven clung to him, suddenly trembling, her voice filling with panicked horror, as if she had just killed him.

"Yes, yes, of course I am." She threw the tome on the chair a venomous glance. "I want to destroy that book." Raven held onto Artemis, as if her very life suddenly depended on it. "Please, I don't want to be alone," she pleaded. He

stroked her hair gently, deep sympathy flowing from the look on his face.

"I know you don't. I understand your feeling completely, for I fear what you fear . . . hope what you hope." Raven felt his heart beating, and began to read it carefully, taking in every pulsing beat that flowed blood through every vein in his body. As she listened, everything about what she read in him screamed truth. There was nothing to doubt. Nothing more to question. His living heart was a truth serum she could not deny, and one that could not escape or elude her.

"I love your heart, the way it beats and makes me feel."

"Just don't try to bite it," he jested. She made a sound as close to a laugh as she could.

"Okay, I won't . . . promise. I'll just feel it. Don't go away, Artemis. If you do, I will die."

"Now that I can agree with. Raven, do you want to meet the crew, or stay hidden?" Quickly, she shook her head.

"I don't want them to know I'm here. That way, I cannot be tracked through them, should they be interrogated." Artemis squeezed her tight.

"That, my future bride, is wisdom." Raven looked up into his eyes, and found her home in them.

"It's about time I stopped doing foolish things. I almost made the biggest mistake of my life . . . well, half-life." Artemis flinched.

"Raven, don't say that again!" he rebuked her. Then his tone softened, if only a little. "You are more alive than any other I have ever met." She froze at his rebuke. She suddenly felt small and vulnerable.

"It frightens me when you become serious. I'm sorry. Seems it was my turn to say something stupid." Artemis started to say something, but she shook her head. "Listen, please, Artemis." He abandoned the idea of what he was going to say and listened to her. "I have more respect for you than I can express. That is why you scare me so much when you become strict, and when you reprimand me. It's you who are imbedded so deeply in my mind and heart. I think I'm making

less and less sense the more I try and explain it." She shrugged, hoping he understood.

"I believe you will find what you are searching for. Whatever your destiny is, I will stand with you." Absorbing his attention, she tried to return him just a little smile, anything, but she could not, and it highly frustrated her.

"Sometimes I feel like you are the only one who gives in our relationship. I feel so selfish."

"Raven, if you give me no more than trouble, I will call it even between us. Seriously, I will tell you, you have let go of a life in the sun. You waited for me for nearly a thousand years, when you could have found another. The most astounding thing about you, Raven, is you kept your humanity through persistent, unnatural hunger. There are few vampires who have ever resisted taking others as sustenance. I see strength in you, beyond that which is normal; strength I wish I had." Raven recalled the hunger . . . unnatural torture. It had been difficult to resist, but somehow she had managed.

"Artemis, I don't remember what food tastes like - well, except for a grape." Her face twisted in disgust.

"When we get to Gaunten, would you have dinner with me?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Don't ever ask me that again, sir."

"My apologies, milady. I'll wait until you ask me." Shaking her head, she reached a hand to the side of his face.

"I will go anywhere with you. Please don't ask, just invite me.

"I see. Well, Raven, I am inviting you to come have dinner with me. Hmm, that sounded odd." She slightly nodded, then tip-toed, kissing him, just as there came a knock on the door, startling her. She was so distracted by him, one of the ship hands had successfully snuck up on her. Looking over at the door, she bared her teeth at it. Artemis looked to her and then at the door, suddenly humored.

"Yes!" Artemis called.

"Captain, could you please come up on deck? I think you should see this."

"I'll be out in a moment!" There was a 'Yes sir', and then silence. Artemis looked at Raven.

"Open your mouth please." Raven did as he asked. Artemis lowered her bottom lip, exposing her teeth.

"Raven, you have grown a new set of fangs on the bottom. They are hollow, meaning they are fangs for feeding." He looked at her void-black eyes and became still. "I could get lost in you if I were not careful." She pulled her head back.

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, you capture me." He bent down slightly and gently kissed her on the left brow. "I know what you are becoming, Raven. No more guessing." She nuzzled him affectionately, not wanting him to leave.

"Is it bad? I'll know if you lie, or hold something back."

"I don't know what you wish to be, Raven. Whether you choose good or evil, I will stay with you. Just remember, I am yours." He kissed her, then backed away, turned and slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

"He didn't even tell me," she whispered. "Jerk," she called after him.

Raven's attention fell upon the book. She noticed a star, not an eye, on its cover. She picked it up, holding it before her. Seething hatred welled up within her as she contemplated the purpose of the book's existence. In a moment, she was ripping it to pieces in a fury of talons. In the next moment, she was gathering the shreds and piling them up in the middle of the floor. She stood over the remains of the book, then looked at the door.

After the sailor had initially surprised her, she could not help but feel the fear he reeked of. Something was happening out there. Walking to the door, Raven slowly opened it. She then sneaked to the cabin's doorway and listened.

"Slap em' in chains so we can see em' sink into the deep where it grips and crushes ya!" There was a sudden struggle and the sound of heavy chains hitting the deck. Raven panicked and took a peek out the doorway to see men and women adorned all in black. From their boots to the hats they wore, every article of clothing donned was ashen black. Over their dark clothes, each wore a long black trench coat.

Every last one of them had a blade drawn. The man being shackled was Artemis! Though now helpless, he looked angry. She knew what they were . . . pirates. Seven lay motionless nearby, and a dozen others wounded.

"No, don't do this!" she called to them, a sudden calm washing over her. She stepped out and walked toward Artemis as all their hardened eyes fell on her. Instantly, as they caught sight of her, they all began to laugh. A woman stepped out between Raven and her future husband, holding up a hand. Instantly, the laughter ceased.

"He be the Captain. Even a harlot, such as yerself, knows what has to be done. It's the way of the hard life, but the way it be. Stand down and ye may be spared." The tall woman squinted at Raven, looking at her hard. "Yer' eyes be different. What's the matter with ya? Are ya sick?" Raven looked at the pirate, then at Artemis, who shook his head at her. She could see fear in him . . . fear like never before. In this, she knew these were not ordinary pirates.

"My eyes are different because I was forced upon by something that changed me." Raven pointed at Artemis. "I'm sure if I told you my story, you would see why I need him alive." Raven waited for her response, ready to shred them all to pieces should she refuse. If he was to die, she would join him and take as many with the both of them as possible. After a tense length of silence, the woman held up a hand.

"Keep em' chained! If I be tricked, we feed the both of them to the hungry deep!" Instantly they all stood down as the woman smiled and waved a hand.

"Well, begin yer' tale." Raven pointed to the cabin.

"Can we please do this in private?" A sword point was at Raven's throat in the blink of an eye, surprising her.

"Feed ya to the sharks, I will little darkened pigeon." Raven looked around.

"I will endanger both yours and my crew if they hear what I have to say. It would be a protection to them if they did not know, should they be interrogated." She looked at Raven for a moment, contemplating, weighing her with a keen eye. After a good long hard look, she waved Raven toward the cabin.

"I was going to take the hands from this ship to serve me, but I won't if ye be dissapointin' me with yer' bedtime story. So, let's get dis' over with. I enjoy a bit of entertainment now and then. Go." Raven led her into the cabin, and walked to the far side before turning to face the woman. The pirate looked her up and down, then looked at her wings. "Tell yer story to me, and don't be mincin' words." Sitting on the Captain's desk, she stabbed her blade into it and folded her arms, waiting.

Raven told her everything, leaving nothing out. She had to impress upon this woman the importance of getting to Gaunten. During her tale, the woman became interested, and began asking questions. When Raven concluded, she went quiet and waited.

"So what yer saying is, I just came in here with a blood-sucking Vampire, away from all me back-up." Raven nodded.

"I have never tasted blood. I never will. I could have attacked when I first saw you all. That's how I took this ship. They were Vahkrin, and got everything they deserved." The woman pondered Raven's words for a while, then pulled her blade free and sheathed it.

"Sala is me name. I be a Black`Rock Pirate. Okay, besides me own vessel, I have three other ships out there, if ye didn't already notice. We be headin' to Black`Sails Port. Would ye care to see it?" Raven shook her head.

"I endanger others by association. This ship's crew did not know of me until I came out." Sala smiled grimly, making Raven uncomfortable.

"Come with me," she whispered, a serious tone in her voice. Raven could see she had no choice in the matter.

"If you think your people will remain safe, I will." Sala stood and looked Raven over.

"Concerned about me people are ya?" A black tear slipped from Raven's left eye.

"I am not a monster, Sala, but things happen. I just don't want to hurt anyone." Sala shrugged, turned, and walked out of the cabin. Just outside, she stopped and spun on her heel.

"Me apologies for pinnin' you as a harlot." Then, Sala was gone.

Artemis was released and his weapons returned. Raven watched Sala, who was as tall as Artemis, and very pretty, though a seasoned pirate, hardened by her line of work. All in all, Raven began to admire her. At some point in their lengthy conversation, Sala began to grow on Raven until she almost asked her for advice, as if she were a friend. That could wait until later. What Raven really wanted was a friend, not that Artemis was not. Raven needed another who she could confide in, female to female.

As the five ships set sail, Raven wondered what the future would hold. She hoped it would be productive. Of all, she hoped Sala and her people would be safe.

Even though Artemis had killed seven of them, nothing was said about it, as if it never happened. This was a seasoned and hardened lot who had captured their ship. It was the way of the hard life.

For a fortnight and a week they sailed with no trouble from the lurking beasts within the deep below them. The skies were clear and the wind steady. It was as if the very hand of nature favored them.

High up within the crows nest, Raven felt the free air coursing over her. Closing her eyes, she extended her arms and wings out, feeling the caress of the wind, threatening to put her in a trance. Raven began to feel free, forgetting the past troubles of her life.

Thinking back, she had been under the impression that Vahkrin only lied. It seemed to her that one spoke the truth, and it made her smile, even as a bloody scene played out within her waking mind. She had saved him for last; the one who made the remark about her being fit for the crows nest. His panicked begging had lasted the longest, and he deserved every moment of false hope she gave him . . .

. . . “Why should I let you live?” she seethed, then snapped her teeth at him. The man prostrated himself before her.

“Mercy,” he begged. “I will do anything.”

“Anything?” She asked, crawling upon him like some dreaded spider. Burying his face in the wood of the deck, he whimpered like a pathetic dog. Nearing his ear, she repeated her question. “Anything?”

“By the great one,” he said, shuddering. His comment stayed her hand for the moment.

“Which great one?” Choking, the man threw a glance at her, then buried his face again.

“Receiving Tower,” was all he said before Crying out in terror. In one swift motion, she ended his cries. She would get no further information from him . . .

. . . shuddering, Raven thought about what the vile creature has said.

“Receiving Tower,” she thought aloud. She had to find out more about this.

It might help her with questions – questions which needed answers.

Coming back to the present moment, Raven threw away all her cares. Feeling the constant flow of the wind had become her place of comfort. The crow's nest was an excellent lookout without flying, and that she kept to a minimum. After all, she was now a prisoner. The thought of the pirate captain made her smile. She liked Sala very much.

During the first three weeks she saw a dozen creatures, both large and small. Raven took a liking to the smaller ones which constantly leapt from the water as they raced along with the ships, as if competing in a race.

She began to admire these pirates, especially the construction of their ships. Each craft was black, with black sails. Every aspect of each ship was night-black. As they sailed toward Black`Rock Island, there were no lanterns lit during the night. Even with her excellent night-vision, Raven could barely make out their ships on the water in the dark.

A Black`Rock Pirate remained onboard at all times, standing at the wheel to give instructions. Whoever it was helping to guide the ship did so without any form of hate, or belittlement. In this manner, the ship was kept on course, safely cruising at the center of the four much larger black ships.

After her watch, Raven would come down as one of the crew traded her out. Just before sunset, Raven then returned to keep a lookout that lasted all night. Often times, Artemis would join her.

It was on the twenty-second day, in the evening, when Artemis came to her, bearing a bottle and two mugs.

"Are you up for some company?" he asked. Raven glanced at the bottle and nodded.

"Sure. I'm always wanting your company. What do you have there?" He popped the cork and smelled the bottle. Sliding down the inside of the crow's nest, he got himself comfortable, then poured them both a half mug. Sipping his,

he waited. Raven watched to see what his reaction would be. Who knew what the sixty filthy Vahkrin had stocked in their larder – probably the blood of their victims.

"You trust anything in the stores of this ship, and you might regret it," she stated, pointing at the bottle. Holding his cup high, as if to make a toast, Artemis grinned.

"You are wise beyond your years milady." She scoffed at him.

"You are not even one sip into whatever that is, and you give me that line? Try again. I want to hear a better one than that." She waved a hand at him.

"Impress me," she challenged. He looked up at the stars and sighed. Raising his mug, he toasted her again.

"You are correct. That's why I bought this a while back. Is that better?" Raven took the mug he offered and placed the edge of the mug to her lips, tilting it just enough to take a sip.

"Don't drink it all at once," he warned, "It's very strong." Raven took a mouthful and swallowed. Instantly, she felt a warmth spread from her mouth into her stomach, like winter suddenly emerging into a warm summer day. Looking down into her mug, she sighed.

"This is wonderful, what is it?" she asked.

"Sovala Keenya. It's Elven made. I'm glad you like it. It's rather expensive, which means the Elves put a lot of work into making each bottle." She shook her head and snapped her teeth lightly together. Looking at her mug, she raised it to her lips and drank it all in one breath. Wiping her mouth, she held it out, nodding slightly.

"May I please have another?" Shrugging, Artemis filled her mug to the brim, then emptied his in one breath as well. After filling his again, he instantly began working on it. Raven blinked, shaking her head, as she felt warmth fill her entire body. Quickly, she drained her mug again.

"This is not normal spirits." She looked up. "I want fly to the stars, grab me

one, then come back . . . but I can't, so I won't." Giving Raven a curious look, he smiled. After a while, Raven sighed, adjusted her wings with a bit of difficulty, and sat down by her fiancé.

"Artemis, this journey will help us both right?" He nodded.

"I hope so. Raven, why did you agree to go with these pirates? Why did you not do to them what you did to the last crew of this ship? They are notorious for killing people." Raven looked down into her empty mug, then looked up, pointing a finger at him.

"That's a good question," she absently stated, enjoying the scent of the spirits rising from her mug." In reply, he gave Raven a look that compelled her to answer his question. "Okay, okay. This may seem strange to you, but it's because I feel a kinship with Sala. I don't know what it is, but I really like her. And, as for notorious killers, we could be labeled the same, you know that. We would be wise not to judge them." Raising the bottle, to the rim of her mug, he poured another half for her, and then himself.

Raven downed it quick, moved over by Artemis and gently began running her nails through his hair. Even though she knew she should not have taken so much drink, she felt as though it did not matter; that everything was incredible and perfect in her life. She felt safe. She closed her eyes and listened to the wind, highly distracted by the feeling of well-being she was enveloped within. At length, she began to ponder her life, well, as far as she could recall.

"If I could do all this over again, I would choose the same paths," she said without hesitation, a pain etching into the features of her face.

"You would still be an undead?" He said, catching her in mid-drink. Raven choked. Once she got control of herself, she set her mug down.

"I gave myself so you would not have to live with a broken heart. I would do anything for you, and you know it. I chose this path for you, for us, and I'm happy. You haven't forgotten, have you?" She closed in on him and punched him lightly in the chest. "Why are you asking all these questions?" Artemis looked

irritated, instantly worrying her.

"Forgive me. Now is not the time for play." Artemis looked at her thoughtfully, his irritation slowly fading.

"I'm just on edge - it's not you. We need to get away from these pirates, and the only way to do that is to kill their Captain. Kill a Pirate Captain, and you take control of their people and their ships. That's their code of honor, and they pride themselves on it. You said you would do anything for me, yes?" Raven frowned severely.

"No."

"You said -" "I promised I would do anything for you, because I knew you would never ask such a thing of me in the first place!" Raven snarled, suddenly angry. "Now, quit mincing words and give me your best reason." Artemis shrugged.

"Because they only take slaves. No one has ever been let go from Black`Rock Island. Raven, we may be going to our deaths. Only you can get close enough to Sala to save us. Now do you understand?" Raven stood and looked down at Sala's ship.

"Artemis, please trust me on this one. My gut instinct tells me we are in no danger. I believe we take our own danger with us by what we bring to them. Sala is not a cold-blooded killer. Trust me, please?" She turned and knelt down beside Artemis, then embraced him. "I beg you to abandon such thoughts. Give them the chance they are giving us. I know this may sound crazy, but, to me, Sala feels like a friend. I need a female friend, badly. She could fill that gap in my life I need so much, and it won't take anything from our relationship, I promise." Looking at him, she waited for his response. Abruptly, he grinned and ruffled her hair with a quick hand.

"I trust you. You have shown good judgement in the past, well most of the time. You are a strange creature . . . one that should embrace darkness and shun the light. But you have done the opposite, and retained your humanity. Don't you

find it difficult?" Raven shook her head, pulling her hair back with a hand.

"You already know the answer to that, but," she held up a finger, "I shall indulge you, seeing this is all to my advantage. The answer is, no. It has gotten easier and easier to resist drinking the blood of the living, and to not break into a rage at the petty doings of the simple minded. No, it's not difficult." Cringing, she shut one eye, giving Artemis a look that made him grin. "I will never let go of the light. I want to tell you something. I asked Vannar to help me be a Knight, or something similar to that. Do you think he will let me?" Artemis's eyes widened in mild surprise.

"A vampiric Knight of Vannar. You have lofty goals, Raven. Whether he will, or will not, is not according to what I think. But, if you aspire to such a rank, you do your best to win that title. You really are full of surprises." Raven tried to grin, then wrapped her arms about his neck.

"Thank you for believing in me." Raven's heart melted that evening, causing her to shed tears of joy as he held her. She never wanted him to let go, but after a while, Artemis gently pushed her away.

"I have to go see how the crew is doing . . . what they're up to. I'll see you soon?" Raven looked down onto the deck.

"Please. Let's have dinner, just you and I, tomorrow evening." Artemis chuckled, as if he thought her invitation humorous, then ruffled her hair again.

"I would like that. Come ask me again in a while." She nodded and watched him climb down.

When he left her, Raven stared at the moon until it vanished into the sea. She thought of her fiance, and all the things he had done for her. As the sky began to turn gray, she scratched her arm, feeling an itching sensation that began to spread to other parts of her body. When it intensified, her eyes widened, the pit of regret playing into the beautiful features of her face.

"Oh no," she whispered, then launched from the crows nest. Landing at the Captain's cabin, she slipped inside, then ran into the bed chamber. As she entered,

she was relieved to feel the itching stop. Apparently, this was a safe place . . . well, for now. The sun had not crested the horizon as of yet.

Looking to the base of the door, she narrowed her eyes, feeling suddenly trapped. Quickly, she pulled the blanket off the bed and lined it across the bottom of the door. Locking it, she backed away and got into the bed. Pulling the mattress up, she slipped under it and waited to see if she could survive the daylight hours.

"Artemis, where are you," she whispered, feeling cornered. As if in answer, the handle to the door twisted. Then, there came a soft knock.

"Raven?" She sprung up from under the mattress, ran to the door and opened it. Before he could say anything, she gripped the lapel of his trench coat and pulled him into the room as fast as she could.

"What's the matter?" he inquired.

"The sun hurts!" she said, glancing out the door as a wave of itching struck her like a swarm of mosquitos. Grabbing her hand, Artemis pulled her from the cabin, and out onto the deck. At a full run he hauled her down into the ship, and into a hallway with doors on either side. At the end of the hall, they stopped before a door which Artemis opened. Stairs led down into another hallway, which they took at a run.

"Will it be enough?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"It will," he answered, his voice sure and undaunted. "There is no light here except that which you bring. You will be safe down here. Keep to the back as far as you can." He pulled her to the far side of the room, turned right and pointed at a door.

"That is the cook's personal larder." He opened the door and led her in. It was a small room, filled with barrels and many jars of various colored powders. Herbs hung in rows across the back wall, and there was a garden smell that opened up a memory to her . . . one she had forgotten.

"This reminds me of Krisha," she whispered. Artemis sighed, stilled by her words.

"I miss her too." Raven turned to him, worried.

"It's happening again," she whispered. "I thought she gave me immunity to sunlight – that this curse would never come back." Gently tilting her head back, Artemis looked into her eyes. She bit her lip, waiting for him to fix the situation, throwing him a nervous smile.

"Indeed it is." With a finger, he caught a tear and showed it to her. She could not believe what she was seeing. It was not black, but clear as rain. "Raven, you just smiled at me."

"I did?" She asked, beginning to hope beyond hope this was a good thing; that she was evolving into something better than what she was.

"Yes, you did." Letting go of her, he looked around. "We need this room cleared and cleaned. He turned to go, but she grabbed his arm, suddenly panicked.

"Please don't leave me," she whispered, terror laced into her voice. "I don't want to be down here all by myself. Please, Artemis, don't leave."

"Oh, Raven, I will never do that to you again. I'm just going to grab a few of the men. I will be right back." Raven let go as a terrible fear threatened to unravel her senses. Her breathing began to quicken as images of shadows in the darkness flashed in her mind. Trembling, she began to feel the dark loneliness of her tomb creep over her once again. It felt like a small flame within her chest, burning like the embers of a dying fire. Artemis stopped and looked at her, sympathy in his eyes.

"It's okay, Raven. We can wait until a ship hand comes down. Anyways, I would rather be with you than sea-bathed men."

"Really? You don't mind?" she asked.

"Of course not, young lady. And it's not that I don't mind . . . I want to stay." Raven took in deep breaths, slowly exhaling, trying to get control of a sudden dark anxiety welling up within her. After a short while, she looked around the room, frowning.

"It's not being alone that effects me. It's being enclosed, like I was for so

many years. I'm sorry. This room is so closed in. It reminds me of my tomb!"

"Then you will not be left alone. I would feel the same." Feeling cornered and lost, Raven tried in vain to keep down a sudden burst of panic. Shutting her eyes tight, she hung onto her fiance, like a ship to an anchor.

"Artemis, the blessing of the girl child has faded. It's all coming back to me now, and I cannot endure the depths of this darkness a second time. I feel it now, creeping in on me, like it did before. Artemis, there is more I need to tell you. I am starting to remember my past!" With a vicious snap of her teeth, she pulled away from him and crouched, ready to attack, as if Gladius had just burst in through the door. Raven truly felt cornered, imprisoned, threatened by a force she could not see. Screaming out a challenge, she filled the room with an unnatural cry.

"So hungry! So very famished!" she seethed, her voice strained, as if she were on the brink of starvation.

"I'll be back soon." Ignoring the shocked expression she threw him, Artemis darted out of the room and closed the door. Slowly, Raven stood and began turning in a circle, not knowing what to do. Like an animal, she screamed and backed against the far wall, listening for his return. Dread enveloped her mind as more memories began to invade and destroy the peace she craved since the girl child had blessed her. Images flashed before her widening eyes, unraveling past memories, memories experienced while in that accursed tomb.

A sudden vision played out before her. Crying out in despair, Raven beheld an army on the move, a hundred massive dragons, each bearing five-hundred twisted creatures, an unspeakable horror leading a host of nameless fears, a shadow coursing over a crimson battlefield, devouring all but the blood-soaked skeletons as it passed. Raven witnessed the skeletons rise and follow after this shadow of death, conjured slaves to its will. More images invaded her mind as she retreated back between two large barrels and sat down, pulling her knees up to her chest.

Relentlessly, once forgotten memories opened up to her, revealing the fact that she was indeed a monster. Weeping bitterly, Raven's head fall to her knees.

"Artemis, help me!" she begged as another vision played out before her. Falling forward, Raven vomited as she saw herself eating the hearts of countless men laying wounded upon a battlefield. One by one, she feasted upon them, looking into their eyes as they struggled in vain to live. As if time had sped up a thousand fold, she witnessed the skulls of the slain sinking into an auburn, barren, soil.

Coming to, Raven fell back against the wall of the room, gasping for air and desperately wiping her mouth with the back of her sleeve. She had to get the blood off her face! Looking on the floor before her, she saw a pool of crimson, mingled with . . . Raven's head spun and she collapsed to the floor, falling headlong into a total absence of light.

For time without end, Raven drifted upon a tide of darkened oblivion.

"Raven, Raven, come on, open your eyes." Raven slowly came to, feeling a hand caressing her brow. Blinking away an exhaustion weighing her down, she steadily perceived Artemis sitting on a small bed next to her. She felt the blanket beneath her and turned her head, noticing a pillow beneath it. In sudden shock, she sat up, pushing him back, and looked at the floor by the barrels. There was no blood, no gore, nothing. Laying back down, she moaned, as if in pain, her eyes shifting to him.

"I'm back . . ." she breathed, relief flooding her senses. "You came back for me." Throwing her a funny look, Artemis took her hand.

"Of course I did. Sala's men helped bring down a bed, so you could rest. We found you passed out on the floor. I'm sorry, but you needed more help than I could give. Sala's here." Raven looked around, noticing Sala and two of her men for the first time. They approached warily, blades drawn. When Raven saw their

weapons, she pushed Artemis to the side.

"Sala," she whispered, fear biting at her. "Am I in trouble?" Instantly, Sala sheathed her blade, shaking her head.

"Not by us." Me hear ya be havin difficulties. Artemis tells me ya have emotions which tax yer` skull. Ya told me about this. Me thinks me can help ya with that, but ya have to trust me. Can ya do that?" Raven nodded, shivering. She was getting so tired.

"Of course I trust you. I wish I could be amazing like you." For a moment, Sala looked surprised. She threw the two men a quick glance. One of them handed her a small, corked bottle.

"Raven, if ya drink dis, it will make dis voyage stop grindin` on yer` bones." Raven looked at the bottle, not understanding what Sala had just said.

"What is it?"

"It will make ya fall into deep slumber, deeper than the sea we sail on." Raven gripped Artemis's hand and looked at him, worried. Brushing her hair back, he threw her a reassuring look.

"I will stay by your side as much as humanly possible." Raven smirked, throwing him a funny look.

"You're not Human." He did not laugh at her sudden joke. Socially, Raven felt suddenly out of place. "Oh, alright, sleep sounds so good right now. I am so tired." The bottle of liquid was uncorked and handed to her.

"Only swig a small mouthful," Sala said. Raven did as Sala instructed and swallowed a liquid that tasted like water, nothing more. She handed the bottle back to Sala.

"Sala, I hope I see you again. I'm scared." The Black`Rock Pirate Captain threw Raven a smile.

"Aye, that ya will. Raven, there be times when fear grips me hard, just like it has its claws in ya now. Goodnight Raven. I'll be needin' to speak with ya when the deep dark of sleep fades." Looking at Artemis, Sala pointed at Raven.

"Get yer woman comfortable, Artemis," she said as she corked the potion and handed it back to the one who gave it to her. "She will be a sleeping for a while." Sala and the two men left, shutting the door on the way out.

Artemis began running his fingers through Raven's hair until she felt a heaviness begin to take her. Wrapping her hands about his neck she pulled his head down, setting her forehead against his, trying to be brave.

"I'm scared. I thought I could be brave, like you, but I'm not," she slurred, then shook her head. Holding her steady, he looked into her eyes.

"I think to be brave, you have to fear. Raven, you are one of the bravest people I've ever met." She hazily smiled. Laying her head back, Raven relaxed.

"Thank you, fangs," she slurred, trying to whisper . . . before darkness took her . . . again.

Slowly coming to, Raven fought to open her eyes. It felt as though she was heavy, made of rock. As she managed to crack her eyes open, she saw Artemis at her side, holding her hand.

"Hello," she slurred.

"Good morning sleeping beauty," he whispered, his eyes lighting up happily. She wiped her face and fought the urge to go back to sleep. Grabbing him by the center of the tunic, she pulled him down to her, staring groggily into his eyes.

"You look good enough to devour," she said, watching his mouth. He grinned and kissed her, then quickly stood and stepped back.

"Now who has the charm? Pretty intense, Raven." She smiled from ear to ear and held both her arms out, beckoning to him with her hands.

"Don't move away, I was having fun. Come here." Artemis shook his head.

"Bad idea right now." Flattered, Raven laughed.

"I'm so sleepy. Can I just lay here for a little while longer?"

"Yes you can, if you need to. I'll tell Sala she will have to come back."

Raven's eyes shot open. Rolling off the bed onto her feet, she staggered over to Artemis, who caught hold of her, balancing her.

"Sala?"

"Yep. You sound intoxicated." She began pulling her hair back in the attempt to look presentable.

"Am I okay? Do I look like a vagrant? Are these clothes okay?" Laughing, Artemis nodded, shook his head, then nodded again, drawing her attention as he held her by the waist to keep her from falling.

"What are you doing?" She slurred, then shook her head, trying to get the haze out of her brain.

"Answering your questions." She stopped and let out a slow, even, breath.

"Do I look okay?" Artemis pointed behind her, drawing her attention to an

open door off to the side of the chamber they were in. Looking, she spotted a bathtub with a fog of steam rising from its surface. As she locked eyes onto it, she realized she was not on the ship.

"Are we -" "On Black`Rock Island, at an inn. There is a bath and all the things you need to make yourself presentable. Sala wants to see you later this morning, which gives you some time to wake up. I'll check on you before you need to be with Sala. If you fall asleep, it's alright. Just get your head straight, and enjoy that bath. I won't let you be late." Staring at it, she bit her lip.

"Thank you," she said most gratefully. Using Artemis to keep from falling, she headed for the steaming wonder in the next room. Her legs were not quite working right. Maybe after a nice hot bath, they would behave better.

The bath was amazing beyond amazing. One drawback to it, was it reminding her of the last bath she took. While submersed in the water, she laid back, against her wings. The good thing about her new feathers was that she didn't have to worry about hurting them. They were strong. Fearing the dark memories, she did not go back to sleep. As she bathed, the fog in her head began to clear. She cleaned herself up and got out. Shaking her wings, she ridded most of the water from her feathers, then dried herself off. Grabbing her leather clothing, which had been cleaned and neatly laid out, she dressed. Artemis had not forgotten anything. She was amazed by his devotion to her. As much as she wanted to talk with Sala, she looked forward to spending time with him.

Later that morning, Raven found herself downstairs across from Sala, who came to the inn alone. Food and drink was brought to them by a very nervous woman.

"Hello Sala," Raven said, trying to break the icy silence. "Thank you for helping me these past few days." Sala raised an eyebrow, then looked at the fresh plate of food set before her. She picked up a fork and knife and begin to cut into

the steak on her plate.

"Last few days? Ya slept for a moon and a fortnight. Honestly, me thought ya died. But, well, here ya be. That potion I gave ya wasn't strong enough to keep ya down that long." Raven looked at Sala's steak.

"Sometimes, I get tired." Sala sighed heavily and put down her fork and knife. Sitting back in her chair, she stared at Raven for a moment.

"I gave the Sovala Keenya to ya in the crows nest, not Artemis. It lightens the senses and loosens the tongue. I had to know if ya were worthy to be here." Raven thought about that night in the crows nest.

"Okay. We are good then, or I'd probably be dead." Sala shook her head.

"Raven, I believe yer tale. No, not kill ya; just send ya on yer way. I be impressed with ya, Raven. Ya have a strong loyalty to friendship. That be why yer here. I want to show ya somethin' me thinks ya be in need of." Ravens' demeanor filled with mischief. Leaning forward, she looked Sala square in the eyes.

"I almost kissed you in the crows nest that night," she whispered, then chuckled. Sala shook her head, a slight smile playing across her face.

"Raven, I be tempted to string ya up." Raven shook her head, amused. Looking at Sala, she quietly laughed.

"What does string ya up mean?" Sala began eating her dinner in silence. Raven looked at her plate and decided to try one of the . . .

"Sala, what is this one?" She pointed at an orange piece on her plate. Sala laughed.

"Try it." Shrugging, Raven picked up her knife and speared it. Raising it to her nose, she smelled it.

"Oh, I remember. This is a carrot." Sala rolled her eyes and motioned Raven to eat it, openly amused. Raven looked at it and frowned. Shaking her head, she thought she might like it. Thinking of it no more, she popped it into her mouth. Instantly, her mouth rebelled, refusing to chew more than once. She looked at Sala, who was watching her with great interest. Smiling without opening her

mouth, Raven looked around, not knowing what to do. She didn't want to offend Sala, who had paid for all of this. Raven noticed Sala seemed entertained.

"How does the carrot sit with ya, Raven? Don't ya like it?" Raven scanned the table, unwilling to spit it out. At least it wasn't a grape. Grapes were ten times worse.

Forcing herself to chew, she slowly ground the carrot between her teeth and tried to swallow. Again, she tried to get it down, but her mouth and throat rebelled. Though she did not look at Sala, she knew Sala was watching her. She was not going to fail, after all she had been through! A giant spider, a terrible forest, even the tomb failed to defeat her. After a ship full of Vahkrin from the Underworld lay dead at her feet, and their ship commandeered, a carrot slice would stand victorious over her? A carrot? With renewed ferocity, Raven set her mind to do battle with her new adversary. Finally, it was down. It was over!

She grabbed the cup before her and drank, washing it down her throat. Raven shuddered slightly, set her cup down and stole a glance at Sala, who was watching, a twinkle in her eyes. She was enjoying this! Raven felt like crawling under the table.

"Did I make a scene?" Sala shook her head.

"Only fer me. I take it ya don't crave carrots." Raven gave Sala a weak smile.

"I thought I might have long ago. Maybe my taste has changed over the cen . . ." Raven's voice trailed off. As she slipped deep into thought. "Maybe I liked them before." Sala cut a piece from her steak and held it up in front of her.

"Raven, a child ya seem to me. How old are ya?" Raven looked at the piece of meat, noticing the red in the middle.

"A year shy of one-thousand, I think. Maybe I carry my age well." Sala popped the piece of meat in her mouth, chewed it slowly, then began cutting on her steak again.

"Seeing meat doesn't bother ya?" Raven shook her head.

"Never has."

"Interesting." After three bites, Sala set her forearms upon the corner of the table. "I trust ya. That's why I brought ya here. Do you know why I trust ya? Because of two reasons. One, I tried to persuade ya ta kill me." Raven rolled her eyes and took another sip of water.

"What's the other reason?" Sala pointed her fork at her.

"Because I know intentions . . . yar agenda." Raven smiled nervously and fidgeted, making Sala laugh. "Raven, I be never alone. Can ya feel me heart beatin?" Raven nodded.

"Always. There is a chorus of heartbeats singing to me in this place." Sala looked around, her brows furrowing together.

"Does it bite at yar bones?" Raven threw her a confused look. Rolling her eyes slightly, Sala restated.

"Does it get to ya?" Raven felt confused still. It must have showed plainly on her face, because Sala repeated her question a third time, but not before taking a moment to think about her wording.

"Does it bother ya, weigh heavily on ya?" Raven shook her head, then nodded.

"Most of the time, I love it. The hearts of the living sing to me, like the music of a master Bard, or Artemis when he sings. It's soothing, comforting and reminds me of the good things I once knew. Sometimes - well - rarely, it reaches out to me, tries to sink its hungry claws into my head." Sala put down her knife, suddenly very interested.

"What do ya do when it gets like dat?" Raven sighed, adjusted her wings and looked her square in the eyes.

"I never give into it. If I did, I would become more than a monster. Already, I have grown multiple rows of fangs on my bottom and top jaw. Sala, I'm not a Vampire . . . I'm so much more." Sala was intrigued.

"This be rather forward, but can ya show me yer razors?" For a moment,

there was silence between them. Sala rolled her eyes. "Can ya show me yer teeth?" Raven felt her face flush crimson. Maybe it wasn't wise to tell others what she just divulged to Sala. Yet, there was something about Sala that drew her in, like a fish on a hook. Slowly, she took her cup and pretended to drink. Keeping the cup up to the left side of her face, so the patrons could not see what she was doing, Raven opened her mouth and bared her teeth. With the thumb of her free hand, she pulled her bottom lip down, giving Sala a good look at the freak she really was. Sala's eyes widened slightly.

"Ya have more than just a few sets of fangs on all sides," Sala whispered. Raven shut her mouth and took another drink. She set her cup down with a trembling hand, and ran her tongue over all her teeth. She recalled Artemis telling her he knew what she was.

"I keep changing, and I don't know why." Sala stared at Raven hard, as if contemplating something as Raven looked at her steak.

"What was the other reason, Sala?" The pirate slowly looked away for a moment, then picked up her fork and knife. Again, she began cutting another piece from her steak.

"Me has a power, similar to yers. Ya feel and read the hearts which beat around ya. I hear the minds around me. That's how I knew ya to be pure and honest. It's quite rare actually." Raven was instantly intrigued.

"Really?" Sala nodded in all seriousness.

"Ya be difficult to pick up. It be nearly impossible to get into yer head. That's why I came to ya disguised as yer boyfriend. I had to know what yer ticker was like." Not understanding what she meant, Raven dismissed the notion to ask, supposing she meant what type of person she was. Raven looked suddenly worried.

"I punched you. Sorry." Instantly, Sala laughed.

"That be the risk me takes when seekin what be screwed into others skulls. One time, me vas attacked by a man who I was disguised as. He wounded me in

da shoulder with his blade." Raven grimaced.

"What happened to him? What did you do?"

"Nothin'. I had to take it, or I would have blown me cover. Such are the dangers of disguising meself in da mortal frame of anotha. The point be, this be how me know ya be honest. And dat be why me offerin ta help ya. Of course, me gives nothin to anyone fer free. Still, we will be discussin dat later."

"What kind of help?" Sala stood up.

"It be easier ta show ya." Raven stood and followed the Black'Rock Pirate Captain out of the inn and into the night. Out on the front porch of the inn, Sala elbowed Raven in the arm, giving her a sly look.

"Yer not afraid of da dark, are ya?" Raven smirked, turned and wrapped her arms about Sala's neck, hugging her tight. She ignored the dagger Sala was suddenly holding as she hugged her back. The rhythm of Sala's heart instantly told Raven she was highly apprehensive . . . that trust was not easily given to anyone.

"I'm so glad you captured us. Otherwise, I would have never met you. Sala, thank you for everything you have done for me," Raven whispered, then let go. Raven pointed down at Sala's, now empty, hand. "And thank you for not jamming that pig sticker into my back. That would have hurt." She threw Sala a slight smile and looked up into the night sky.

"Raven, ye be a strange one in me life. Never crossed da likes of ya. But, yer welcome all da same. Me be glad me captured ya meself. Ya know," she said, following Raven eyes into the night sky, "dat night in da crows nest opened me eyes about yer race. From now on, me be more gentle with yer kind." Raven turned her head, catching a side glance from Sala. She did not wish to say what she was about to say, but she felt compelled.

"Sala, that would be the biggest mistake of your life. The Karritch Gleighdor are notorious liars and thieves. They are deceptive and cruel. We have the blood of the Raven flowing through in our veins, and that should tell you

everything you need to know about our disposition." Sala laughed, perplexed by Raven's warning.

"Ya betray yer own blood? Are ya on the run from then?" Raven shrugged and looked back up at the stars.

"Sometimes, I want to fly up and get one of those stars and keep it. They are wonderful." Raven sighed. "I don't remember what my parents were like. I don't remember if I ever had friends. It's been so long, I've forgotten almost everything. I'm getting memory flashes now and then, but not of my kinfolk. I just know my kind are hated, and that my race earned every bit of bias people have against them. Sala, the Karritch are a dreaded race because they steal anything they take a fancy to. I fight it, the kleptomania that is. I can't follow such chaos. I cannot walk another's path." Sala reached up and touched Raven's wing.

"If me could fly like ya do, me would be straight on with being hated."

"Aren't you hated already?" Raven asked.

"Aye," Sala whispered, a dire gleam flashing in her eyes.

"Why?" Sala looked surprised, taken back by the question.

"Why, ya ask? Raven, me was gonna' feed yer boyfriend to the deep. It's the code. Doesn't that grind yar brain, even a little?" Raven pointed to a shooting star in amazement.

"I want that one!" she exclaimed. Sala looked just in time to see it.

"Ah, dat was a good one, Raven." Raven kept watch for more falling stars as she pondered Sala's question.

"Sala, if the Black`Rock Pirate code mandates the execution of every captain you capture, then that is the way it should be done. I won't get personal with you on that issue. The fact is, you listened to me, made a sensible decision. You made your mind up on the course of action you would take concerning us. Sala, I think you are the second person ever to actually take me serious." Sala looked at Raven's feathers, suddenly intrigued by them.

"Ya be starvin fer attention Raven. Is dat why ya want me friendship?"

"Yes," Raven answered, and without hesitating. Sala looked up at the stars.

"Well, ya be an honest bush ranger, me gives ya dat." Raven smiled.

"What's a bush ranger?" she asked.

"Thief." Raven's jaw dropped open. Pushing Sala, she acted indignant and offended.

"Sala, no one ever accused me of such a thing before."

"Lia," Sala laughed, pushing Raven back. Raven looked at Sala, grinned, then looked out from the front of the inn.

"So, where we going?"

"I be takin ya up dis trail. It's a walk, and den some, but me believes ya be needin ta meet someone. Ya won't be coming back on me for disappointment ringin in ya brain." Raven noticed a gleam in Sala's eye, and it made her feel like a rabbit, cornered by a fox.

"Sala, you scare me." Sala rolled her eyes.

"There be no needin' ta get yaself worked ova. As me said, me likes ya, and not smalllike. Come wit me. Thank me later, ya will." Raven grew curious.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Not a toungueful." Grabbing Raven's hand, Sala pulled her off the porch and onto a short path that lead to a larger, well kept, trail passing by the inn. Turning left, Sala led her uphill, away from the inn, all alone, without her Vampire there to protect her. They waked in silence for about an for some time until Raven saw a full moon cresting a high cliff to her right.

"Sala," she whispered, "that is a very high mountain, or is it a cliff. It's too far for even my eyes to tell."

"We be walking upon dis huge island. Where we be now is between two great cliffs - Jaws of Thunder," Sala whispered.

"Is there a reason why they are named that?" Sala nodded, smiling grimly.

"Ya. When da heavens crack and boom, da tunder repeats itself, echoing ten fold ova before it lets ya go. Sometimes, when da burnin sky be lighten without

stoppin, da echoes come togetha . . . drive ya to ya knees, it will.” The pirate, then whispered, “Claws at ya.” Raven thought about it, then cringed.

"That is awesome." Sala shook her head and continued leading Raven up the trail, becoming silent. Raven marveled at the moon as it rose. The towering cliffs which rose up on either side channeled a steady current of wind that washed over them in a never ending stream. Looking up, she noticed all the palm trees were bent, bowing to the sea behind them. Within the trees were many lights, but they were spaced apart.

"Are these homes?" Sala stopped, holding up a hand, suddenly tense.

"Shhh!" she hissed. Raven froze, looking around.

"Raven, go back to da inn, now!" Sala turned, pushing Raven as she drew her blade. Without question, she did as she was told, for Sala's heart suddenly held an emotion she thought the pirate was immune to. Fear.

In all haste, they both sprinted back down the trail, but didn't make it quite halfway before a dark shape loomed up before them on the trail, blocking their path. Sala cursed, sliding to a stop.

“Fiend,” she whispered, readying herself for a fight.

Raven felt the steady rhythm of the creature's heart just prior to it coming into view. Pulling her hand free, Raven took two more steps before halting, hearing Sala throw her a warning to stop. Before her, on the trail, was what appeared as a large wolf, until it stood up on its hind legs. Its ears laid back against its neck as it eyed her. She knew full well what it was, and it both terrified and intrigued her.

"Lycanthrope," Sala whispered. Raven took another step toward it, quietly filling her lungs with a deep, steady breath, removing her gloves and dropping them to the ground.

"Do you understand me?" She asked, a dead calm filling her mind. The only answer she got was a snarl as it leapt forward, charging up the trail, its attention fixed on her. The speed of the creature was impressive, throwing her off guard. Still, Raven was faster. As it lunged, Raven dove toward it, lighting off the ground with a quick thrust of her wings, and tumbled across its back burying her talons into its spine as she rolled over it. She felt the muscles and tendons snap and tear as she rolled off from its hind quarters, and hit the ground, skidding to a stop, wings raised up high in case she had to ascend quickly.

The large wolf-like creature howled in pain and rage, splitting the night with a terrible cry that repeated itself multiple times, even as Sala leapt at it, stabbing and slicing with impressive skill and speed. Spinning about, its aggression instantly turned to defense as it retreated from the trail and out from between the two. Sala readied herself for another charge.

"This one be da plague on dis island for too long, Raven!" Understanding, Raven leapt into the air, vanishing up into the night in a flash.

"Retreat, Sala!" she called as she ascended. Sala cursed and backed away from the raging monster, stumbling on something that caught her heel on the third step. Instantly, the beast charged, bearing down on her with an insane and senseless rage. Sala grit her teeth and called out a challenge as she leapt to her

feet, raising her blade to strike and moving back.

Raven twisted and dived, catching as much night air as she could. With all the speed and might of her wings and will, she propelled downward toward the beast, bearing her teeth in a silent snarl. Halfway into her descent, the Lycanthrope leapt a great distance, attempting to quickly take Sala down.

Raven knew if this thing bit Sala, she would be infected, just as the blood of Artemis had infected her. The difference was, once Sala was infected, and if she survived, she would soon join her attacker, hunting her own kind forever. Raven could not let this happen. Hurling downward, she thrust with her wings and spun, adjusting the angle of her dive to meet their assailant in mid leap.

"Raven, you coward!" Sala screamed as she stepped back and prepared for the inevitable. Out of the darkness, Raven plunged, slamming down onto it, burying her nails so deep into its neck, her fingers vanished into its flesh as well, cutting its howl of victory short as she forced it to the earth with a grunt.

Both she and the beast began to tumble, and as they did, Raven felt the pain of her attack rip through her fingers and hands as too many bones snapped. Ignoring the pain, she gripped tight, hugging the lycanthrope tight, desperately staying connected to the beast as they rolled in a mass of fur and wings. As they rolled to a stop, Raven ended up on top of the werewolf. Screaming, she felt her entire frame rebel, so hard had she struck it. Ignoring the pain of multiple broken bones throughout her body, she focused on the Werewolf she now straddled.

Like the explosion of a volcano suddenly erupting, Raven screamed down at the back of its half-severed neck as she impaled the shuddering form of the creature with her wings, knifing through multiple areas of its body, pinning it to the ground so it could not move, should it yet have some fight left in it.

The terrible visage she beheld in Raven, and the sound of her scream, instantly threw Sala into dread. In panic, the pirate captain fell back to the earth, pointing her blade at Raven, eyes wide in the terror of the moment. Desperately,

she managed to stand as she tried to distance herself from Raven, stumbling backwards.

Ignoring her, Raven bent down and nearly locked her teeth into the top of her quarry's head. Before making contact, she pulled back, shocked at the mistake she nearly made. Turning its head, the Werewolf's jaws snapped repeatedly, desperately trying to get to her. In one swift motion, Raven growled and severed its neck, instantly beheading it. Crying out in agony, she shuddered at the pain.

The Lycanthrope's head rolled away from its body, its jaws snapping spastically as Raven pulled the feathers of her wings free from its body. Shuddering, she looked down at her blood-soaked trembling hands. Growling, Raven looked up at Sala, who was still backing away with her blade leveled her way.

With a thrust of her wings, Raven leapt off the still thrashing Lycanthrope, landing beside it. Falling to her knees, she closed her eyes, and began taking in deep breaths, preparing herself for the pain of regeneration. After a few moments, her entire body began to heal, bones snapping back into place in a symphony of pain that ever granted no mercy. She always hated this part; the healing that is. It hurt worse than being wounded, yet only for a short duration.

Retracting her nails, Raven knelt down and cleaned her hands and wings off on a crop of grass, ridding herself of as much blood as possible. When she was done, she stood and looked at Sala, who was yet in the grips of horror.

"Sala, Sala. It's me, Raven. It's me. I'm still the same Raven you just ate dinner with. Well, you ate dinner . . . I had a carrot." She bit her lip and gave Sala a worried look. "Sala, it's over." Slowly, the pirate took a step forward, lowering her blade and glancing at the heap of mutilated werewolf next to Raven.

"What be ya?" She asked in a quavering voice. Raven took a step toward Sala, then stopped as the pirate backed up. Holding her hands out, Raven backed up one step.

"I don't know. Sala, please, don't fear me. I will not hurt you, or anyone. I thought we could be sisters." Sala looked at her blade for a moment, then took three tries to sheath it, even as a dozen of her men appeared on the scene, weapons brandished. Immediately, they advanced on Raven. She crouched and raised her wings, ready for flight.

"Sala, please . . ." Raven begged.

"Stand down!" Sala commanded, instantly composing herself. "She has slain da nightmare!" Raven looked at Sala in surprise, then pointed at her, relaxing a bit.

"We slew it, not just I," Raven countered, locking eyes with her. "I could not have dealt the death-blow without you." Slowly, a grim smile played across Sala's lips.

"Aye . . . sista. We done well," she stated triumphantly. Raven threw her a wide grin, so happy to hear that one word Sala said. The smile turned to a frown as she looked at her blood-stained hands.

"Why to I always end up like this?" Shuddering, Raven stepped onto the trail and bent down, grabbing a handful of dirt, and began scrubbing her hands and arms. Sala walked over to her and stopped, watching her. "You called me sister," Raven whispered, not looking at her. Vigorously, she scrubbed at the blood, desperate to get it off.

"Aye, that me did friend. Ya did well. Da Lycanthrope be plaguing us for too long."

"You did well yourself," Raven quietly stated. "Had you found me first, I'd be donned all in black, and that is a fact." Sala shook her head.

"Forgive dis crazed pirate for fearin ya. Me neva seen da likes, whatcha did, how ya did it. Me being glad me lent an ear to ya when first we met. Me thinks we all woulda' been in a heap of misery, tryin ta give ya boyfriend to da deep." Raven shook her head and grimaced.

"I don't want to think about that. I just hope, if ever I need a place to go, I

can come here . . . be with you." Sala raised an eyebrow at Raven, then nodded, suddenly pleased.

"Ya'd do us good on da open sea."

"Would I really?" Raven asked. Sala nodded, then walked off to join her men, who were watching the carcass of the Lycanthrope with great interest as it began to shrink and change. Raven turned and walked away, not wanting to know, rejecting such a memory that would, no doubt, feed into her nightmares. They were bad enough as it was. Retrieving her gloves, Raven slowly put them on as she heard Sala speak.

"It be Reymoth." Her name echoed in Raven's ears before she could cover them. A cold and dreadful guilt gripped her by the heart and squeezed as she thought of this man. Did he have a family, like the two she had killed at the cliff? It was a fact that wives and children miss their fathers, and she might have just created a widow – another widow in the world. Despair abruptly gnawed at her mind, causing her to shrink away from the group in terrible guilt. Suddenly, she felt as if she was a criminal . . . the real monster on this island.

After a short walk away from the group, she lowered to her knees, trying not to become emotional. The taking of a man's life, no matter his condition, made her feel as though part of her soul had been lost. Her soul was like a puzzle which she kept misplacing and losing the pieces to. She was fast becoming less and less complete. It was a Vampire that kept existence making sense. Because of him, she rejected giving in to a raging monster that wanted out. One day, she would slip and cause no end of havoc in the lives of the innocent. This had to stop, now.

Shivering, and not from cold, Raven silently cursed her decision to become a Vampire. It was a wonder Artemis was not forever angry with her. She had deceived him. He had cautioned her to wait until he could get her somewhere safe. In one impulsive, unwise decision, she had gone against his wishes. Now she had killed sixty-four.

"Oh Vannar, I've tried to keep my honor. But I feel as if I've strayed too far

away from the light to ever be accepted by it. I am cursed. Please, forgive me for this last action. I can't do this anymore." Placing the fingers of her left hand to her head, and the other five to her unbeating heart, she shuddered. Closing her eyes, she hesitated only for a moment, before – a gentle hand rested upon her shoulder before she extending her nails. Startled, she dropped her hands in shame.

"Forgive me for what I have done. Sala, I just killed a man." A warmth spread through her shoulder, quickly enveloping her in loving comfort. Hiding the sudden flood of tears, Raven refused to look up for shame.

"I had to save you, Sala. But ever time I take a life, something inside me withers and dies, like the leaves of a tree touched by winter's hand. One by one, they fall, eventually leaving nothing but a barren tree, empty of beauty and life.

"What happens when the warmth of spring touches it?" Raven felt a great peace overcome her.

"It comes back to life," she whispered. "Sala, do you think I will come back to life?" She felt a gentle squeeze.

"You will decide that. One must be touched upon by true darkness in order to comprehend and embrace true light. These two paths are irrevocably connected. One cannot exist without the other. Raven, you have kept your honor. When you are brought low, arise and press forward. Never give in to despair, for that is your true enemy, and it will devour you. If you wish to become my Knight, get up and press forward. You have been judged worthy to stand."

Abruptly, Raven's eyes shot wide open. She turned to see who was speaking to her, but she was alone. In astonishment, she looked around, trying to find the woman who had spoken to her. She thought it had been Sala.

"Vannar's holy Herald came to me?" She looked up in wonder and wiped her eyes dry. "Thank you," she whispered. "I will do my best." As she gazed in wonder up at the moonlit sky, Sala approached and looked at her, then slowly raised her eyes to the night sky.

"What do ya see up dar?" Startled, Raven raised a wing between the two of

them. Quickly, she lowered it and let out a quick breath.

"You scared me, Sala. Oh, nothing. I was just, well . . . you would laugh at me if I told you." Sala gave Raven a most stern and serious look, causing Raven to give in.

"Okay, I was praying to Vannar."

"Oh, me gets it," Sala whispered, looking back up into the sky. "Ya be prayin to da big man. Did he fill ya with words?" Raven shrugged and began to stand. Sala squeezed Raven's arm as she stood. "Well, dar be no harm in da big man. Come wit me. We yet have a stretch of dirt ta bear." Raven wanted to tell her what just occurred, but she did not. She and Sala came from opposite ends of two very different worlds. Throwing her arms about Sala's neck, Raven squeezed her tight, suddenly and openly emotional.

"Thank you for not rejecting me. Thank you for everything. Thank you Sala." Sala patted her on the wings, then reached up and removed Raven's arms from about her neck.

"Has yer mind always been entwined with yer heart?" Raven lowered her head.

"It's my curse." Lifting a finger up into Raven's face, Sala shook her head.

"Ya snuggle like a kitten, weep like a new widow and rage like a dragon in battle. Raven, ya be a complex creacha. Ya entertain me big, but me needs to get ya to anotha. From what me sees in ya, ya need to come. Are ya ready, or do ya wish to hug me bones a bit longa?" Raven pushed Sala's hand down. She hated being pointed at. Her father had always pointed a finger in her face, and it drove her crazy. Her father . . . her father!

"My father! I remember my father! Thank you Sala!" Sala rolled her eyes at Raven.

"Ye be a maze, and not only in yar skull. Focus now. Will ya come wit me up da mountain or not?" Sala walked away from Raven, ascending the trail once again, not looking back.

"Of course," Raven said, smiling brightly, then followed after.

For a long while, Sala led Raven up a gently winding trail that cut between a growing number of well-built houses and shops, all of which were set well off the main path and connected by smaller trails.

"How big is this island?" Raven curiously inquired, looking around.

"It be fairly large. Most of da land be void of boneheads like da one I be takin wit me," Sala replied. Raven cuffed her with a wing, then rested her head on Sala's shoulder, if only for a breath's time. Sala shook her head, nearly smiling.

In silence, Raven followed Sala up a path that steadily inclined until they reached what looked to be a mountain of jagged rock. Sala stopped and pointed, drawing Raven's attention to the base of the mountain. The trail stopped directly at the base of the rock, which seemed rather odd.

"A dead end," Raven said. Sala nodded.

"Not to dem who knows da secret. I be a showin ya." Sala probed the rock with her fingers, searching for something. "Ah, here it be. Feast yer eyes on dis indention. Ya see it?" Raven looked where Sala was tapping her thumb.

"Yes."

"Push hard into it, den twist yar thumb to da left." Sala stepped aside. Raven placed her thumb into the same spot and twisted to the left. Instantly there was a sound of deep grinding, coming from within the face of the stone. Raven felt the ground tremble beneath her feet. She backed up, watching in fascination as a tunnel into the mountain revealed itself.

Sala motioned her to follow as she stepped in. Quickly, Raven followed. As they walked, Sala produced a candle and whispered something Raven did not understand. Instantly, the wick lit, shedding light before them.

"Oh, I really like that candle. Amazing." Sala turned on Raven, stopping her.

"I want ta thank ya fer savin me life back there." Raven remained sober,

suddenly loving Sala.

"Anytime," she replied. Sala smiled shortly, then leaned in and placed the side of her head to the side of Ravens'.

"Sisters we be in life and death and life." Sala paused. "Now ya say da same. It be da way." Raven took in a breath of excitement.

"Sisters we be in life and death and life."

"Ya be one of me own now, Raven, if ya accept." Sala parted from Raven and waited for an answer.

"I accept on the condition I do not have to kill anyone, unless it is in self defense." Sala grinned, turned, and began leading her down the rock tunnel.

"Raven. Me never met a heart-warming Vampire, or whateva ya be. The terms be set." Raven frowned at Sala's back. What was she becoming? Disturbed, she followed Sala in silence.

They made their way through a tunnel that ended all too quickly. Soon, both women stood before a set of large well kept steps of crafted stone.

"This be da entrance. Still yer bones." Raven had no idea what Sala was talking about, but held her position just in case she meant wait. Sala ascended ten broad steps which wrapped about a landing twenty could stand on with room to spare. A large wooden gate barred them from entering an obvious structure in the mountain. Casually, Sala walked to the right side of the gate, grabbed a thick rope hanging down from a large bell and pulled three times. Shortly, through the gate, there came the distinct sound of another bell, which rang three times. Sala gripped the rope and rang the bell another seven times, waited, then pulled it twice more. She then stepped to the center of the platform.

"Don't be movin, Raven. I be tellin ya when to come to me." The gate shuddered with a boom, then began to lift steadily upward. Raven froze in place as she was instructed to do, watching it raise. When it was fully open, Sala motioned Raven to come to her without looking back.

"Okay, now come stand on me left." Raven quickly ascended the steps and

stopped by Sala's left side, waiting anxiously in silence for Sala's next instruction.

"Be right wit me." Raven did exactly as she was told. Slowly, Sala moved forward so Raven would not be left behind. As they entered a massive chamber of perfectly cut stone, Raven spotted a large pool of clear water at it's center. Shelves of large books lined all the walls, and about the room were tables set with lanterns and lush chairs. Sala turned, facing Raven.

"Dis be da library. The pool be warm ta heat dis chamba. Feast on any tome, but put it back exactly where ya pull it from. The Librarian be intimidating, so be not foolish." Raven walked over and began looking at the titles.

"What am I supposed to do here?"

"Figure it out ya bonehead. Just give it all ya best. Me be a headin back to get yar boyfriend. I'm sure he be gettin ancy for dem hugs ya throw out." Without another word, Sala left Raven alone, vanishing back out the entrance. Raven watched her go, hating the sinking feeling that began to eat at her chest. After the gate closed, Raven sighed heavily and closed her eyes.

"What a night. First a Lycanthrope, then I'm shut in here. For some reason, I do not believe these books will help me," she whispered.

"How do you come to such a conclusion?" a serene and distinct female voice echoed throughout the large chamber. Startled, Raven turned about in a full circle, but saw no one. Again, the woman's voice came to her, asking the same question. Raven looked into every part of the library.

"The books don't feel right to me. Are you are the Librarian?" Raven asked, then waited nervously for an answer.

"Yes, I am the Librarian. You have been searching for answers. Here, you will find them." Raven rubbed her face.

"What am I?" There was a long pause, in which time Raven became anxious. What was this place? Why was she here? What was the purpose of this place? Who was this Librarian?

"So many questions, young one. Those answers may come in time. Until

then, I will help you seek the answers you so desperately crave. Raven, do not be afraid of me." Raven's eyes widened. Why would she say that?

"I will do my best. Can you help me?" A loud padding sound filled the air, growing louder with each breath Raven took. Something was coming. In fear, Raven looked about the area.

"Is that you?" she asked, retreating toward the gate. As she backed away, Raven felt a presence that made her not only uneasy, but suddenly overwhelmed. Maybe Sala had tricked her. No, that could not be, or why else had Vannar's Herald come to her? Panicking, Raven turned a full circle.

"Please, I want to leave. I'm sorry for coming in here. I did not touch anything. I just want to go." Glancing back, Raven noticed she was about halfway to the gate. When she turned back toward the padding noise, she saw, at the opposite end of the library chamber, the unmistakable form of a night-blue dragon enter in through a large alcove she had not previously noticed.

Raven's eyes widened in sheer terror as the dragon focused on her and began loping across the library floor, swiftly closing the distance between them. Raven raised her hands, as if to ward off an attack, she stumbled back toward the gate. Stopping before Raven, the dragon rose up and looked down on Raven. The heel of her left boot caught the leg of a table, causing her to fall back to the floor.

"Please, I -" "Fear me not, Raven," came that serene voice again, "I am here to help you on your way." The Librarian reached out a claw. "Let me help you up." Suddenly, Raven found it hard to breath. She sucked in breath after breath, as the dragon waited. Trying to get control of herself, Raven forced herself to take in breath after breath, slowly, until she no longer felt paralyzed by fear. Tears streaked her face as she reached up and gripped a trembling hand about the end of the dragon's talon.

The dragon's claw was as long as her forearm, and slightly curved, and her scales were midnight-blue, beautiful to behold. The most striking feature of this dragon was the bright silver runes which adorned each scale covering its entire

body. For a moment, the dragon paused. She then gently lifted Raven to her feet, as if she were weightless, then withdrew from her a step.

Trembling, Raven looked the dragon over in astonishment, noticing the dragon's claws were also covered in silver runes. Its sleek build reminded her of a mountain cat, but much, much larger. The dragon she and Artemis encountered in the dungeon was nothing in comparison to this one. Raven noted the sharply slanted eyes, and teeth as long and sharp as newly crafted blades.

"There now, you are safe with me. What is your name?" the dragon inquired. Taking a deep quivering breath, Raven tried hard to swallow her emotions.

"Raven," she wept. "I'm sorry. I can't help it." The dragon looked her over slowly, ignoring the emotion in her response.

"A fitting name. You are very beautiful, Raven." Flattered, and terrified, Raven lowered her eyes, still streaming with tears.

"You are too," she whispered, feeling small and vulnerable.

"I won't hurt you, young one. There is no need to fear me." The dragon sat back, tucking each of her great wings in. Raven watched, wiping her tears away. It seemed she wasn't going to be killed after all.

"I, I love the color of your scales, and how the silver writings lift from them. They are beautiful." The dragon's eyes narrowed.

"Thank you for that most unusual compliment. My name is Rinn, and it is more than a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. Raven, did you know you have the gift of Dimensional Rune-Sight?"

A knock came at the door while Artemis was reading a book he'd found in the room. It was a story about a mountain cat's cub that had lost his mother during a storm. He was quite enjoying the story.

"Come in, the door is not locked!" he called out. Placing a paper to bookmark the spot, he set the book down on a small table to his left. When Sala entered, he stood and bowed shortly.

"Pleasure to see you Captain. What can I do for you?" She slowed to a halt as she neared him.

"Ya really do send out da call, don't ya?" Artemis looked at her, not responding. Waving her hand, she cleared her throat.

"Raven be in da mountain fillin her skull with some learnin. I be free to take ya when ya wish to see her."

"Learning?" he curiously asked.

"Yep, da Librarian is teachin her some things. Deep learnin', only for her kind." Artemis raised an eyebrow.

"What kind of learning?" he pursued. Sala smiled charmingly at Artemis and shrugged.

"Dat be something ya have to ask yar woman. Just know, she be safe and sound. If ya be needin her presence, come find me." Shaking her head, Sala let out an sigh.

"Intense be ya." Ignoring the comment, Artemis pointed at the book.

"That means I have time to finish this book." Looking at the title, she gave him a funny look.

"Aye, ya have a bit a time." Sala smiled briefly, then departed, shutting the door on the way out. Artemis slowly sat down and took up the book. Opening it, he removed the bookmark and continued reading.

"May I ask you some questions?" Raven nodded and knelt before Rinn. "Tell me, child, has anything out of the ordinary ever happened to you?" Looking at the dragon, Raven was suddenly lost in a mass of memories, not sure where to begin. Should she tell Rinn the deeper, darker, happening in her life, or start from the beginning? She decided to start as far back as she could remember, in hopes of recalling more of her past. She now could picture her father, but that was all. It seemed to work, for as she began, other scenes came to light within her once darkened mind.

"Yes. I am a Locust Magician graduate. When I fled my home, I took control of a giant spider. I should not have been able to do it." The dragon lowered to the floor, folded its forelegs and paws, talons retracting as she rested her chin down.

"Was it difficult to accomplish this control over the spider?" the Librarian asked.

"No, but it didn't last long before I had to reconnect with it again." Raven felt herself relax a little more. It was difficult being in the presence of Rinn. She was incredibly intimidating.

"Do you have siblings?"

"I don't know. I know I have a father, because I remembered him as Sala and I came up the mountain. I wish I did," she whispered, giving Rinn a slight smile. Realizing her fangs would show, she dropped the smile. "I wish I did," she whispered again.

"I know what you are, Raven. You need not hide it from me. We - all creatures in Utaemia - have our purpose. Was the spider the only incident?"

"No," Raven said, relaxing a little more, "As I was up in a tree, as I watched Artemis by the fire, there came upon me a Gargantuan Preying Mantis." The dragon's eyes opened slightly more than usual.

"Go on," Rinn gently urged.

"It came down from above. It cleaned my wings, which was amazing. I could have died that moment and been happy. I had to give the beast a good work over to make it pleasurable for her as well." Raven threw Rinn a slight grin. "She was so beautiful."

"What spells have you officially learned?" the dragon pressed. Raven thought for only a moment.

"Insect Subservience. I learned it from my guild master when I graduated."

"I see. Raven, to do what you did with the spider and the mantis takes years of practice and mastery to accomplish. Has anything else occurred in your life?" Rinn persisted.

"When I concentrate on it, I can dream and it comes true. All I have to do is focus on what I wish to happen, like the Leprechaun who took Artemis's magical Storing Sack while I was in it. Once it left its house, I brought the sack back to Artemis. We fled the area and checked into an inn. I knew its name, so I dreamed it into the common room for Artemis to confront. After he spoke its name, it was helpless." Rinn sat up.

"Indeed, Raven, that is a profound and highly rare gift you have. Have you experienced more?" With her tongue, Raven played with her teeth, then nodded.

"I have been changed into a Vampire, but its more than just that. My feathers fell out and were replaced by new feathers, which are sharp as razors, hard as steel and light, just like my old feathers. My eyes aren't normal anymore. I am growing multiple sets of fangs. I fear I'm losing myself, evolving into a terrible monster." Raven reluctantly exposed her teeth to the dragon. She felt Rinn had to know and see. The dragon stretched her head forward, focusing on Raven's mouth for only a moment, then settled back down and closed her eyes for a long while as Raven knelt in silence before the dragon. She dared not disturb Rinn, for fear of overstepping her welcome.

Closing her eyes, Raven began meditating, balancing herself. She focused on the darkness behind her eyelids, letting go of all thought. Slowly, she slipped

into a restful state of peace wherein the world no longer mattered.

A touch to her arm brought Raven out of meditation. She opened her eyes to Rinn withdrawing.

"Welcome back, Raven. You had a visitor, but I sent him back out of this place." Raven stretched and stood.

"I'm sorry. I hope I wasn't long." She looked around. "Artemis was here?" The Librarian nodded. Raven instantly felt disappointed. Rinn adjusted her wings.

"When you meditate, do you have any recollection of time?"

"No. How long was I?"

"Seven days, Raven, seven days." Raven felt as though she had just been hit with a cold wind.

"Forgive me, Rinn. I didn't mean to waste your time." Rinn shook her great head.

"There is no need to apologize. This tells me more about you, and it is good to know as much as possible before we explore you further." Though excited to be in company with another who seemed to have answers, Raven didn't like the sound of that.

Rinn asked many questions, some of which Raven did not wish to answer. Not once had Raven looked at a book, nor was she asked to - which she was grateful for. Books had never been interesting in the least. In either case, the dragon delved into her past, which required Raven to think and meditate on things she could no longer recall, or did not wish to.

After two grueling days, the dragon ceased her questioning, leaving Raven a nervous wreck. On the third day, without letting Raven rest, or gather her senses, Rinn led her out of the library. Rinn led her down a long hall set with many suits of plate armor. Each plated armor was set at up against a wall of perfectly sculpted stone.

"Rinn, are these walls part of the mountain itself?" Rinn stopped, turning to Raven.

"Yes, I forged this place long ago. Come with me." Raven followed the dragon, all in wonder, passing between sets of armor, positioned evenly on either side. Lagging behind a bit, she stopped to look at each set of armor, becoming curious. They must have had a history.

As she gazed upon them, she felt her feathers prick up, and goose bumps rise upon both her arms as a chill ran through her. Rubbing her arms, she stopped and stared into the open visor of a large set of plate mail, the sudden feeling of being watched overpowering her senses. Quickly she jogged up next to Rinn, looking back over her shoulder to make sure it was not following her.

"Rinn, I feel like that one is watching me," she whispered anxiously. Rinn stopped and slowly turned, careful not to trample Raven.

"Point at the armor you speak of, child." Raven lifted a shaking hand, extending a finger.

"That one," she whispered, feeling spooked. She wanted to get out of this hall, yet, to Raven's alarm, Rinn had opposite plans for her. Approaching the armor Raven had pointed out, Rinn settled down before it.

"What are we doing, Rinn?"

"Hmmm, curious," the dragon stated, suddenly deep in thought.

"What's curious, Rinn?" The dragon placed a gentle paw about Raven and looked at her.

"Look at the armor carefully, Raven. Do you see anything familiar about it?" Reluctantly, she stepped before the plate mail, scanning its every section.

"No, nothing comes to mind." She looked into the hollow of the helm and froze in terror. For a moment, she felt paralyzed, as if gripped by some unnatural force. With all her will, she staggered back against Rinn, who gently kept her from tripping into her great forearms. Raven pushed back against Rinn's paw, panic flooding through her.

"There's someone in the armor! I saw eyes!" Raven slid under and behind Rinn's great paw, pressing up against the chest of the dragon, not wanting any more to do with this. The Librarian pulled her arm away from Raven and sat up.

"Has something happened to you since you landed on this island?" Raven stepped further away from the armor.

"Yes. I thought it was Sala at first, but it wasn't." Raven went silent.

"Do you know what it was?" Rinn inquired, eyeing Raven with a narrow look.

"Yes, generally speaking. I believe it was a Herald of Vannar." The dragon thought for a moment, then let out a long steady breath.

"Heralds only show themselves to the pure in heart, Raven. Do you desire to follow Vannar?" Not daring to take her eyes from the hollow within the plate helm, Raven nodded.

"I've met a Knight of Vannar. I have desired to follow in the same footsteps ever since." The dragon's eyes widened a bit, then narrowed again.

"And you hold to that commitment, even though you are a Soul`Reaver?" Raven nodded, then froze. Looking up at the Librarian, she became suddenly still.

"Is that what I am? Am I a Soul`Reaver?" Shifting, Rinn stared at Raven

for a time, and then nodded. "Rinn, I know I'm a monster, but, yes, a Knight of Vannar I wish to be . . . with all my heart. I feel purpose in that path. I am drawn to it. I don't know if Vannar will ever accept me, but I want to try." Without further discussion on the matter, the dragon stood and moved on. With her mind floating in a sea of questions, Raven followed Rinn to the end of the hall, passing by the remaining suits of armor.

She followed Rinn through a number of large doors and three descending stairwells, paying more attention to the runes on Rinn than her surroundings. At times certain runes would float from a few scales with a haze of light stretching between the rune and each scale. Raven was fascinated by the appearance of it all.

"Rinn, what did you mean when you said I have Rune-Sight? Rinn continued walking.

"It's complicated, Raven. How shall I put this? You see runes rising up off my scales when they are naturally scribed into my scales. They do not rise, but you see them do so. That is only one aspect of Rune-Sight. There is so much you need to know." Raven thought about it.

"But Rinn, at times the runes I see raised up off your scales are no longer lifted. I see them drop and others raise up. When this happens, I feel drawn to them as if . . ." The dragon stopped and turned.

"As if what?" Rinn inquired with great curiosity. Raven back up a step, still intimidated by the dragon's presence.

"As if they call to me." She thought Rinn would disbelieve her, but she didn't.

"Raven, that is good to know. Thank you for telling me. Please, feel free to tell me anything. It helps me with your training." That was the second time Rinn had said that. Raven felt puzzled.

"I just don't know what to do. Things become confusing. As much as you frightened me, when I first came here, I'm glad I'm here. Thank you for helping me." Rinn reached up a claw and pulled Ravens hair back over her should on one side, then the other.

"I've never met an honest Karritch Gleighdor in all my long life, Raven, until now. I hope you remain honest with me. I know it is in your blood to steal and lie, but by staying honest with me, I can best help you." Raven flinched at her words, but knew she spoke the truth.

"I promise I will never steal from you. I promise I will always be honest with you." Rinn grazed the back of her talon down Raven's left wing, then turned around.

"Let's move on."

Raven was relieved to be out of the hall of armors, though the place she was following Rinn into reminded her of the dungeon she and Artemis had been through. She shivered at the memory of that place and stayed close to the Librarian. When they reached the bottom of the third spiraling stairwell, Rinn stopped.

"Ahead is a room into which you must enter alone. I will wait here." Raven moved forward, passing through a large alcove, entering a very large chamber with floor to ceiling pillars everywhere. The room was fashioned with flawlessly cut stone, just like everything else here, but at its center the stone on the floor was a different color, creating a large circle of red. A vision of Artemis beating her caused Raven to stagger back, turn and flee. She had to get out!

"Rinn, I can't -" Raven struck a solid wall with her head, bouncing off it and falling to the cold stone floor. Rolling over, she gripped her head for a bit, waiting for the pain to subside. There had been an alcove . . . a way out. Holding her head, she stood and looked about the chamber as a flood of anxiety assailed her.

"Rinn, please, help me!" She yelled. She waited for the dragon to say something, anything, but there was only silence.

"I can't do this again," she said feverishly. "I can't be alone . . . not this, please." From behind her, a soft, almost musical voice filled the air.

"Raven, Raven, help me. I'm so alone here. Help me be free." Raven turned about, then slowly walked into the chamber, passing around a number of pillars until she could see the red circle in full. At its center, Raven beheld a woman of surpassing beauty. Raven's eyes widened in disbelief, for she knew this woman.

At the very center, shackled in chains, knelt a fair-skinned woman with

snow-white hair and wings. She was Sagen Gleighdor! Her face was perfect, and looked as though it was sculpted by a master of masters. Her beauty was complimented by her sparkling eyes of clear amethyst-blue. Her beauty struck Raven as incomparable to any other.

Raven felt the intense pain in her head fade away as she slowly walked over to the woman, noting her shackles were silver. Stopping at the edge of the circle of red stone, Raven suspiciously shook her head.

"You are the backup plan; the trap if the Gorgonoth failed. You are the girl in my dreams . . . Allanna." Allanna tried to stand, but failed. The chains were thick and heavy. The Sagen Gleighdor threw her a desperate look, tears streaming her face.

"Raven, help me please!" she cried softly, desperately. Raven felt sympathy for Allanna, but did nothing. Though she wanted to go to her, save her, she did not, fearing the inevitable consequence that mercy and sympathy might bestow upon her. Allanna bowed her head and wept bitterly, eroding Raven's resolution to stay away.

"Allanna, I'm here with friends. If you really are the girl in my dreams, I will petition their help to free you." The beautiful white-winged woman slowly looked up.

"Promise?" Raven shook her head.

"No, I do not promise anything. However, I will try my best, heeding their counsel in this matter." Through her tears, Allanna looked shocked.

"You sound like the group of men who voted on my removal and banishment."

"Banishment? What could you have done to be banished?" Allanna threw her head back, flipping her hair from her face.

"It was a mistake. I didn't mean to become a freak, a nightmare," she narrowed her eyes at Raven, "a monster. It just happened." Raven chest grew suddenly cold.

"Tell me more," she whispered, her gut tightening. "Please, talk to me." Allanna shook her head, then began shivering as if a sudden arctic chill had swept over her. At the sight before her, Raven began to tremble, as if the bitterness of hoarfrost had gripped her in its icy claws. She waited for Allanna to tell her story. If she did not, she would stay clear of her. Looking down at the red ring of stone before her, Raven felt her gut tighten. Something wasn't right.

"I went hunting. While scouting the surface of a mountain side, I spotted a cave opening with a ledge of rock leading into it. At the entrance stood a ram. Circling around to get the best advantage, I landed the shot, but not a flawless kill. Wounded, the ram struggled into the opening of the mountain, vanishing." Allanna shuddered violently. Raven could see this was hard for her.

"Please, tell me," Raven urged. Composing herself, Allanna nodded, struggling with some inner conflict for a time before continuing her story.

"I wanted to go back with something to eat, so I went in after it. I followed the blood trail about forty paces into a cave, where I spotted the animal, still and unmoving. I grabbed the dead ram by the horns and was . . . about to pull it out . . . there was a man." Allanna growled, as if in sudden, terrible agony, then screamed and began pulling at the chains with panicked determination to be free.

Raven watched on, shedding tears of sympathy for her. She knew it was useless to try and calm her down, so she waited and watched. She guessed what Allanna's story was leading to, and she did not like it. After Allanna gave up trying to pull the chains out of the floor, she slumped to the stone panting heavily, exhausted by the struggle. Placing a trembling hand to her forehead, she closed her eyes.

"Raven, I cannot recall how long I have been a prisoner here." Raven motioned to Allanna, ignoring the sympathy she felt.

"Tell me what happened to you in the cave, please." Terrified, Allanna struggled to speak. After two tries, she continued.

"He was kind to me, and helped me bring the animal to the ledge, just

outside the cave. I retrieved the arrow and cleaned it, placing it back in my quiver. Yet, before I left the mountain, he asked if I would return. He was handsome, and polite, so I said I would come back on the morrow, at mid-day. I did return the next day, and the next, and the following day after. I fell for him, Raven. For him, I fell." Raven didn't fully understand.

"You fell?" Allanna nodded, her eyes a tell-tale sign of the horror she had faced.

"I stayed with him for a full week. I told my family I was going on a hunt, and I prepared everything as if it was true. I lied to them. I thought I had found the one I would stay with for the rest of my life." Allanna shuddered, her fingers going into spasms and she began to claw at the stone she knelt upon.

"On the last night, as I slept, he changed me into something. As I awoke to him watching me, I met his pale-gray eyes, with which he held me bound. After suffering beneath his gaze, I fell into blackness. When I awoke, I was alone. After that, I began changing." Allanna looked up at Raven, her eyes a desperate plea. Raven's heart ached for her, but she was still not convinced. Allanna was shackled. Another aspect of Allanna caused her great suspicion.

"Why are you here, and in silver chains?" The fair haired Gleighdor wrapped her fingers around a length of chain and lifted it.

"Because these keep me from hurting others." Raven stared at Allanna, thinking.

"You only answered half my question." Allanna grew silent, refusing to answer. "Allanna, have you murdered innocents?" Raven whispered. Allanna began weeping and hung her head.

"Yes!" she suddenly screamed. "I thought you were going to help me; the girl in my dreams. But you never came. I despaired, gave up on you. Please don't make me tell you any more, please," she begged. The emotions of the Sagen Gleighdor changed drastically with every moment that passed. The way she acted intrigued Raven, and repulsed her. She could feel that something was not right.

Wrapping her arms about herself, Raven shivered, feeling cold . . . so very cold. A trembling overtook her as she knelt before the circle. As her knees made contact with the stone floor, Allanna's emotional state instantly ceased. She sat erect, stiffening, gazing hard at Raven.

"What is wrong with you?" Allanna asked, an accusing tone in her voice. Raven shook her head, as in denial.

"You. You are the backup plan – to take me." Allanna's face slowly twisted in anguish as she threw her hands out to Raven, fingers stretched wide.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Raven! I need my freedom, please, release me! We had so many plans!" Raven lowered her head, staring at her hands to find them trembling. Clenching her fists, she grit her teeth, focusing on them. What confused her the most, was how Allanna knew so much about her, seeming this was the first time they had met. She, Raven, was the Dream`Seer, not Allanna. No, there was something more to this, and she dreaded learning the truth of the matter.

"Stop," she whispered, hearing another tone in her voice, as if another spoke the same word within her from far away. Highly disturbed, Raven closed her eyes, meditating, listening, feeling, reaching out to who or whatever it was. Something was happening to her, and it had nothing to do with Allanna . . . it was her.

As she waited, tuning out Allanna's begging, something moved deep within her. This was no dream. She was awake, unlike that hideous dream forced upon her at the inn, before taking the ship. No, this came from within the far depths of her soul, and was fleeting, illusive, dark, like the deepest of pits where stalked horror, pain, misery and eternal hunger . . . a mere fleeting memory that she barely perceived. Yearning, Raven focused on that memory.

"Raven," the silken voice of a man echoed in her mind.

"I'm here," she whispered, responding as a single blood-red tear slipped down from the outer corner of her left eye. "I'm here milord - no, no, leave me be. Let me have peace!" A feeling washed over Raven, as if shadow and flame

walked within her, she being the apprentice of that darkness. For a moment in time, Raven waltzed with the wicked within. The feeling was fleeting, elusive, touching upon her for no more than a breath's time. She yearned for . . .

"Stay away from me, whatever you are!" she hissed. "I am not yours!" Even as she desperately rejected it, from deep within, she yearned for he who had spoken to her. Memories on the edge of her mind began to dance and spin. Reaching out to seize them, she growled softly, frustrated. Then it was gone.

Raven opened her eyes, an instant calm washing over her. Allanna instantly began weeping as their eyes met.

"Are you doing this?" Raven whispered.

"What?" Allanna growled in misery.

"Answer my question." Allanna broke out sobbing, desperation in her now bloodshot eyes.

"Doing what, Raven? What is it you think I am doing to you?" Raven slowly stood and began pacing back and forth, listening to Allanna weep. She was highly confused at this situation. This girl was right before her, which was profound. She had no idea why Allanna - of all people - was here, but, well, she was, and that was that, bizarre as it seemed. At length Raven came to a conclusion.

"I cannot free you alone. This is much too deep, and too far above me, to make this choice on my own." Allanna collapsed to the stone, an emotional wreck. The scene before Raven suddenly struck her, as if she were looking into a mirror, seeing herself.

"Am I like this to others?" she questioned herself in silence. She hoped not. She needed Rinn and Artemis to help her figure this out. Looking around, Raven spotted an opening leading out of the chamber. It was not there before, but, well, here it was, and Rinn was within the alcove watching her.

Raven wiped her face and walked toward the opening as Allanna begged and pleaded with her to stay. Ignoring her pleas, she exited the room and stopped

before Rinn.

"Rinn, am I going mad? Things change in this place. That girl in there is my childhood dream friend. I don't understand. Please, I need some help here. I cannot do this by myself." The night-blue Runed Dragon sat up, glancing into the chamber.

"Seeking wisdom other than your own is wise. Well spoken, and well done. Come with me." Raven looked back at Allanna, suddenly curious.

"Is she real?" Rinn snorted and lithely stalked back the way they had come, not answering the question.

The two ascended the first set of stairs, taking a turn down a different corridor . . . one Raven had not seen as they came down into this area.

Artemis waited patiently for Rinn to come back. She had taken him out of the library and into this room. 'Wait here until I come for you', she had instructed. So, he waited.

All the comforts of life seemed to have been added into this rather large and accommodating waiting room. He had a soft chair, a bed, a fireplace, plenty of books. The floor was filled with well placed furs and soft rugs. There was even an area for eating. In one corner of the room was a basin for bathing, which impressed him greatly. Whoever build it, left nothing lacking in comfort.

Artemis had just finished his third book, and was scanning the spines of a row of novels for a fourth, when there came a knock at the chamber door. Walking over to the door, he shook his head and smiled before opening it.

"Sala," he whispered, then opened the door. She smiled at him slightly.

"I just come to check up on ya. How are ya?" Artemis stepped back.

"Fine, thank you. Please come in. I've begun talking to the books for lack of people," he jested. She entered, and as she did, he could smell the perfume she wore. This was a new side to her he did not care for. He also noticed she had dressed for the a social visit.

"You look nice, Sala. Did you end a wonderful evening with a lucky pirate and forget to change?" he asked, giving her an inquisitive look.

"No lucky pirate for me bones. Tis' easier dis way. Wow, yer accommodations here be regal." Artemis bowed slightly.

"Sala, thank you."

"Fer what?"

"Seeing what she needed, and doing something to help. I did not know what was going to happen. Pirates have quite the reputation. I really thought I was going to lose everything." Sala began reading the titles of the books, scanning them with growing interest.

"Ya know, Artemis, not all pirates be filthy murderers." Artemis walked

over beside Sala and looked at her, smiling. Throwing him a brief look, she rolled her eyes.

"Men," she stated with a smirk. "All da same." Artemis's smile broadened.

"Well, not all of us crave what we should hold in sacred respect. Sala, what will be the payment you need for all of this? You name the price, and I will make good on the bill." Sala narrowed her eyes at him.

"Anything?"

"I will not betray Raven, just to make that clear. Name your price, and I will gladly pay it." Sala placed her hand around Artemis's neck.

"Yer woman would never have ta know," she whispered, eagerly looking into his eyes. Slowly, Artemis pulled her hand down.

"I do not love you, Sala. I am betrothed, and happily keep myself for her. If this is all you came for, I think you better leave." Sala suddenly laughed.

"Ya be a good man, Artemis, for a Vampire." She winked happily at him. "I did come here fer two purposes. One: To be sure of yer loyalty and honor to yer pretty girlfriend. Tell me, am I pretty?" Shaking his head, Artemis looked Sala over.

"How old are you?" Sala grimaced.

"Should I be a telling such a thing to a stranger?" Artemis nodded.

"Please."

"Okay, but ya better keep this a secret, or Ill gut ya meself. I be twenty-four." Artemis walked slowly around her with a hand on his chin.

"Stop it. Me thinks you be buyin me from da slavers market," Sala exclaimed. Artemis completed his round and stopped in front of her.

"I will tell you."

"Me head be gettin crazy with suspense. Just make sure ya give da right answer, even if ya need to be lyin." Artemis chuckled.

"Why aren't all the men on this island trying to court you?" Sala blushed.

"Cause I be a Captain of captains. They know best ta stay clear."

"Well, their loss, Captain. Without lying, I can honestly tell you, I've rarely met a more physically perfect and beautiful woman in a thousand and twenty-seven years. There, now we both have a secrets we must keep." Sala laughed.

"Ya be dat old? Thank ya for yer honesty. I truly be flattered. Ya know, if Raven wasn't in da picture, it would be me honor to have dinner with ya." Artemis looked at Sala with appreciation.

"Thank you. I would have been honored to dine with you. What is the second purpose you came here for?"

"Ah, now we be comin to da business of payment. I love money, but I suppose ya knew dat already. I would have a payment of three-hundred yellow-gold for each of me deck hands, and two-thousand black-gold fer me. Agreed?" She held out a hand and waited. Artemis took her hand, sealing the deal.

"Of course. When we are done here, I will pay you." He felt the beat of her heart change then, just before she let go. She was succumbing to his natural charm, which greatly alarmed him.

"Sala, before you lose any more will to resist me, we better part." Shaking her head, Sala seemed distracted.

"Aye, I best trod off." Sala walked slowly to the door, opened it and turned, throwing him a look that spread fear within him. She then walked out, pulling the door closed behind her. He had seen looks like that before, and he did not like it. The problem was, if Sala wanted something, she could take it. She had the power to trap him here. Approaching the door, he rested a hand upon its surface, sensing the beating of her heart just on the other side.

"Please keep your honor Sala. I would rather have you as an ally, than my adversary. Please, please, please," he whispered, terrified at the thought of what would become of his Raven should this Black`Rock Pirate Queen give in to her desire.

To his relief, he felt her walk away, stop, then slowly depart.

Drenched in sweat, Raven ran through an endless hallway, seeking an exit out. Truthfully, she was terrified. One moment she and Rinn were entering this hall together. The next moment, Rinn was gone. She looked both ways and saw nothing but a stone hallway. No sconces, no doors, no exit, only a hall.

"Rinn!" she called out, hoping to hear an answer that never came. Doubling her efforts, Raven sprinted until she had no strength left to do anything but fall to her hands and knees.

"There's no end to this," she panted, feeling trapped. Sitting up, she knelt and stared down the stone hallway. Looking both ways, and seeing no hope of getting out of this wretched place, Raven began to despair. Maybe she had done something to upset Rinn, and was being punished for it.

"Rinn, if I did something wrong, I'm sorry! Please Rinn, don't leave me alone!" She waited, for an answer, yet silence was her only reply. Maybe this was a test to see if she could get out of an endless hallway with no exits. Raven pondered her situation for quite some time before an idea came to mind. There was a way out; she could create it.

Closing her eyes, Raven concentrated, slowly relaxing, soothing away all her present thoughts, fears and worries. Centering herself on the present moment, she steadily brought all her emotions and thoughts into control, burying them deep within where they could no longer be an influence.

The moments lengthened into a span of passing in which she began to perceive time no longer. Feeling at peace, she forgot her surroundings, even the fact that she existed. Raven did not know just how long she meditated in a state of being that brought into her present state of peaceful existence. She no longer cared.

Eventually, Raven slipped into the dream world in which she stood, opening her eyes to the endless hall. A slow, sober smile played across her lips as she looked upon the solid stone of the corridor before her. Within her mind, she

pictured the hollow of a large hearth into which she could simply step through. Within, she pictured a rather large comfortable chamber. Within this chamber she crafted all the comforts of life into a single dwelling place.

After it was fashioned to her liking, Raven simply stepped through.

Rinn gazed upon the corridor Raven had taken. Curiously, the dragon watched her, eyes filled with curiosity. After long while, the dragon watched Raven stand, take three steps directly in and through the stone of the hallway, simply vanishing from the corridor.

Openly startled, the dragon growled and turned, lunging up the stairwell in great haste.

"Foolish girl!" the dragon growled as she launched upward, swiftly ascending the stairs with great speed.

Raven stepped out of an ornately carved fireplace, and found herself in the middle of a conversation between Sala and Artemis, who stood with their backs turned toward her. Shocked, Raven froze, taken back by the scene before her, yet for only a moment before looking around to see if there was a place to hide. Quickly, she spotted a bookshelf and made for it, concealing herself at its far side. It wasn't the best place to hide, but it would have to do. Anxiously, Raven froze, listening and watching.

"Yer woman would never have ta know," she whispered, eagerly looking into his eyes. Slowly, Artemis pulled her hand down.

"I do not love you, Sala. I am betrothed, and happily keep myself for her. If this is all you came for, I think you better leave."

The conversation continued, and as it did, Raven's eyes filled with tears of pure joy. Eventually, Sala walked to the door, opened it and turned, throwing Artemis a look Raven instantly hated her for. She then departed, shutting the door behind her.

"Rip your heart out," Raven thought, her blood boiling within her veins. She nearly flew into a rage as Sala spoke to him. Raven watched Artemis approach the door and rest his hand upon it.

"Please keep your honor Sala. I would rather have you as an ally, than my adversary. Please, please, please," she heard him whisper. As he spoke, Raven slipped up behind him, smiling from ear to ear. Artemis took his hand down from the door and rubbed his face.

"Raven, where are you?" Calmly, she waited for him to turn, and as he did she launched at him, throwing her arms about his neck . . . and passed through him, as if she were a ghost. Her eyes widened as she fell to her hands and knees. For a moment she looked at the floor, shocked.

"What have I done?" she whispered in horror, rising slowly to her feet and turning to Artemis. "What is happening to me Rinn?" Bewildered, Raven followed Artemis over to the fireplace. Slowly, Raven raised her hand and touched him. As her fingers passed through his arm, Raven despaired.

"Maybe I can go back and," she stated, her voice trembling, "undo what I've done." Kneeling before the fireplace, Raven watched Artemis sit down in his chair, facing the great hearth. Closing her eyes, Raven focused on waking up.

Artemis walked over and sat down. Facing the fireplace, he stared into it for a long while until a warning began to burn in his heart, steadily growing into anxiousness and fear. Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong.

Startled by an abrupt knock at the door, Artemis jumped up and turned. Clearing his mind, he focused on the door. Raven ignored him, trying desperately to return back to the hallway.

"Yes?" There was no answer. Quickly, he ran to the door and opened it to find himself facing Rinn. She gracefully squeezed into the room, pushing Artemis aside.

"She is here," the dragon hissed. Looking over at Rinn, Raven nearly got up to greet her. Then, suspecting she would not, Raven's eyes widened.

"Rinn, can you hear me?" Raven stated, raising her voice. There was no response.

"Sala left about -" "No, she is here," the dragon cut Artemis off. Placing her nose to the floor, she began to sniff about the room, a few of her scales lighting up like a waxed moon. "She cannot complete the jump - she needs assistance. If she does not make it, she will be lost forever." Artemis looked around, scanning the chamber as the dragon stopped before the fire place, then backed up.

"What are you talking about, Rinn? Raven?" The dragon sniffed the air about Raven's hair without seeing her. Raven froze, suddenly horrified at the words, 'lost forever'.

"Here, she is here. If you can hear me, do not move," the dragon commanded, then pushed both chairs away from the fireplace, knocking them over. Extending her wings, she cupped them about the hearth and closed her eyes. Finding herself halfway through her left wing, Raven moved into the center and faced Rinn, panicking.

"Rinn, help me, please don't let me -" Raven choked with fear, wide-eyed, as she looked up to Rinn, hoping she could help.

Artemis quickly grabbed both chairs and set them up out of the way as he watched Rinn, a sudden fear rising within his heart.

“What did she do this time?” he asked, then fell silent as the dragon turned her attention on him, striking Artemis with a dire and fel glance.

“Silence!” she growled as many of the silver runes upon her coat of scales began to illuminate, bringing into the room a power Artemis could not only feel, but feared. As the runes burned brighter, Artemis retreated, raising his hands to block the intensity of the power being displayed by the Librarian.

Raven’s attention locked onto Rinn. She did not know if she could help, but she had to try. In her mind, she willed Rinn to help her. She did not wish to be lost forever. Nearly a thousand years in the tomb was bad enough, but forever? Whatever lost meant, she wanted nothing to do with it. As she focused all her willpower on Rinn, Raven’s eyes flooded with a golden light.

The room filled with a power Artemis could not describe. Overpowered by pure energy, he fell back against the far wall, shielding his eyes with raised hands. His skin began to chafe and peel as he fell to his knees.

“Rinn!” he called out, but his voice was silenced by a power that had quickly overcome him. In dread he waited to be consumed, as if he were a mere Vampire beneath the rising sun. In shock, Artemis looked at his hands and despaired to seem the flesh of his mortality wither and begin to disperse. Never had he been subject to such astonishing might. Rinn’s magic was unrivaled in Utaemia, and he was slowly succumbing to the effects of it. Lowering his head in regret, he thought of Raven and cried out in despair. Yet, as he began to lose all hope of surviving the power overcoming him, his eyes flickered, suddenly, with the same golden light. As it did, Rinn stiffened and shot a deadly glance his way.

“Thur una vis anar!” (shield him from death!) she uttered in her native tongue. Instantly, four of the runes upon her body leapt up, shooting toward Artemis, striking him against the stone wall. Bursting in silent energy, all four runes expanded, encasing him in four globular layers of energy. The moment her

magic shielded Artemis, she cast yet another spell upon him without hesitation. “Vissara Mental-Attack lithis!” (Elixir of life!), the dragon growled. Instantly, the fast decay besetting Artemis reversed, completely healing him. Artemis shook his head, all in wonder, as the energy in the room intensified. Rinn threw him an openly surprised glance, then turn back to face the hearth.

“Mur asha tes eva!” (Come back to me!), the dragon spoke in a commanding voice. After a long, tense moment, Rinn lowered her head and relaxed her wings, slowly pulling them back against her sleek, powerful body. The silver runes diminished until they were no longer illuminated. Slowly, she raised her left wing, and as she did, Artemis saw Raven kneeling, facing Rinn. The golden light in her eyes slowly faded as she gazed at the dragon. Getting hold of himself, Artemis stepped toward the two as all four spheres of magic splintered into shreds of fading light.

"How . . . what happened?" Artemis inquired in earnest as he came and knelt before Raven. The dragon sighed heavily, stood and departed in silence, her wings drooping slightly. As she passed out of the room, the door began to close.

"I will return. Stay here," she commanded, her voice sounding weary. As she departed, the door shut and locked.

Artemis watched Rinn go. When the door locked itself, he turned his attention back to Raven, watching and waiting. After a minute, he took her hand and squeezed. Raven stood and looked at Artemis, a fondness burning true within her countenance. Artemis looked about the room, surveying the damage, then returned his attention back to Raven.

"Sala came by this evening. She asked me if she was pretty. I told her the truth. I think she came by for me as well." Artemis's jaw tightened. "Raven, we need to leave this island. I think Sala is going to try something, and it frightens me, because you would take the fall if she does." Artemis began to comb her hair with his fingers, separating the side of it into three sections. Once again, Raven noticed his infatuation with her hair. As he set a braid in her hair, he began to softly sing.

I found a beauty, maiden true, upon a mountain high,  
Her life was ebbing, cold winds blew, I feared that she would die.

Rescued her from frigid grave, I tended her to health,  
I yearned this maiden, her to save, a treasure beyond wealth.

In wonder I was pierced with joy, she chose to stay near,  
Our conversations I enjoyed, her voice I longed to hear.

In bitter darkness we were hurled, I sought to gain her hand,  
In love she entered my dark world, together we would stand.

Her loyalty has made me free, in her I find I'm home.  
Free she gave her life for me, I find I'm not alone,

I see her struggles day by day, I see within this hour,  
Though life be as the darkened gray, I see her inner power.

Her living soul, self resigned, I fail to find true words,  
She seeks the status, Knight Divine, within my heart is stirred.

And now we seek a dire Witch, Raven's future guide,  
Desperate seeking to enrich, in who she can confide.

Willing, I pledge my life to you, forever take your hand,  
I am Loyal, faithful, true, together we will stand.

If ever death besets my soul, in spirit I will guide,  
Beyond death, protector's role, I am at your side.

Continue, searching, who you are, discover your true self,  
I will stand, not from afar, Raven, my true wealth.

We forge our life without measure, at each others side,  
Raven is my greatest treasure, in her my fears subside.

As we take each others hands, Together we will walk  
Exploring into distant lands, Mysteries to unlock

Forever loyal, constant, true, your shield, my greatest pride,  
Though utter darkness should ensue, my faithful future bride.

I could never think to leave you, I'm yours and you are mine,  
We shall hail among the true, until the end of time.

When he finished the song, he gently kissed the braid now set at the side of her head. As he did, she turned and wrapped her arms about his neck, returning his affection. When they parted, she smiled and wept.

"Don't cry," he whispered. She kissed him again, pulling herself into his arms, then laughed for the joy she felt.

"You are far too good for me. I am so thrilled to wear this ancient engagement ring." She held it before him. Touching the diamond on it, he smiled.

"It needs polishing." She nodded, resting against her Vampire, listening to the life flowing through his being.

"I know you, and that is why I am so in love with you. Artemis, how can such a man as you lower yourself to someone like me?" Artemis wrapped his arms tightly about her.

"Interesting you should ask such a question. I was about to ask you the same thing." She smiled, listening to the most pure and noble heart she would probably ever hear.

"Liar," she accused. Artemis shrugged.

"Well, I've given it thought, and more than once." She laughed and began playing with his fingers.

"I was here the entire time that walking dead pirate was in this room. I heard everything." Feigning shock, Artemis looked around in a panic.

"Everything?" Raven nodded, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Uh huh, everything." Sobering up, Artemis squeezing her tight. She could feel him trembling.

"What's the matter, fangs?"

"We are no longer safe here. I believe the only reason you are alive, is because you are under Rinn's protection. I fear if you return to the inn, something bad will happen. Raven, Sala has the means to take you out of my life. She knows too much about you now to take her by surprise." His comment deeply hurt her feelings.

"I thought I'd found a friend." A grim look came over her Vampire.

"I'm sorry. You know, where we need to go, you will find the loyal friends you seek." Desperately, Raven looked up at him.

"Promise?"

"I most certainly do promise. I know you will." Brightening, she hugged him tight.

"Allanna is here, Artemis, unless I was hallucinating. She's down in the bottom of this place, chained in silver." Artemis rested his chin upon the top of her head, thinking.

"That's incredible. Maybe Rinn will shed some light on all of this. You know, she is quite amazing, and very beautiful to look at." Artemis suddenly winced, feeling the tips of Raven's nails pricking the back of his neck.

"So you are falling for a dragon?" A slow grin played across his face as he nodded.

"Oh, sure, you know how charming they can be. In fact, Rinn is quite irresistible, don't you think?" Artemis grit his teeth as she gave her nails a little more pressure.

"I'm glad I regenerate, ow! Okay, ease up. You know I jest." Raven

snickered and made her vampire jump just a bit before retracting her nails.

"I know. I was just teasing you back." As Raven pulled her hand away, she glanced at her wrist. It was bloody, as if she had been shackled tight for too long. Quickly, she pulled her sleeve back and removed her glove, staring at it.

"What is this?" she stated curiously, her brows knitting together. Artemis took her hand, frowning.

"Have you been shackled? Let's see your other wrist." Raven removed the glove from her other hand and pulled her sleeve back to reveal her other wrist in the same condition.

"No, no shackles on me. I don't know how I got these marks. Raven turned and pulled her boot off, curious to know if her ankles were scarred the same. They were. "I don't understand," she stated in amazement. Artemis took her other boot off.

"Same," he said, all in wonder. Raven looked at her ankles in disbelief, then put her boots back on. Artemis watched her as she fell deep into thought for a time. Finally she broke the silence.

"I wonder," she whispered.

"Wonder what?" Artemis inquired, deeply concerned. Raven nestled against him. Closing her eyes, she took in a deep breath and sighed, feeling a heavy weight beginning to burden her.

"I think I know the answer to something I faced here. For now, while we wait, I just want you to hold me until Rinn comes. I'm tired. I need to rest for a while." Artemis scooped her up, cradling Raven in his arms and sat down in a soft chair. Slowly, he began rocking Raven from side to side.

"Raven, after you figure this out, we need to leave this place." Reaching a hand up, she began playing with his hair.

"As long as we are not separated, I don't care where we go." His smile was quickly replaced with worry as he held her protectively in his arms.

Rinn returned after a long while. After Raven showed Rinn her wrists and ankles, the dragon immediately took them both down to the chamber where Allanna was shackled. Raven followed Rinn into the chamber, followed by Artemis. It was odd that the same alcove she had first passed through was now directly facing the red circle of stone where Allanna was being held. This place changed, and Raven did not like it. The one thing that had not changed was the circle of red stone and the beauty chained down within its center.

Raven noticed Allanna's reaction as she spotted Artemis. She also noticed Artemis's reaction as his eyes fell upon her. Allanna was speechless, seemingly dumbfounded, a look of shock and surprise on her face. Artemis froze, narrowing his eyes at her as if he was about to attack.

Noticing the same, Rinn turned and watched in silence, taking the scene in with sudden, intense interest. The air in the chamber seemed to crackle with a powerful and negative energy. Raven saw Artemis's eyes shade to black as he slowly stalked to the edge of the circle. Allanna raised up gracefully, the silver chains by which she was bound no hindrance in the least.

"Come to torment me in my misery, Ardenoth?" Artemis's fangs extended as he growled at the shackled beauty before him.

"May I dispatch her, Rinn?" The dragon observed, but remained silent.

"Artemis, what is happening here?" Raven inquired, turning to him. Glaring at Allanna, he did not answer. Raven gripped his arm tight and pulled, bringing his attention to her.

"Talk to me," she firmly said, raising her voice. With a snarl, Artemis pulled his arm away, inadvertently pulling Raven off balance. Catching herself, Raven's foot entered into the circle. As it did, Allanna lunged at her with startling speed, hissing like a serpent. Raven tried to move back, but Allanna caught her foot and drug her with incredible strength and speed to the center of the circle, gripping her with both hands and feet, like a spider subduing a fly.

Allanna chuckled.

"Come near me, she dies," she stated with a beautiful smile. Raven struggled in vain as she witnessed Artemis's face twist in rage, veins surfacing in his face, transforming him into something to fear. Allanna laughed pleasantly.

"I would tell you to calm down, love, and that you are hurting yourself, but it doesn't matter, you regenerate. So, go ahead and -" "Shut up," Artemis whispered, trying to hold himself together. "Either way, you will be unraveled this day." Raven perceived no simple connection between the two.

"Allanna," she whispered hoarsely, "you know each other. How, tell me, please." Allanna kissed the side of Raven's head and sniffed her hair.

"Okay, food, I'll tell you. By the Jahthas you smell so good."

"Tell her nothing, Shaedling." Allanna laughed and licked Raven's ear as Raven desperately tried to get away.

"That one likes to travel, find those outcast and forlorn, forsaken, and take them to safety. I caught them, once upon a time, and . . . she was so delicious." As Allanna spoke, a power emanated from her, filling the area with dread, painful to bear. Artemis fell to his knees and hung his head, as Raven groaned in misery. Allanna laughed.

"Does it still hurt, after all these many, many, many long years?" Artemis did not reply. She suddenly understood what Allanna spoke of, and pitied Artemis. This was Allanna? This was her dream friend?

Raven noticed Rinn lowering her wing to the ground as the dragon locked eyes with her. Rinn glanced down at her wing, drawing Raven's attention to several runes of silver, standing out in contrast with the many other runes covering the Librarian's wing. Rinn then lowered her head and sniffed the stones absently. Allanna smelled the side of Raven's face as she watched Artemis, a dark and sadistic pleasure burning in her flawless eyes.

"I am going to shatter your broken heart, Ardenoth. Slowly, you can watch your precious fiancé wither before your eyes. Yes, I see the ring. I know."

Artemis remained silent and unmoving as Allanna's cheerful voice filled the air with delight.

Raven felt her mind flood with rage as Allanna spoke to Artemis. She sounded cheerful, happy, like a young woman socializing with those in agreeable company.

The dragon's wing shifted, once again, catching Raven's attention. Staring at seven glowing runes, Raven felt drawn to them, even as Allanna gripped her like a vice.

"Now, observe how I feed Ardenoth," the white-haired beauty whispered. "I think this will be quite educational for you."

Raven saw every one of the seven runes rise from Rinn's wing. Like lightning, each rune flashed toward her, striking her in the forehead, even as her captor gripped her hair, yanking her head to one side. Allanna's eyes began to radiate a dull gray illumination.

"Sorry, love," she whispered, then placed her lips to Raven's neck. In that moment, Raven felt pain like she had never before felt. Also, in that same moment, she felt a power, pure and terrible, fill her entire being.

Screaming, Raven writhed and twisted in Allanna's arms, her wings breaking Allanna's grip, even as she felt something within her drain away. So intense was the torment setting upon her, Raven screamed, feeling part of her soul being ripped away. Whatever this creature was doing, it felt as though she were being ripped apart. The physical anguish of losing her soul, and the sight of Artemis's suffering, struck Raven like dark lightning as Allanna struggled against her, desperately feeding.

Throwing her arms about her neck, Raven gripped Allanna by the back of her hair in abrupt, silent fury. With all her might, she wrenched Allanna's head back, growling as if she were some dark predator, and lunged into her throat, stinking her fangs up into the soft of Allanna's neck, just under the base of her jaw. Biting down with all her strength, she pierced her enemy's flesh . . . and

discovered something she had never thought could be so incredibly sweet. She found, and locked into, Allanna's essence.

A desperate hunger filled her as she began to devour Allanna's soul, pulling back that which had been taken from her, and then absorbing more. Famished, Raven lunged up into her quarry's neck, gaining a better advantage. It was euphoric, merely pricking her flesh with a single tooth. With every last fang piercing her, Raven suddenly regretted never having truly nourished herself in this manner before.

The two battled on, one trying to overcome the other as they ripped out and fed upon the essence of the other, each desperate to gain the advantage. On the conflict raged, until, at some point, Raven realized she was winning.

Allanna's confidence slowly turned to desperation as Raven's fury consumed her. Not long into their struggle, Raven knew she had the victory. Unlatching from Allanna's throat, Raven pulled close, her bloodstained lips brushing Allanna's ear.

"I will commit the forbidden act to save him," she whispered. Wrenching Allanna's head, so that she could not look away from her, Raven gazed deep into the eyes of her weakened foe. Her prey groaned, struggling and pushing against Raven, trying desperately to retreat. As she did, a grayish illumination began to flow from Allanna's mouth and eyes. As it did, Raven slowly inhaled it with a hunger she could never quench.

It was at this point that Raven could feel what she truly was, and she savored it, relished it, consuming the beauty before her. As she devoured this helpless abomination within her grip, Raven fed in ecstasy until there was nothing left to take. Feeling Allanna's arms and wings slowly weaken, she relaxed as Allanna collapsed to the stone floor of the chamber, now forever stilled.

It was over.

Fighting to stay conscious, Artemis heard the battle raging on before him,

his vision blurred by desperate, hopeless pain. Desperation gave him the will to slowly raise his head to witness his Raven feeding.

"No, no," he breathed. "Raven don't," he called out in his weakened state, but she heard not his plea. All the loneliness, all the pain, all desperation accumulated in the long years he had walked in sorrow upon the Earthen Plane, set upon him, driving him to his knees in an unnatural attack. Not only had this Shaedling killed his wife, it also wielded all his misery against him as a weapon of power. Never before had he encountered such a foe, and it leveled his strength and willpower to a mere spark of resistance within a flood of great waters. All he could do was merely watch as the two struggled against each other.

Raven clenched her victim tight, gazing into Allanna's eyes, even as her enemy's pupils expanded. Within her fallen enemy were many souls, trapped by the power of the Shaedling. She could feel their fear, their torment, and it caused her great hunger.

"Mine," Raven whispered, then willed the helpless essence of many souls into herself. As she ripped the souls of Allanna's victims from her fading soul, Raven took them in, keeping them for herself. As she captured each soul, she watched, searching for one in particular. There she was! Separating this female soul from the others, she rejected it, not daring to devour this one. Placing the Ardenoth female aside from the others, Raven shuddered, nearly giving in to irresistible hunger.

"He's there. You are free. Go to him." She only saw a light, but no person, as she pointed to Artemis. The light quickly moved to the edge of the circle, instantly engulfing her Vampire in its brilliance, causing Raven to regret her decision. Jealousy flamed to life within her, darkening her already blackened heart.

Feeling the souls of those she devoured, Raven felt an incredible power well up within her, like a great body of water held at bay by a reservoir, there to use at

her every whim. In this, she felt true power and energy, and knew she would have no problem in destroying Sala and all her pirate lessers. It would be an easy hunt. She could use each soul for healing, shielding, and many other abilities, forever devouring them as she gained much from their eternal loss . . . even as she collected more to wield.

Hundreds of trapped souls lay chained within her ready to be consumed, molded into her every want and need. The power Raven had discovered kindled the need for more. If she could take another thousand souls such as these, she would be invincible! Looking to Artemis as her next victim, Raven -

"Nooo!" she screamed. What was she thinking? Without hesitation, she threw both arms out toward the stone ceiling and willed all the souls she was in possession of to be free. "Go!" she cried out, not wanting to release them . . . not willing them to stay. "You are free!" Looking deep within herself, Raven perceived the chains by which each passed on soul was bound. Raven alone held the key to their freedom. Against her very will, she severed the shackles of each, rejecting them. Screaming in misery, she set them free.

As one, a stream of glowing orbs exited Raven. Groaning in misery, she lamented their release as hundreds of souls, in the form of light and beauty, fled out through the walls and ceiling of the chamber.

As a dark light began to flee, Raven snatched it, curling her fingers tight about this one soul. Watching it jerk and shudder, trying desperately to escape her grasp, she quietly laughed, bending her will upon it.

"Not you," Raven calmly raged in the darkness of her soul. "You are mine. You will stay." Bringing the dark energy to her chest, Raven closed her eyes, subduing it by the force of her will. Slowly, it passed back into her, moaning dreadfully as it began to slip back into her being. Vanishing with a wailing shriek, Raven inwardly laughed, pleased.

"You will neither see, nor hear, nor influence me or anyone again. I seal you mine until my time ends." A terrible wail filled the chamber of stone, then

silenced, leaving Raven alone in the circle with the stilled body of the Sagen Gleighdor on the red stone before her. As Raven looked upon Allanna, the fierceness of her countenance slowly transformed to sorrow and pity.

"I should have come right away. I'm so sorry, Allanna. I failed." Standing, Raven bent down, gently lifted her defeated foe into her arms. Looking to Rinn, she beheld the dragon begin to blur and shift. With great effort, Raven made her way before Rinn and surrendered the body of the Sagen Gleighdor into her care. As she released Allanna, Raven fell, her strength utterly failing. Before Raven struck the stone floor of the chamber, the dragon snatched her up. As her vision began to fail, she desperately looked to her Vampire.

"Artemis," she whispered as her vision faded into darkness.

"She has committed the forbidden act!"

"Did you see why?"

"Does it matter why? It is forbidden!"

"You did not observe what was to come. You turned away your eye."

"Okay, I am inclined to ask . . . why?"

"She freed all souls but one."

"You see? Even she could not abstain!"

"The soul she kept was as she, but dark and loathsome. It was that soul she subdued and chained, even the one that caged the souls of ones she released."

"Interesting. You have convinced me. What of the fair one?"

"She is lost."

"She is not lost to me!" Thunder rolled across an eternal sky of amethyst-blue. "I have mercy upon the innocent. It is my right and place to feel such compassion for these mortals."

"What will you do then?"

"I will grant Duo-Existence."

"Will this work out for them?"

"It will be a grand experiment. Let us watch and see." Again, thunder rolled across the heavens, shaking the very foundations of a grand city of the purest white.

"The Shaedling has vanished from my eye!"

"What is to be done?"

"I will take a different approach!" Blood began to rain down from amethystine skies as black lightning streaked from horizon to horizon without thunder.

"What would you have me do?"

"Gather an army of lessors, mingled with greater generals. Lay siege against Wardenoth Keep. Bring me the Dark Child, and her companion. Bring them to me alive, unharmed and unspoiled."

"I will begin immediately!" The crimson rain increased to a monsoon of bloodfall, mingled with shreds of flesh and bone, as silent lightning flashed.

Lightning, followed by an instant crack of deafening thunder, split the night air, causing Raven to leap to her feet and stagger. Her eyes widened in terror.

"It's okay, Raven! You're okay!" She heard his familiar voice. Blinking, Raven looked around, trying to focus on her surroundings. She was blind, and so crouched back down, afraid that she might be standing on the precipice of a cliff. The wind was so harsh, there was no way she could safely fly, and this frightened her. Placing her hands upon the ground, she realized she was standing upon solid wood. Another flash of lightning preceded a deafening clap of thunder.

"Where am I?!" she yelled as a wave of rain nearly knocked her down. "Artemis, is that you?"

"Yes!" Lightning flashed again. "Come back into the cabin!" Feeling a swaying motion, Raven perceived where she was.

"We are on the ship!" she called out.

"Yes! And you are standing out on the deck in the middle of a storm! We need to get inside! Take my hand! The storm will pass, come on!" Raven could not see his hand without the lightning, and so waited until another flash arced between the billowing clouds above. Quickly, she gripped his hand and let him pull her across the deck of the ship and into the cabin. Once inside, Artemis turned and slammed the door shut.

"We are on the ship," she said again. "What happened?" With one hand he wiped his face of seawater, steadying her with his other.

"We also have a new door, thanks to our men. They got to work on it as soon as we landed at Black`Rock Island." Another flash of lightning filled the cabin with light for a brief moment, followed by a deafening boom that shook the very air about them. Covering her ears, Raven staggered over and grabbed hold of a support beam at the center of the cabin.

"They let us go?"

"With Rinn's persuasion, yes. In fact, if it wasn't for the dragon, I don't think

they would have let us go. As much as Sala seemed to be honorable, I believe she had plans for us." Raven growled at the mention of her name.

"Plans? What plans?"

"She's the Black`Rock Pirate Queen. She is no mere Captain. No matter what you think, she had an agenda, which included me. Raven, she's a pirate, an outlaw." Raven frowned.

"I thought she was my friend!" she yelled, feeling water pouring from her hair.

"Raven, she would have betrayed you." Raven felt stung by his words, yet she knew he spoke the truth. A flash of lightning, followed by three more, gave Raven enough light to notice a change in her wings. Grabbing her left wing, she watched it apprehensively, eyes widening. Artemis pointed.

"Again, you have changed!" A clap of thunder shook the heavens outside the ship, yet not so close this time. "Raven, are you still mine, or are you someone else now? Just tell me and I'll adjust to whatever you need!" She felt his words strike her like a fist.

"What do you mean?" she called out, no longer having to compete with the storm. "Artemis, I need light. What happened in that place?" Though she could not see, she could hear him stagger across the cabin as the ship rocked to and fro.

"Let me see if I can light this lantern." Ironically, there was not one more lightning strike. It was as if the storm did not want her to see.

"Artemis, my eyes, my eyes! I cannot see!"

"Hold on, let me get this thing burning. I brought a hand mirror just for this. Be patient."

"Okay, I'm patient, now hurry!" Artemis laughed as she heard the distinct sound of a drawer being opened. She then heard a strange sound she could not identify.

"Hurry, please," she begged, beginning to panic.

"Okay, here we go." A match ignited, shedding some light into the cabin,

drawing Raven's attention to it. As the match blazed, he touched it to the wick of the lantern. Closing its small glass door, Artemis turned the flame up, filling the room with light as a faint thunder growled off in the distance.

Rave's face paled as she gazed upon her wings, which looked as though they were touched by a mist of snow that never melted. Artemis walked unsteadily over to her and braced himself against the same support beam she was holding onto.

"My apologies if I'm crowding you miss." Raven instantly appreciated the humor and smiled at him.

"There's no sign on this beam that says only one at a time." Gently ruffling her hair, Artemis grinned, then became serious once again. Reaching into his trench coat, he pulled out a mirror, handed it to Raven and motioned to it with his eyes.

"Look." She took it, glanced up at him, then raised the mirror, looking at herself. Her complexion had lightened and a significant lock of hair, at her left temple, was white as snow. She exposed her teeth and tilted her head back.

"Well, I still have all my fangs. Why can't I see in the dark?" She raised her hand and saw white nails. She extended them to full length, then retracted them. Reaching to her wing, she grabbed a feather and pulled. It was solid and sharp. Raising the mirror again, she looked at her eyes. They were still black as black.

"Why can't I see in the dark?" she repeated.

"I don't know. Your face has changed also. I don't know what happened, but you have taken on some of the physical traits of your dream friend." He sighed and rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Raven, thank you for what you did for me. You lifted an unbearable burden from my shoulders. I am more than in your debt." Shrugging, she reached up and gripped his hand tight.

"Now we are even. Are you still mine?" she asked.

"Yes. Are you still mine?" he returned, a smile lifting the left corner of his mouth.

"Yes, I am more than yours. Always. What would I do without my very own Vampire?" She snickered quietly, then frowned. "Artemis, I did something in that place . . . something terrible. I had to do it." Artemis sighed heavily.

"I saw. What is done is done. What possessed you to do it?" Raven handed the mirror back.

"I had to do it - I had to."

"Will you tell me why? If not, we will forget it; never speak of it again." She sniffed, trying not to get emotional.

"As Allanna began to take my soul, I knew what she was doing. It was then, at that moment, I realized I could do the same. I knew she had trapped many souls. They were inside her, Artemis, suffering." She smoothed his wet hair back, throwing him a look of sympathy. "What Allanna said to you convinced me of a horrifying truth – your wife was among those souls, trapped. If that thing had used your wife's life force to heal, or increase its speed, or whatever, she would have been consumed. Your wife would have ceased to exist. That is why I took all those souls. That is why I drained the Shaedling." Shrugging, she now felt cut off forever from every good thing. Still, it was worth it to save his first love.

"I released all those people, all of them. Your beloved has a most beautiful and loving soul. I can see why she was taken. I would have fought to keep her myself, but I knew she was yours, and you were hers. The Shaedling's soul will forever be caged and forgotten in time. It doesn't matter to me, as long as you are happy." Raven looked at Artemis, tears breaking loose and spilling down her face.

"I realized, if I did not free her, you could never be reunited again. If this act costs me my soul, so be it. You are worth it. All you have ever done for me is give. It was my turn to do the same. Frankly, you wonderful, blood-sucking Vampire, I still owe you so much more to pay the debt I owe you." The look on Artemis's face, and the sudden tears he shed, threatened to break her heart.

"Oh Raven, I have never met anyone such as you. I do not believe you will lose your soul for such an act. How can one such as you lose everything, when you

have already given away everything you have?"

"You are my balance, Artemis. I am the darkness, you are the light. I am the cold, you are my warmth. What would I ever do without you? Where would I go? What would I become? I am more grateful for you than words can express."

"You are always welcome, milady. Because of you, and what you have done - what you do - my life is blessed, and has meaning; true meaning," he returned. Feeling his heart, she could only perceive truth in his words. Raven smiled happily, tears streaming her water-soaked face.

"Artemis, am I still pretty to you?" Her Vampire gave her a strange look.

"You are more gorgeous than ever. You seem to gain more beauty every year." Raven's eyes narrowed mischievously as she sniffed.

"So, I am about a thousand times more beautiful than when you rescued me from Feryl Mountain?" she timidly stated, suddenly remembering where she was from, what it was like!

"Yes," he stated without hesitation, "and you have grown on me like no other. I believe you have stolen my charm ability, no doubt to use for your own devious purposes." She nodded enthusiastically at the idea.

"Artemis, why was I laying on the deck of the ship in a storm?"

"I put you in bed. You were unconscious. Rinn said you needed rest. You were sleeping so sound, so deep, I decided to get some sleep myself. When I awoke, you were gone. I found you laying on the deck. I heard you talking to yourself." Raven looked at her once night-black feathers.

"Did you hear what I was saying?" Slowly, Artemis answered.

"Yes." She looked up and bared her teeth at him. "Alright, alright, I'll tell you," he said. "You said, 'Raven, I'm scared', over and over again, like it wasn't you who was speaking." Raven fell deep into thought and frowned.

"Do you think I'm changing again?"

"I suspect so. But, only time will tell."

They both talked for a long while, and as they talked, a weariness stole over Raven she could not resist. She tried to keep her eyes open, but slowly drifted away into a dream where she soared through a wintery forested within a chain of mountains, looking for something she had misplaced. She had to find it before she could return home.

Artemis saw Raven began to collapse and caught her. Carefully, Artemis bore her into the bed chamber. Laying her gently down, he pulled the blanket up over her. Obtaining a dry towel, he gently dried her hair. As he did so, Raven opened her eyes and watched him until he noticed she was awake.

"You startled me, young lady. Get some sleep, and I will keep watch over you. Get some rest now." She blinked, and as she did, her eyes instantly changed from black to amethyst-blue. Startled by the sudden change, Artemis peered into her eyes.

"Are you alright?" Ever so slowly, she nodded, a sudden fear taking hold at the way he was looking at her.

"Yes sir. Where am I, and who are you?"

Artemis quickly retreated from Raven and sat in his soft-chair, not knowing how to respond. He knew he had to say something, but what? He had to say something, anything.

"You are on a ship headed for the Zurkel Mainland. I am," he hesitated, then continued, "Artemis, a friend." She sat up and pulled the blanket off her. As she did, Artemis beheld snow-white wings.

"Am I a prisoner?" she whispered, terror beginning to play into her voice. Artemis looked at the door, shaking his head.

"No. What is your name?"

"Allanna, and yours?" Keeping calm, he touched his chest.

"Artemis, my name is Artemis."

Things had just gotten complicated beyond anything he could have ever imagined.

"I'm glad we happened upon you. You are safe here, I assure you." She slipped out of the bed and stood, obviously confused and apprehensive. As she stepped away from the bed, Artemis saw Raven sleeping soundly, exactly where he had laid her. He slowly stood, taking in both Raven and Allanna, thoroughly confused.

"Am I sick? I am seeing both of you." Allanna turned to the bed and quickly stepped back, pointing.

"Is that Raven?" she asked.

"Yes," Artemis whispered, trying not to lose control. Allanna was silent for a few moments before speaking again.

"How did I get here?" Artemis sat back down, letting out a heavy sigh.

"That is a difficult question to answer. When Raven awakens, I hope she can answer your question better than I." Allanna pulled back her hair and checked her wings, going through each feather until she was satisfied with their condition.

Raven opened her eyes, blinking the haze out of them. Slowly she turned . . . and saw Allanna watching her. Leaping up, she screamed, her nails flashing to full length in an instant. Like lightning, black veins covered her face and neck as she leapt at the Shaedling. Allanna fell back as Artemis cut her off, catching her wrists.

Both Raven and her fiancé crashed to the floor of the cabin, Artemis landing on top of her. With all his strength, he pinned her down as she violently twisted and struggled to get up.

"Raven! Raven! It's not the Shaedling! It's her, she's real! She has a heartbeat!" Raven screamed, throwing Artemis a deadly look as black tears spilled from the outer corners of each eye, followed by a single drop of what appeared to be blood. Alarmed, Artemis dared not let go of her for fear of being attacked. "Raven, please," he begged. "She's a girl. Just a girl." Raven relaxed a little, then looked up into his eyes. Shuddering, she blinked, as if suddenly coming out of a deep sleep.

"Sorry," she growled, her nails slowly retracting. The dark veins in her face receded until they vanished as well. The skin about her eyes gradually lightened back to its normal complexion.

"Artemis?" she whispered.

"Yes?"

"Will you please get off me?" She half-heartedly snapped her teeth at his chin, twisted her wrists free, then pushed him off. Quickly, Artemis got to his feet, grabbed Raven's hand and pulled her to her feet as Allanna scrambled into the corner of the room next to the door in wide-eyed terror.

"Raven, this is Allanna. I have to tell you how she got here." Raven looked at Artemis, her anger slowly diminishing.

"Artemis, please move out of the way," she whispered, her voice quivering. With a sigh, he moved aside, glancing at the Sagen Gleighdor huddled in terror,

arms raised to protect herself. As Raven warily approached her, Artemis placed a hand on Raven's shoulder.

"We need to talk." Raven hesitated, then let out a breath, calming down all the more.

"Okay," she whispered, her eyes fixed on Allanna. Slowly, cautiously, like a predator bent on its prey, Raven approached her childhood friend and knelt before her, ready to strike her through. She could feel Allanna's heart beating dangerously fast. The blood flowing through her veins was real, convincing Raven this was no Shaedling. This changed things.

"Allanna, how did you get here?" she inquired in an even tone, trying not to scare her further. The white-haired Gleighdor tried to catch her breath several times before giving up. Reading the beating of her heart, Raven discerned Allanna expected Raven to kill her.

"Allanna, I'm sorry I frightened you. After the three of us talk, you will understand. I don't understand what is happening, but -" she raised a hand to pull the hair out of her own eyes, and as she did, Allanna flinched and screamed, cowering. Raven looked back at Artemis, motioning him over. As he came and knelt by them, he smiled at Allanna.

"It's going to be okay. You are safe now. This misunderstanding is ended." Allanna sniffed, tears streaming her face as she caught her breath.

"Please," she choked, "don't leave me locked up. I can be of use . . . give me a chance." Alarmed, Raven looked at Artemis, who shrugged.

"We are not going to abandon or cage you. We are going to help you. Do you want help?" Raven said, keeping her voice calm. She remembered saying those exact words to a Vampire long, long ago.

"Please," she begged, lowering her arms. Artemis reached into his coat, pulled out a handkerchief and offered it to the girl. Slowly, she took it and wiped her swollen eyes dry.

"I need to check on the men. I won't be long." Artemis smoothed Raven's

hair back and smiled, giving her a look that clearly meant, "I trust you now." Raven snapped at him once, then turned her attention back to Allanna. Before leaving, Artemis placed a hand on Allanna's forearm.

"I'm sure you will become friends with Raven. If you give her a chance, you will see what I mean." Allanna's looked to Raven, eyes widening.

"Okay, I can do that," she whispered, taking courage. Artemis departed, leaving the girls alone. When he was gone, Raven stood and held out a hand to the Sagen Gleighdor.

"Your wings are beautiful," Raven said, trying to calm her down. Allanna shifted her balance, took Raven's hand and allowed Raven to help her up.

"I'm sorry I scared you, Allanna. It's just -" Raven froze as Allanna stood. She shook her head, as if trying to remove water from her ears. Allanna pulled her hand free, looking at Raven in surprise.

"Did you . . . I must be tired." The snowy-winged girl shook her head, as if something had just happened to her as well.

"What's just happened?" Allanna whispered in amazement.

"Did you see something when our hands touched?" Allanna slowly nodded, not sure what to make of it.

"Did you?" she asked Raven.

"Yes. I saw myself, as if I was you, looking at me." The girl nodded.

"I saw myself as well, as if I was you, helping me up." A frightened look twisted into her beautiful face. "I'm still seeing me as I speak to you." Raven bit her lip, not knowing what to think. She looked at her wings, no longer seeing white in them.

"Something happened to us in that place," Raven wondered aloud.

"What place?"

"Allanna, let's keep what we just -" "experienced a secret," Allanna finished. Raven shrugged.

"Do not do that again. It will pass, I'm sure. Until it does, ignore it."

"I'm sorry. Forgive me, Raven. I'll do better." Allanna lowered her head in submission, which agitated Raven. Without thinking, she reprimanded her.

"Allanna, don't act like that!" Startled, Allanna looked at Raven in fear. Raven stepped back, suddenly amazed at seeing herself act in such a way.

"Forgive me, Allanna. I won't talk to you like that again. Do I really look like that? I'm beholding myself, and I do not like what I just saw." Raven sighed, feeling a heavy weight bear down upon her. Maybe this was a lesson she had to learn. Maybe Vannar was teaching her.

Raven watched Allanna nervously groom her feathers. How she got here was a complete mystery. Yet, here she was, and no mistake. Stepping close to her right wing, Raven lifted her hands to it, but not making contact.

"May I?"

"Please," Allanna replied, not daring to say no. Very carefully, Raven assisted her with each and every feather. As they worked, Raven began from the very beginning, telling her everything pertaining to what Allanna needed to know, ignoring the fact that she was watching herself clean her own wings of pure white.

There was a knock at the door just before Artemis poked his head in.

"Is it okay to come in?" Raven put a finger to her lips.

"Please, come in," she whispered. The door opened all the way. Artemis looked relieved, as he briskly rubbed his hands together.

"Ladies, we are well past the point where we should be. Instead of being confused and in wonder, I will give credit to Rinn on this occasion. Raven glanced at Allanna, then walked over to him.

"How far along?" He shrugged.

"You won't believe this, but we are only three days from Port Sathrin, which is located at the southern end of the Zurkel Mainland. Rinn sure is -" Artemis stopped at the look Raven gave him. "I wasn't going to say that the dragon and I had a date while you were unconscious." Before she could react to his teasing, he continued. "Anyways, we are three days out as this ship should normally travel. Based on how far we've sailed, we could be arriving by late morning . . . miss jealous." She shrugged.

"Jealous, am I?" He nodded enthusiastically.

"If you were a porcupine, your quills would be raised. If you were wolf, hackles would be standing on end. If you -" "Shut up," she teased, causing Artemis to laugh.

"How is this done? It seems supernatural, if you ask me." Artemis neared her and ran a thumb over her lip, touched her nails and brushed a hand down the length of her wings.

"Yes, supernatural doesn't seem so impossible these days. Anyways, don't ask me how it's done, I'm just the Captain." Raven chuckled.

"I'm not complaining." Allanna threw Artemis a brief and delicate smile, which he returned.

"I hope you are feeling more comfortable." She nodded.

"Raven told me everything." Raven held up a finger.

"Yes, but I think Artemis needs to tell his side of the story as well. It's always good to get more than one point of view. I think that would clear the tale up a bit more." Raven walked over to her fiancé, placing a hand on his arm. "Just what relates to Allanna," she whispered, throwing him a wink. Pulling close to her, Artemis brushed the side of her face with the back of his hand.

"I love you," he whispered, then placed a hand over his heart as she gave him a gentle smile, thoroughly enjoying this attention. But, since she had an audience, she broke away toward the door. As Raven walked away, Artemis raked his fingers through her hair and watched her leave.

After they were alone, Artemis turned to Allanna, feeling her heartbeat increase. He knew he had to be quick.

Raven stood in the crows nest, watching Artemis quickly tell his side of the story. Raven felt her heartbeat quicken as he spoke to her . . . spoke to Allanna. She knew Allanna was watching the sea, even as she was watching and listening to Artemis. This was so confusing, being in two different places.

"This is insane," she lamented. "How am I seeing through her eyes, as if I am her? And how is she seeing through my eyes, as if she is me?" Raven waited, scanning the waters on the horizon, searching for any signs of land. Oh what she would give to be on land again. The sea was beautiful, but she felt a desire to be on land now.

Soon, she felt the irresistible urge to give in. Startled, Raven leapt out of the crows nest and landed by the captain's quarters. There was no need to hide from the crew anymore. She needed to go down below; it was getting towards dawn, but she was not itching, as before. Ignoring her thoughts, she opened the door to see the bedchamber door wide open. Artemis was just leaving.

"How did it go?" she asked, though the question was unnecessary. He shrugged.

"You better get below," the sky will be lighting up soon."

"I will, but I'm not itching." He stopped and turned.

"Really?"

"Yes. I want to try something . . . I'll be careful." Artemis threw her a look of concern. Gripping his arm, she smiled up at him.

"I'll start from down in the ship and go slow, promise. Before that, I have something to do. I'll be quick." Sighing, her vampire gave in.

"I'll be down in the first hall, at the end. Hurry." Turning, Raven entered the room. As she did, she saw Allanna in front of the chest of drawers.

"You alright?" Allanna smiled.

"Yes. I'll be in the crows nest until you come get me." Raven neared her and absently fixed a few of Allanna's feathers.

"I'll see you when the sun sets, and it is dark. She turned to leave.

"Lucky," Raven heard Allanna whisper. Pausing for only a moment, she smiled.

"Can't deny it," she stated, then left the Sagen Gleighdor. As she departed, she knew Allanna was infatuated with Artemis. Not only that, Raven felt the same emotion. This was going to get complicated, she could feel it in her bones.

As the dawn approached, Raven inched down the hallway toward the outside door. She could feel the sunlight warming her, even though she yet remained unexposed in the darkness. As she came to the door, she felt her arms and face begin to itch. Recoiling from the doorknob, she retreated, backing up until her skin no longer itched.

"I'm surprised you made it as far as you did," Artemis said.

"I'll try again tomorrow," she panted, mentally shaking off the dreadful effects the sun so willingly bestowed upon her. "I better get below," she lamented, hating that silent, dark room she was forced to exist within.

Shortly after entering, Artemis looked all through the chamber, as if searching for something. She watched him comb through everything, pricking her curiosity. After a while he stopped, turned and approached her.

"Find what you were looking for?" she asked. Looking around, Artemis laughed.

"You can't be too careful. You never know who's watching, or listening." Raven shrugged, squinting at him and taking his hand.

"I know what you mean." He gave her an odd look and pointed to the soft chair by the door.

"I'm staying with you, if you don't mind. It seems, every time I let you out of my sight, you get into mischief." Raven tilted her head, the side of her mouth playing into a funny smile. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing more than feeling grateful for you," she casually replied. Artemis squeezed her hand and pulled her over to the soft chair and sat down. Instantly he got up, suddenly full of life and energy.

"Can I do something for you? Don't respond to that." He pointed at the roughly built bed. "Lay down." Raven did as he asked. She watched him unfold a blanket and put it over her. He then grabbed a chair and set it as close as he could to her. Sitting down, he looked at her and smiled.

"Are we going into a dream together?" He grinned, eyes twinkling like two stars.

"If you like, absolutely. We'll talk about that in a little bit, if you wish. Right now, I have something special for you." Suddenly excited, Raven laughed.

"Okay, I have a perfect place we can go. You will love it."

Allanna lay upon the bed, her head hanging down over the side. Playing with the dust on the floor, she began to absently draw designs on the floor with her finger. She watched Artemis reach into his trench coat and slowly pull a small package out. Opening his hand, he revealed it to her . . . well, to Raven. The Sagen Gleighdor smiled, a warmth spreading into her perfect eyes.

Excited, she reached out and took the package. Slowly, she carefully untied the string and put it in his hand. The paper was simple brown wrapping, but that was perfect. Looking up at him, she could not help but grin from ear to ear. Savoring every moment, she slowly unfolded the gift to reveal a plain wooden box. Eagerly, she lifted the box from her hand as her Vampire took the paper wrapping and folded it neatly - just as she would have done.

Allanna drew a circle on the floor and laughed.

Raven reached her other hand up, set it on top of the box and closed her fingers about the lid. She stopped, looking past the box at her fiancé, grinning from ear to ear.

"Go ahead, open it." he said. Focusing on the gift, Raven slowly lifted the top, savoring every moment of this. Once the lid was free, Artemis took it and pointed.

"I wonder what's in there?" he stated with enthusiasm. "Maybe something shiny . . . sparkly," he teased. Looking at him, Raven smiled brightly, her dark eyes filled with wonder. Tilting the box, she gently pulled the small white cloth away and took in a sharp breath, her jaw falling open.

"Oh, wow!" She exclaimed in absolute wonder. Reaching into the box, she lifted a beautiful silver necklace, set with a thumb-sized pendant. The pendant was the color and thickness of a piece of white-gold and polished to perfection. Around its entire edge were set ten small diamonds, and upon its surface was a single rune of black. Flipping it over revealed another rune, this one red.

Artemis took it from her and slipped it around Raven's head. Carefully, he pulled her hair through the one-piece chain and looked at it.

"That was from Rinn; a gift for your birthday. Happy birthday young lady. Grinning from ear to ear, Raven ran her thumb and forefinger down the chain until she came to the pendant. Taking it up, she looked at the diamonds set within its edges, suddenly mesmerized by their beauty.

"I love it," she whispered. Artemis reached into his trench coat again and pulled out another, smaller package, wrapped with identical paper and string. Taking the wooden box and its lid from Raven, he took her hand and set the small package into her palm.

"This one is from me," he stated as a matter of fact.

Allanna grinned happily, and raised her hand to receive the gift. Closing her fingers about it, she stared at it like a child, eye widening.

"Go ahead, open it. I'm sure you will like it." Raven opened her fingers and began untying the string. Once it was free, she slowly wound it about her thumb, then pulled it off and tied the two loose ends of the twine about the tiny coil. Artemis held out a hand.

"Packrat," he accused. Raven placed the string into his palm.

"You never know when something like this will come in handy." He chuckled and raised the string up.

"Oh, I agree. In fact, I believe this is the key to defeating the dragon." Smirking, Raven became distracted by the package in her hand. Removing the

paper revealed a small leather pouch with a draw string. Placing the paper in her Vampire's outstretched hand, she watched him meticulously fold it.

Allanna looked at the pouch in her hand. Carefully, she opened it, wondering what the contents could possibly be.

"You can empty the pouch in your hand, it's safe." Biting her lip, the Sagen Gleighdor slowly turned the pouch upside down. Into her palm fell two matching bracelets of black, each fashioned in the shape of a raven's wing. The craftsmanship was exquisite. She slipped one over her left hand and squeezed it to fit her wrist, then did the same on the other hand. Looking at them, Allanna smiled, genuinely pleased.

"I love them!" Raven said with sudden excitement. "Thank you so much!"

"You are welcome. I have some things for you when we reach my castle - our castle. I think you should go through my collections and pick out whatever suits you best." Raven sat up, grabbed Artemis by the coat and pulled him to her.

"Now I've had two of the greatest birthdays of my life." Artemis took the pendant, holding it up.

"I believe you will have many more wonderful birthdays in the future. I wish I could do more for you. You are worth it." Grabbing his collar, she pulled him into a kiss that lasted for quite some time.

Allanna closed her eyes and smiled happily. This truly was the best birthday ever. Abruptly, she opened her eyes, the smile instantly changing to a frown. Slowly, she touched a hand to her mouth.

"I hate this," she muttered, feeling suddenly alone and forlorn. "I cannot do this." Rising from the bed, she walked to the door, turned and paced back. Three times, she did this before the dresser caught and held her attention. She stared at it for a while, then stepped up to it. Slowly, she knelt down and opened the bottom

drawer. Within the drawer set a night-blue book with a crescent moon on the front cover. Grabbing it, she quickly locked the door, ran and jumped on the bed and settled down.

Raven was thoroughly enjoying herself as she coursed her fingers through his hair. She never wanted this moment to end. This was the best time she - Raven's eyes widened in sudden disbelief, panic washing through her like hot water.

"What is it Raven?" Artemis asked in earnest. Looking up, Raven frantically pointed at the door.

"Artemis, I destroyed the Book of Lies, the one you retrieved out of the sea. Allanna is reading the first page right now!" Without hesitation, Artemis sprung for the door, dropping the string and paper. Grabbing the door handle, he twisted and pulled with a haste that surprised Raven. In no time, he was gone.

After she was alone, Raven got out of bed and walked to the door and slowly closed it. As it latched shut, she set her back against it, hugging herself.

"Allanna," she urged, "don't read it. That book lies." How did the book come back? She had destroyed it! Another worry plagued her more than how the book survived. How was she going to explain to Artemis she knew Allanna was reading the book?

Ignoring the warning from Raven, Allanna smiled as she read the first page, finishing it quickly. Even faster, she turned to page two. Halfway through the second page, the doorknob twisted and rattled, but the door did not open. There was a loud knock at the door.

"Allanna, let me in!" She read the second page in haste, finishing it just before the door burst open, ripping out part of the doorframe as Artemis forced his way through. As he rushed in, she frantically turned to the third page, trying desperately to read more, her eyes widening with surprise. Artemis snatched the

book out of her hands and closed it.

"Anything you read in this accursed tome is a lie, Allanna. I promise. Just leave it alone." Allanna slowly stood.

"Really?"

"It is called the Book of Lies, and for a good reason." She smiled cheerfully, seemingly very happy as she approached Artemis.

"Promise?"

"Yes, I swear it." Grabbing his coat, she pulled herself up and kissed him. Instantly, Artemis pulled away from her.

"What are you doing?" Allanna pointed at the book.

"Read it." Quickly, he opened to the first page and read it. Panicked, he flipped to the second page, his eyes widening in disbelief.

"How can this be?" She smiled happily and shrugged. He looked at it again. "It's my handwriting, but I never wrote this."

"Artemis, I can be anything you want me to be. If that book is a lie, then you really do love me. Why didn't you just tell me in the first place? You didn't have to try and convince yourself otherwise."

"No, no, no, no, this is a deception, Allanna. This book is chaos . . . a deception. Please believe -"

In a rage, Raven burst through the door, smoldering like a freshly doused campfire. Bent on Allanna, Raven drove her back towards the bed, driving her extended nails through both her shoulders. Allanna screamed as she was forced onto the bed, Raven on top of her. Ripping the nails of one hand out of her left shoulder, Raven raised up to strike again, determined to take her eyes out, but a strong hand gripped her wrist, thwarting her attempt to never let Allanna see him again. With surprising strength and speed, Artemis ripped her off Allanna, holding her tight.

"No, Raven! Stop!" he yelled as two deck hands appeared at the outer door, staring into the bedchamber in silent fear. She struggled in vain as he carried her

out and onto the deck. Instantly the sun attacked her, causing her skin to peel and burn. Down into the darkness of the ship and back into her room Artemis bore her. Before letting go, Artemis pressed his lips against her ear.

"Am I safe to let you go?" Growling like an animal, she forced herself to relax.

"Ten-thousand, I would destroy for you!"

"Please, Raven, tell me what to do here. Please. I hate this, but I know your rage and, even to me, it is scary. I beg you, don't make me fear you," he whispered, closing his eyes. Raven's skin was still steaming from the sun's exposure.

"Let me go, please," she growled, her voice filled with stress. Slowly, he released her, raising his hands. Instantly, she shoved him hard and screamed at him, like a mountain cat defending her young from a predator. Artemis's eyes widened as he kept his hands up.

"Look on your left hand. Look, Raven," he begged, pain twisting into his face. Raven glanced at her hand, instantly spotting the diamond ring he had given her so long ago. Shuddering, her eyes narrowed as pitch night tears began to streak her face. Looking at her fiancé, she jumped at him, desperately embracing him.

He received her with open arms, not knowing what to expect. He didn't even flinch at her quick approach.

"Your mine!" she bitterly wept. Wrapping his arms tight about her, he held her, kissing the side of her head.

"Always, I am yours." Sobbing in relief, Raven's nails retracted.

"I did a bad thing, Artemis!" she cried.

"I'm going to go save her, Raven. I am yours, you are mine. Don't you ever question that, young lady. It was the book. Use your head from now on, and stop being so jealous. Use your head!" Nodding dramatically, she let him go, feeling the sting of his reprimand.

"She's losing a lot of blood, Artemis. I can't see the ceiling above the bed

anymore." Again, he gave her a questioning look, then fled the room.

Raven calmly laid down and pulled the blanket over herself, the last of the smoke rising from her, creeping across the ceiling. The sun had scorched her badly, but did not kill her. Raising her wrists, she looked at her birthday present from him.

"Happy birthday, monster," she whispered as tears of blood began to fall from her eyes.

Artemis jumped out onto the deck of the ship at a full run, just as a deck-hand pointed and cried out, "Land ho!" Skidding to a stop, he looked to where the man was pointing, then sprinted to the railing. In the distance, he spotted three ships anchored off shore and three more docked. As he looked on, the shoreline grew close, and all too quickly. Looking around, he saw his men scrambling to maintain the ship, which was doing its own work perfectly. Still, his men worked the ship all the same.

"I will pay all of you before you leave this ship! Come to me to get your final wages when we are finished here. Each of you will receive a generous bonus if you will forever be silent about this voyage and all the details from beginning to end!" He looked around at each crew member, who continued manning the craft as if they had not heard him.

"You there!" He pointed at the nearest crew member. "Come here!" The man looked at him briefly, then continued coiling a rope, as if Artemis was but a ghost. "Well I'm a fool of an Ardenoth," he whispered. "They have no beating hearts. How did I miss that? This explains their behavior, but where are my men?"

Artemis watched on in growing wonder as the ship sailed into the shallow waters and dropped anchor. The sails raised as the anchor hit the water's surface. All this occurred in a matter of a few short moments. Never before in all his long years had he seen something like this. Then his mind caught hold on the truth of what was happening.

"Rinn, you are beautiful," he whispered. "Thank you." One of the ship hands turned and raised a hand.

"You are most welcome, Ardenoth," he stated in Rinn's voice. "Now, take Allanna to the Guild of Healing. It lies at the very center of the city. Go quickly, or she will be lost, and half of what you knew as Raven will fade away forever. Keep the honor you have been faithful to, and I'm sure, in the end, all will be well for you. I have taken care of your crew. They are paid and will not remember more

than a mere voyage of no consequence. Farewell, my friend." Along with twenty-nine others, the sailor dissolved like steam into thin air.

"Am I dreaming?" he whispered. Quickly, Artemis unsecured and dropped a rowboat into the water, then raced to retrieve Allanna. Putting her carefully over his shoulder, he grabbed the rope with one hand and slid down into the boat. As he landed, the boat rocked violently, nearly capsizing. Steadying himself, he held the rope tight, which had painfully burned into his hand. After a brief struggle for balance, he let go the rope, laid Allanna down, and grabbed the ores.

Using both ores, he pushed away from the ship and began rowing with all his strength toward the shore, all the while feeling Allanna's heart begin to weaken.

By the time he reached the shore, his hand had fully healed from the rope burn. Taking her up into his arms, careful not to injure her wings, he made haste into the city.

"Hang in there, Allanna," he said in earnest. "Be strong."

Raven felt the slowing of the ship. She wanted to go up, but feared the sun. Though the sun was painful, it was no longer instant death. She had gone after Allanna for kissing him. Raven had become so enraged, she didn't think before acting. Still, the intense jealousy and anger blinded her of the burning consequence. She would have killed Allanna had Artemis not stopped her.

"I do not care," she thought. "I am going to cut your eyes out, and deafen you when I see you again," she seethed in sudden hatred. "No, no. I can't, I can't," she replied to her own threat. "She can't help it. It's his nature to attract us. It's not her fault. That book!" Raven began grooming her feathers, grateful she was not seeing and hearing what Allanna was doing.

She would never do that again. She had learned her lesson. No, next time, she would only break Allanna's finger . . . just one. After finishing her wings, she started in on her hair. After a while, she was ready. Allanna had found the book she had destroyed, but she was relieved Allanna had not found the other items in the top two drawers.

Raven's eyes abruptly widened, as if someone had thrown cold water in her face. Looking up at the ceiling, a look of hope filled her countenance.

"Could it be?" she mused. "Could I be so blind as to miss such a thing?" Opening the door, she forced herself to walk to the base of the stairs which led up onto the deck of the ship. She could feel the heat of the sun pressing through the door, compelling her to step back.

"Oh, come on, Raven. You did it once. Just do this once more." She quickly ran back to her room, snatched the blanket off the bed, then ran back up. Draping it over her, she raised the front of the blanket and stared at the door that would lead her out onto the deck and into agony.

"Come on," she begged herself. "If this is what I think it is, it will right a great wrong I caused. Besides, there could be -" With a sudden look of hope, mingled with curious greed, she sprung up the stairs, opened the door and ran out

onto the deck.

Instant pain struck her, as if she had jumped into a lake of hot water. She cried out in pain as the sun drove her to her knees. It felt as though she were at the center of a forest fire and was trying desperately to breath. With all the willpower she could muster, she staggered to her feet and made for the captain's bedchamber.

"Mischief," she muttered as she entered in and slammed the door shut, giving her some respite from the sun. Raven made her way to the bedchamber and entered, shutting the door behind. With a creaking sound, the door opened a crack. Inside, she discovered even more relief and sighed. Slowly, she peeled the blanket back to discover she no longer needed it; it made little difference now, even though the door would not close. Throwing the blanket at the base of the door, she turned her attention to a matter of hope. Walking to the dresser, Raven rested both hands on each knob of the middle drawer and pulled it open.

"Please, please, please," she whispered. Snatching up both the burlap sacks within the drawer, Raven walked over to the softchair and sat down. Laying one sack across her lap, she opened the other and slowly looked into it. A sudden, triumphant grin exploded on her face as she spotted a number of toy-sized chests, sacks, as well as a variety of other items, scattered within the bottom of the sack.

"Happy birthday Artemis," she laughed. Closing the sack, her eyes darted to the other. Quickly, she put the one down and picked up the other. Looking into it revealed another identical sack, yet this one had but a single chest at the bottom. Her attention was suddenly captured by the thousands of diamonds encrusting it's entire surface. All in wonder, Raven eagerly reached into the Storing Sack and grabbed hold of the chest.

As he ran into the city, Artemis called out to the people he passed, asking for directions to the Guild of Healing. In this manner, he reached his destination as fast as possible. He could feel her blood running up his right hand and into his sleeve. Her heart was beginning to beat dangerously slow.

As he drew near the city center, a large dome-shaped building came into view. Large, sturdy iron gates surrounded the grounds, rich with a well tended variety of grass, plants and trees. Two guards stood at either side of the closed gate, still and unmoving, both watching him. Artemis noticed silver runes written upon the entire border their robes, signifying they were Guardians. Hope kindled within him as he did his best to formally bow with Allanna in his arms.

"Honor to you both," he said in haste. "This woman is dying from blood loss. I beg your assistance in this matter." Both Guardians stood forth and looked at Allanna. There was one man, a Human, and one woman, a Twilight Elf, whose eyes reflected light as if she harbored two stars within her eyes.

"He will take the woman, Ardenoth. You will stay here with me," the Twilight Elf commanded. The Human Guardian waited until she gave him a nod, then opened the gate and stepped out. Artemis gently surrendered Allanna to him.

"Her heart begins to still," he whispered. The Guardian looked at her, turned and ran, bearing her into the dome with all haste, leaving he and the Twilight Elf alone.

"You came from the sea, I smell it on you. Does her blood bother you?" Shaking his head, Artemis looked down at his blood-soaked trench coat.

"No. She must not die. If she does, I lose everything I've worked for."

"What would you lose?" the woman asked. Artemis pointed toward the sea.

"I believe the woman I brought in, and the woman I left on my ship are the same. I fear if she dies, so to will the other." The Twilight Elf gave him an inquisitive look. Artemis did not give her a chance to ask the next obvious question.

"Milady, I would tell you the tale, if you have time." She looked at him, unblinking, then closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened her eyes again, she bid him enter with a hand gesture. He did so after surrendering his weapons to her without being asked. Taking them, she motioned him to follow her as two Human Guardians jogged up to the gate, taking positions.

Taking a winding path into a small grove of trees, the Twilight Elf stopped and sat down on a circular stone bench. Artemis joined her, just without arms reach.

"My name is Artemis. I brought Allanna to you for healing. Raven remains on the ship. She is Gleighdor as well, but of the Karritch breed." She raised an eyebrow at the mention of Karritch.

"I am Selari. You say Karritch. Does she give you trouble?" Artemis knew the power of the Guardian class and dared tell no falsehood, no matter how insignificant. However, he also knew Guardians could not read thought, unless they walked the path of Psychic as well, and this was extremely rare.

"She gives me much worry, yes. She's trouble incarnate, and has nearly gotten us killed multiple times. She can be frightening, demanding, and is always in need of nurture. Yes, she is the greatest trouble I have ever undertaken." Selari smiled slightly.

"So what you mean is, you love her." Soberly, Artemis nodded.

"With my entire soul. I am the one with innate charm, and yet I find myself charmed by her." Selari laughed quietly.

"What is so special about a Karritch Gleighdor, that an Ardenoth, a true race Vampire, needs her – other than what your race usually takes within the female society." Artemis was taken back by her words. She was socially fencing with him, and had gone straight for the kill in one statement. Still, he had nothing to hide, and so he began at the beginning, when he and his companions had rescued a freezing girl from a wintry death . . . he left out no small detail.

Raven stared at the small chest in her lap, ignoring the itching sensation coursing like the waves of the sea over her entire body. It wasn't so bad within the bedchamber, but she could still feel it. The beauty of the chest sitting upon her lap dazzled her into a trance-like state.

"How did you get so beautiful?" she whispered, her hand resting on the lid. "It's as if you were meant for me, and I was meant for you." She caressed the diamonds adorning the chest. Feeling them call to her . . . open, open, open.

"You could be a trap," she chided. She tapped the top of the chest with a nail. "A traitor," she whispered. "Mischievous Maker." As she spoke to it, Raven was taken by surprise to feel the chest begin to emanate a soothing shadow that quickly engulfed her entire body. Panicked, she almost dropped it, until she noticed the itching sensation was gone.

"Thank you chest. That was uncommonly kind of you." As she caressed the lid with her fingers, the chest slowly grew important to her, like she truly was meant for it.

"Well," she whispered, smiling and thrumming her white nails on the lid, "if you are going to be helpful, I can't see any harm in taking a peek at what you have inside." Slowly, she lifted the lid to see darkness within . . . no, not darkness, but cloth. Standing, she walked over to the dresser, placed the chest on top of it and retrieved an ash-black cloak. After donning the cloak, Raven noticed a piece of paper within the right pocket. Taking it out, she unfolded it to see a message scribed in silver ink.

Raven,

It is a rare thing to find peace and purpose in this life. Enchanted into the medallion you received, are two runes of power. The red rune is known as the Rune of Suppression, and will aid you in curbing unnatural appetite. The black rune will aid you to withstand moral darkness, whatever you perceive moral darkness to be.

You can be a great asset, a balancing factor, whatever side you choose.  
It is vital that you take Allanna to Gaunten. Keep her safe. It is vital that  
you protect her.

I do love you,  
Rinn

P.S.: The cloak will protect you from the sun.

P.P.S.: Happy birthday.

"Rinn," Raven exclaimed, smiling bright, "I love you too." She folded the note, placed it in the chest and closed the lid. Retrieving her storing sack, she placed the chest back into it, along with Artemis's Storing Sack and all the items from the drawer. She grabbed the book and slipped it within the sack as well.

Opening the top dresser drawer, Raven looked over the lot of fist-sized gems. One by one, she took and placed them into the sack, until only one remained in the drawer. She reached in to take it . . .

Selari listened in silence until Artemis was finished.

"And she is alone on the ship now," the Twilight Elf Guardian stated, giving Artemis a curious look. Artemis looked out at the city in the direction of the ship.

"I must get back. She is probably wondering where I am." The Twilight Elf stood.

"Are you sure you are not the one in need of nurture?" He shrugged.

"I do feel without purpose when I am away from her. Can she and I come back together? I would like her to see Allanna. She would love to meet you, I'm sure. She is so innocent, yet not." Selari looked toward the sea.

"Yes. Bring her here. I would like to meet someone like her. It's less boring that staring through a gate. You know Artemis, most of her life, she has lived in solitude. You say she is innocent, yet not. Her condition, or mind set, is the state of one who must grow up faster than normal. It can get complicated. She will mature, if she doesn't get cut down because she makes a foolish choice. But that is what you are for." The Guardian ran a finger down the border of her Guardian Robes, then looked hard at him. "To protect her." Artemis stood and bowed.

"Thank you Selari. I promise to make as good a donation as I can upon my return." Bending down, she took up the daggers, turned and began walking away.

"Before you leave, come with me," Selari called to him. Without question, Artemis followed Selari deeper into the grove of trees. Soon they came to a pool, ever fed by water that poured from a basin that caught the runoff of a stream pouring over a shelf of moss-covered rock.

At the side of the pool, Selari set down his daggers, snatched up two towels and submersed them. She then began cleaning the sides of his neck.

"Lift your hands." she stated. He raised his hands, as commanded.

"I can to this," Artemis said.

"Hold still." She gave him a stern look that meant business. "I am not only a Guardian of this guild, but of the people of this city. You came here covered in

blood, carrying a wounded woman. The people saw you as the champion of another in need." She pushed his hand down and began cleaning the other side of his face.

"If you leave here blood-soaked, it will frighten them." Artemis understood.

"I see. Thank you." She threw him a pleasant smile.

"The only reason I trust you, is because you held nothing back in your story. It is true, I know." She pushed his other hand down and threw the bloodied towel to the ground.

Artemis watched her eyes as she did her duty. After cleaning both his sleeves, she pushed his arms out to each side and worked her way up the shoulders. She then worked her way downward. Cleaning as much blood from his coat as possible.

"This trench coat is exquisite, and enchanted. What are the enchantment properties?"

"To never wear out. There is one more aspect about it I like very much. The inner pocket is a storing enchantment . . . like a storing wallet, or pouch. The daggers - they vanish into the sleeves, and appear when I need them, practically teleporting into my hands."

"Anything else?" Artemis looked at her without blinking.

"Yes, actually. It changes color at a thought." She looked at him, suddenly skeptical.

"Now you are lying to me." Artemis's mouth curved into a faint smile.

"I wanted to see your ability to detect a lie in action, Master Guardian." Turning him about, she began cleaning the back of his trench coat.

"Now you have. No need to do it again." Walking back around him, she locked eyes with him. "Right?"

"Right, Never again, unless I am bound to secrecy."

"But then, you could simply not reply."

"And kindle the suspicion of a Master Guardian?" Artemis pursued.

"You could forfeit silence for a brief explanation. I might accept it."

Artemis sighed, still holding her unbreakable gaze.

"This city must be in good hands. I wager the children love you." Turning her attention back to detailing the seams of his jacket, Selari sighed, as if bored. "My apologies. I spoke out of line, but it was meant as a compliment. Children are brutally honest, with no pretense, no agendas and plots. I admire them deeply." Picking up both towels, Selari rung them out. She then soaked one in the falling water. Turning back to Artemis, she flipped the dryer towel over her shoulder and folded the dripping one.

"Take your trench coat off . . . please," she added, her voice much less formal. Artemis did as she asked, and dropped it behind him.

"Please hold still." Starting at his head, she squeezed the towel, covering him in water that began to rinse off the smell and filth of a long journey. Three more times, she plunged the towel into the pool, and three more times she drenched him with water.

"Your shirt is filthy, and you smell. Before you come back, please make yourself, and your fiancé, presentable." Artemis agreed. He also noticed the sudden change in the beating of her heart, which was now filled with apprehension.

"Selari, what is it?" A bit surprised at his question, she looked toward the sea.

"You need to get back to your ship, now." Without asking why, Artemis grabbed his trench coat and bolted for the gates at full speed.

When he was gone, Selari retrieved Artemis's daggers. Picking up the towels, she jogged back to the guild and entered.

Artemis leapt into the rowboat, grabbed the oars and returned to the ship in haste. Hooking the boat on the line, he pulled himself up to the hoist and grabbed it. Hand over hand, he worked his way over to the side of the ship, swung himself over the railing and landed on the deck.

The door leading down into the ship to Raven's room was open. With all speed, he sprung down the stairs and raced through the hall and entered into her room, crouching and turning as he made his way about the entire chamber. Falling to the floor, he glanced under Raven's bed, then shot up and out of the room.

Up onto the deck, Artemis raced. Making his way to the captain's quarters, he entered slowly, making no sound, and looked about the room. It was empty. Quietly, he made his way over to the broken door, suddenly aware of whispering coming from within.

Sprinting through the door, he saw a dark cloaked figure in front of the dresser. His eyes instantly shaded to black as he watched, until he saw a familiar red glove and sleeve as the shadowy cloaked figure reached into the top drawer of the dresser. It was Raven. Pulling her hand back, she went still as he entered.

"Hello, Artemis," she stated, a sudden gleam in her dark eyes, "I have something for you." Nearing, he pulled her hood back. As he did, she turned on him.

"I thought something happened to you," he stated, relieved. "You are in secondary sunlight, and you aren't itching? She touched the cloak.

"Rinn gave me this for my birthday. It's to shield me from the sun." Raven touched the amulet hanging from the chain about her neck. "The runes on this pendant are protection runes. In all the chaos we just experienced, I did make a friend, just as I wished. It was Rinn." she stated happily. Snatching her to him, he gripped her in a tight embrace for a time. Letting go, Artemis breathed a sigh of relief.

"Glad to see you too, sir." Resting his forehead against hers, he relaxed.

"Artemis, you're trembling. What's wrong?"

"I thought something happened to you. I was worried. Now, what did you say you have for me?" At his question, a look, like a burst of sun, exploded in her countenance, like a child who had just walked in on a surprise birthday party. Raven reached within her new cloak, then froze.

"Close your eyes, and no cheating." With a questioning look, Artemis shut his eyes and laughed.

"What's so funny?" she asked, bearing her teeth at him, though he did not see it.

"Oh, you're just adorable, that's all," he replied. "An excited Soul`Reaver of Vannar. You will make a very persuasive knight." In all seriousness, Raven looked at him.

"Do you really think I'll make it?" Artemis nodded, his eyes still shut tight.

"Yes. Now, you said you have something for me?"

"Yes, I do," she replied as she began brushing off the lapel of his trench coat. "I can't do this without you." Sighing, her very own, personal Ardenoth Vampire shook his head, his eyes still closed.

"Raven, you can do anything . . . anything. You are strong willed, open minded, adventurous and loyal. Your purity is your light in the dark path you walk. It is I who cannot do without you. I am the Ardenoth - I am the master of charming - yet I am charmed by you. It's unfair, but I have to accept it. You are not only beautiful and very attractive, but desirable beyond words. And I have fallen beyond in love with you." At his words, blood-red tears began to escape Raven's eyes, though she tried not to let them.

"That is the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me." She wiped her eyes and looked at her hands. Ignoring the tears, she pulled the Storing Sack from her belt and opened it. Reaching in, she took out the other one and put hers away.

"I believe this one is for you, sir." Artemis opened his eyes and took the sack. Opening it, he looked in, a grin spreading across this face.

"Thank you Raven."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry about the other one." Artemis shook his head, then kissed the side of her head.

"I don't care about objects." Raven lowered her head, smiling. "Let's put as much of the ship's stores in it as possible, Artemis suggested. "I'll start with the pantry below. See what you can find around the ship and do the same, if you will. Then we need to go get Allanna."

Through the entire ship, they collected anything and everything that would fit into their magical sacks. Artemis warned Raven not to keep any of the food items found on the ship. Raven found it humorous, placing a broom down into a sack that never seemed to fill up. "This will never get old," she thought, highly amused as she shoved a coil of lengthy rope into the sack as well.

Once they were both washed and changed, they took the row boat and departed for shore, never to return to the ship again. Raven stared at the sea vessel as Artemis rowed them to shore.

"What happened to the sailors?" Raven asked, suddenly concerned. Artemis smiled.

"When you fell unconscious, Rinn took you to the ship herself. To make this little story short, Rinn paid and sent each crew member home in her own special way." Raven looked amazed.

"Rinn is rather spooky," she stated with enthusiasm. He gave her a funny look and laughed as he drew the oars through the water.

"You are spooky," he said. Raven looked down over the side of the boat, taking interest in a star-shaped creature on the sand at the bottom of the water. She wanted to get it, yet was apprehensive of the water. She remembered the sea monster.

"Spooky, really?" she asked, suddenly distracted.

"Yes," he replied, and looked over the edge of the boat to see what had caught her eye.

"Artemis, what is that?" she pointed.

"Starfish." He stopped the small boat just over the tiny sea creature, giving her a slight smile. "Do you want it?" Raven looked up at him and shook her head.

"I would have no where to keep it." She looked up at Artemis. "But it's not moving. What a strange fish. It has no fins." Looking down at it, she added, "It is fragile. Just seeing this small creature brings a thought to mind. Many people are delicate, just like it is. I want to protect them; keep them safe. Does that sound odd to you?" Artemis shook his head.

"That is what we do, Raven. That is exactly what my purpose has been for hundreds of years. I love your thoughtfulness does you credit, Soul`Reaver. I never thought I would meet, let alone fall in love with, a creature such at you. I believe you will evolve to be great. You are truly one of a kind." Artemis continued rowing, and as he did, a rather large fish swam directly under the boat.

"Woa, look at the size of that shark!" Artemis raised an eyebrow.

"A rather big one at that. It's called a Great White, and is one of the predominant predators in the sea. It's hunting for seals which keep to the shallows." Raven became curious, then suddenly dove into the water, much to Artemis's surprise.

As she dove, she used her wings to propel herself downward. As she did, the shark turned and made a full circle about her, seemingly curious. Raven made her way toward it, wanting to touch it. As she neared, it moved away from her, much to her disappointment. After a time, she surfaced, watching the silhouette of the shark move on out of sight. She had felt its heartbeat; felt its emotion. It was apprehensive and wanted nothing to do with her.

Swimming back to the boat, she reached up, grabbed the edge, and pulled herself halfway out of the water.

"Did you see it Artemis? It was so big. What a wonderful creature!" Humored, he smiled and held out a hand.

"You want back in the boat, or do you wish to keep exploring?" She thought about it.

"I would like to keep swimming. I won't be long. There's so much down there. Do you mind?" He laughed.

"Go have some fun. Just don't drown on me." She gave him a look that plainly stated the impossibility of such a notion.

"I can't drown. I don't even have to breath."

"Does not breathing hurt your lungs at all?"

"Yes, but I just ignore it. It's not so bad. I could dive deep and be just fine." Artemis, leaned down and kissed her.

"Go ahead. I'll be at the shore waiting for you when you are done."

"Can't you just stay here? I might have to come up and ask questions," she inquired, then she hastily added, "Unless you want to get to shore, I don't mind." He waved her away.

"Go ahead, I'll stay right here. Beware the hunting tactics of that shark. They dive deep, then come up to strike with a power bite that rends flesh and bone. They are not cuddly creatures."

"I'll be careful. I can't feel it near, but I'll watch out for it. See you in a bit."

Thanks for letting me do this." He sat back and smiled lovingly at her.

"Your welcome. I'll have to show you some other sites as well, miss curious." She laughed and turned, diving down into the water.

It wasn't too deep. She made her way to the bottom and looked at the starfish, noticing how slow it moved. Picking it up, she and turned it over, studying it. She then placed it back on the sand and moved into deeper water, keeping to the sea floor to avoid the shark, should it come back.

There were strange plants that grew downward from the surface of the water, almost touching the bottom. Within the long plants, there were groups of various fish which evaded one black creature chasing them. She watched it gracefully maneuver through the green foliage, occasionally snatching an unaware fish and eating it. Raven grinned and watched them for a time, until they all abruptly swam away into the thick of the forest of floating green.

She felt the heartbeat of something large to her right and looked to see the shark slowly piloting along the bottom. Quickly, she made her way toward it, desiring to touch it. As she neared, it suddenly shot out into deeper water, avoiding her. Disappointed, Raven stopped, turning slowly in the water, and looked around as strange sounds echoed through the deep, like high-pitched calls that ended in strange sounds. She witnessed a small school of larger fish approaching her, and could feel, by their small heartbeats, they were curious about her. As they neared, they turned in circles about Raven. At times, they headed upward, breaking the surface of the water, then diving back down. Raven recalled seeing these fish before. They were the same ones which had followed alongside the ships. Thoroughly delighted she watched as they gracefully maneuvered about her, making clicking sounds.

One swam within arms reach and looked at her before darting away. Holding out her hand to one, she was delighted when it closed the distance and touched her hand with its nose. Grinning from ear to ear, Raven caressed its

snout, then ran her nails gently under its body. It seemed to love the affection and turned, allowing her to rub its underside.

After a time, more came, competing for attention. After a while of competing for her affection, Raven dove down into deeper water, heading out to sea - but not too far. Looking up, she assumed the water was twice as deep as the entire height of the ship they had just abandoned.

Below, she spotted a rock surface with an opening and headed for it. It was a large entrance, with strange looking rocks which appeared as stony bushes. Swimming to the side of the opening, she grabbed onto the strange looking plants, pulled herself to the edge and peered into a large cave that twisted out of sight. As she looked in, Raven felt the steady beating of a very large heart. Cautiously, she waited, remaining at the edge and out of sight as she looked within the sea cave.

She was grateful to have stayed to the side, for within she saw a large reptile-like creature slowly move into view. It's enormous mouth was similar to the shape as crocodile's. Desiring to get a better look at this creature, she waited, keeping as still as possible. As she wondered at this magnificent creature, she knew it had noticed her by the beating of its heart, and the way its blood pumped throughout its entire physical body. With all her heart she yearned to communicate with this massive creature. Raven did not notice, but as she was filled with desire, the irises of her eyes, or where they once were visible, began to illuminate with a golden hue.

"What are you?" she heard the great sea monster inquire. Taken back, Raven looked at it, rather confused.

"Did you just speak to me?" she asked, suddenly realizing she was talking underwater. It moved to the entrance, startling her greatly.

"I have seen many types in these waters, but never a creature such as you. What are you?" It sniffed, inhaling a great amount of seawater. As it did, Raven's hair was caught in the movement of water, flowing toward its massive nostrils.

"I am Raven. I do not belong in the sea, but was curious about what was

down here." It moved even closer and sniffed again.

"You have a strange smell about you. Raven, are you? Strange indeed." She moved back just a little, seeing a row of rather large teeth on the upper and lower jaws of the creature.

"I didn't mean to invade your home. Will you forgive me?" The great sea monster abruptly glided out of the cave and turned on her.

"You would not be worth the effort." Raven nodded in agreement, finding herself face to face with a massive fish, at least three times the size of the ship she had sailed in on.

"Can I touch you? You ware wonderful." The gargantuan marine reptile moved close, stopping just within arms reach.

"You may," it stated in a voice deeper than any she had ever heard. Seeing shreds of its victims stuck between its teeth, Raven swam up to its great eye and pointed at its mouth.

"It must be very uncomfortable having parts of your dinners stuck between your teeth. Would you like me to pull them out?" Without replying, its mouth opened wide. It waited, watching. Swimming down, Raven began cleaning every scrap and bone from between its long teeth.

"Well," she grunted as she pulled a long shard of bone free, "you sure do need someone who will help you with this on occasion. It must bother you immensely. It would me, and I only have small teeth, compared to you." After working every bit of remains from the sea creature's mouth, she swam up and placed a hand near its great eye.

"There, that should feel better."

"It does," stated the monster in a deep cool tone. "Come with me." Swimming out a bit, it turned and slowly swam back into the cave. As it passed, Raven caught hold of its side-fin and caught a ride, all in wonder and amazement at this encounter. By the way its blood flowed within its body, she knew it was at ease, content, sure of itself.

Down into the large shaft in the sea floor Raven descended. For a long while, she was dragged down into a steepening tunnel that finally opened up into a massive sea cave.

The cavern itself wasn't any more magnificent than the entrance, or the tunnel. What lay at the bottom of the great cavern was what stole her attention. At the bottom, amidst a literal sea of old bones, lay treasure chests, parts of ships, coins by the thousands, and many other oddities.

"Oh, you are a collector, like me," Raven gushed. "But your collection is so much larger than mine." She let go as the great reptilian serpent navigated its hoard collection. Turning, it faced and watched her for some time, making her rather nervous.

"Wow, this is so beautiful. I wish I could stay and go on great adventures with you, but I have something I must do. If I do not, I fear my future will end. What is your name?" she asked, rather taken by this incredible beast.

"Phannix, I was named by mankind."

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, Phannix." She bowed respectfully, to which the great sea creature moved in on her, nearly touching her.

"Raven, take a single item of your choice from my treasure for the service you rendered me." Touching its massive muzzle, she shook her head.

"Just meeting you is enough for me. You are magnificent and wonderful. But I cannot tell anyone about you, for, like me, when they discover what we are, they are not kind. If I were to pick one thing down here, it would be friendship between you and I." There was long silence.

"Agreed, Raven. Your choice is pleasing to me. Yes, alliance is a treasure few pick amidst such riches. Go down and pick one item that comes to your attention. I insist . . . friend." Raven grinned and wrapped her arms about the sea creature's snout.

"I wish I could give you more, but what more could I give than service? You are so much greater than I. Thank you." The serpent dove slowly down,

taking Raven with it. When they reached the bottom, she let go and used her wings to glide among the treasure trove. As she looked and searched, she spotted a chest and made for it. Once at the chest, she found it sealed with a lock. Extending a claw, she worked it into the encrusted keyhole and smiled.

"Simpletons use locks such as these," she said as the great serpent curiously observed what she was doing. In no time, she snapped the guts inside the lock, ruining it. Pulling it off the chest, she dropped it, then lifted the lid. As she did, her eyes opened in wide-eyed wonder. The chest was filled with a thousand gems and other items, one of which caught her eye more so than the gems themselves.

Within a scabbard, was a long sword with a dark, faceted gem forged into the bottom of the hilt. She reached in, then hesitated, looking up at the creature watching her.

"Maybe you want to keep this," she said, then waited for an answer. The creature watched her intensely.

"Over the centuries, many have tried to take all I have gathered. All have failed. I tell you to take one thing, and you ask me if I would rather keep it. I wonder at your tale." Raven shut the lid of the chest and maneuvered to sit on it. She then started when she was saved by three others. Her tale took only a short while, as she gave only general details of her life. She did not want to waste this creature's time. When she was finished, she pointed at the chest.

"I would fancy the long sword, if you would part with it."

"Then consider the sword a gift. I will see you again if the great serpent allows such fortune. Take it, Raven. I give it to you. Our alliance will be a secret. Should you ever need anything within this sea, I will gladly assist you. We could sail into grand adventure, you and I." Raven placed a hand on the large muzzle of the sea monster.

"Phannix, should you ever need anything on land, I will gladly assist you. But, I will not murder or steal that which is not rightfully owned by another. Please, don't ask me to do that." The creature sniffed her gently.

"Agreed, Raven. Now, I have your scent. I will not forget you. Take the sword as a token of our alliance." She slowly drifted off the chest and open it up again. Reaching in, she took hold of the scabbard housing the long blade and turned in time to see the creature turn to swim out. Grabbing its large fin, she found herself being pulled up and out into the open sea once again. Once out of the cave, she let go.

"I will never forget you, Raven of the clouds." Grabbing the point of its snout, she hugged the massive reptile.

"I will return one day. We could go exploring . . . have an adventure together."

Pulling from her, it slowly turned in a great arc and descended back into its cave. As it departed, she heard it say, "That we may, that we might." Then she was alone, staring into an empty cave. She looked at the blade and smiled.

"Alliances," she whispered, her eyes slowly losing that golden hue. As her eyes diminished, her lungs began to burn for want of oxygen. Looking up, she beat her wings with all her might, propelling herself upwards. As she ascended, picking up speed, she recalled the canopy of the forest, and how she breeched it with pure speed and impact. With all her strength, she straightened out her body to give the least resistance against the water as she neared the surface.

With a great splash, she broke up through the surface of the ocean, soaring up into the air. Tucking her wings along her side, she forced a spin that caused ocean spray to fling from her wings and body. Steadying her self, she let out a triumphant cry, spiraling as she flew in a circle high over the water's surface.

Looking about the area, Raven spotted the boat.

When she landed in the boat, she adjusted her wings outward, so the sun fell directly on them.

"Sorry I was gone so long. Look what I found on the ocean floor. It was down in the deeper part." She held out the sword and scabbard to a very surprised Vampire. He took it and unsheathed the blade. Looking at it, he whistled.

"That's a very nice blade, or I'm a fool. Was there more treasure?" Raven shook her head.

"That's it. There is a whole other world down there!" she said with too much enthusiasm.

"Yes there is. Raven?"

"Yes?"

"Next time you decide to vanish for a lengthy amount of time, will you please just let me know. Sometimes you really do worry me." He sheathed the blade and held it out to her. Taking the sword, she bit her lip.

"I will. I'm sorry. I just got carried away. I won't do that to you again, promise." Satisfied, he picked up the ores and began rowing towards the shore. As they moved closer to land, Artemis started up a conversation.

"Raven, when she came to me, we spoke while Rinn helped both you and Allanna.

"She?"

"Yes, and she told me you were a perfect match for me, and gave her blessing for our marriage. Do you know what that means, Raven?" Suddenly understanding, Raven shook her head.

"No," she whispered, becoming instantly stilled and wide-eyed. He grinned, shaking his head. The boat grounded, sliding to a stop. Placing the ores into the boat, Artemis turned on Raven, scooped her up into strong arms and carried her up onto the shore. As he did, he held her tight and whispered something in her ear. Raven's face began to light up as he set her on the sand. Without hesitation,

Raven threw her arms about his neck and launched a hug so tight, Artemis grunted. She pulled back, weeping for joy.

"Really, really?" she nearly shouted as tears of blood cascaded her cheeks.

"Yes, and please," he laughed. She nodded enthusiastically and pulled him tight, embracing him with more excitement than she ever felt in her whole entire life, even when she was alive.

"I accept! I can't believe it!" Snatching her up again, Artemis spun her around until she felt dizzy.

Gasping, she sucked in breath after breath of air.

"Where," she struggled, "am I?" In a blur, she saw men and women about her as she hugged Artemis tight. But Artemis was not here in this room, among all these strangers, and certainly not holding her. Allanna lay face down upon a narrow table with thick, warm blankets covering her from head to toe.

"Be still Allanna. You were gravely wounded. Our spells will complete the healing process, but you need to relax for a while." She heard his soothing voice and looked up, her eyes slowly focusing to see a very old Human watching her, bent by the passing of years. Nearby, were others going about their business.

"You are in my guild house. This is the Guild of Healing, and you, thank Arial Anarias, have been restored back to nearly full health. It should take but a short while for your full strength to return." Allanna instantly liked the old man.

"Thank you sir. Thank you all," she whispered and rested her head back down. He neared and gently patted the back of her hand.

"Rarely do I see such wounds as these. In fact," he lowered his voice, "I've never seen this type before. May I ask, what did this to you?"

Raven pulled away from Artemis, turning her back on him.

"Say a creature from the sea attacked you in the dark. You could not see it clearly. Please, say it." Artemis threw her a confused look.

"What? Why?"

Allanna began to weep and tremble. Wiping her face with a hand, she shook her head.

"No, no, leave me alone! Kill me! Kill me!" she screamed. The old Healer tried to withdraw his hand, but Allanna would not let go. After two attempts, he reached out and touched the side of her head and quickly mumbled a few words.

Allanna closed her swollen eyes and abruptly fell into a deep slumber.

"Raven, Raven, what's going on?" Mentally balancing herself, Raven shuddered and turned to her fiancé.

"You have shared with me something most precious. I cannot deny anything from you." She sighed heavily and raked her fingers back through her wet hair. Looking up at him, she hesitated, fearing her link with Allanna would dampen their relationship. Patiently, he waited as she changed her mind.

"I need to get to Mitcheio, the Essence Witch Guild Master in Gaunten. Artemis, this is not a want – I need her. It is imperative to be there now, if possible. A change is coming over me, and even with all the support you have blessed me with, if I don't receive full training from her, I fear the worst."

That was all she could get herself to tell him. She felt guilty and selfish, but that would pass with training and time. She would tell him the full truth later. In Mitcheio, who she never met, she had a strong hope that all could be made right . . . the balance restored. Artemis held out a hand, which she took without hesitation.

"Let's go get Allanna and leave." She smiled faintly, feeling so much less than he. Then again, she craved his physical attention. If by telling him the absolute truth, Artemis withdrew from her, it would spiral her life down into darkened chaos.

They arrived at the gates of the Healers Guild, and were met by the same two Guardians. Bowing, Artemis smiled pleasantly.

"Long live the Guardians of Utaemia," he soberly greeted them. Both bowed in return. Raven's attention was abruptly fixed on Selari's eyes, as if she could not look away. Artemis placed a hand on Raven's shoulder.

"Selari, this is Raven. Raven, this is Selari. The Twilight Elf Guardian smiled pleasantly, opened the gate, then turned to her partner.

Kaldin, please call another to take my spot. I will be near." Kaldin closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them.

"Strength," he stated formally. Selari briefly placed her hand on Kaldin's shoulder then opened the gate.

"Come in, please," she invited. Artemis entered through the gate, Raven following. Gripping her Vampire's hand tight, she nervously followed, pulling close to him. Pulling his hand free of hers, he wrapped it about her shoulder, throwing her an expression of reassurance. Unsure, Raven looked back at the gate as it closed.

"Artemis, I'm scared," she whispered. "People don't like my kind. I'm a monster, Artemis." Pulling her tight, he continued following Selari.

"I promise you, you are safe. You do not know the Guardians of Utaemia. If you did, you would not fear. We follow one now. Give her a chance." Selari guided them on the winding path that led them into the small grove. Noticing Raven still staring at Selari, Artemis pulled her to him, nuzzling her hair with his lips. Distracted by his sudden display of affection, she smiled and looked up at him.

"We are in public," she whispered, nudging him in the ribs.

"Yes we are, and you are staring at her." Raven lowered her eyes.

"Is she Herald? Her eyes shine as if the light of the Seven Havens burns within." Artemis shrugged.

“I don’t know, and I’ll never ask.” Biting her lip, she pointed to Selari’s back.

“She is beautiful. Her eyes are like diamonds in full moonlight.” Giving up on curbing her social skills, he continued on with his fiancé, and soon entered into the area of the circular stone bench, a place Artemis had been. Selari stopped, turned and watched the two approach. Again, Raven began to stare, to which Selari gave her a curious look.

“What do you see, Raven?”

“Priceless,” Raven whispered, as if hypnotized. The Twilight Elf Guardian gave her an odd look, then slightly smiled.

“That is original. Thank you.” Raven nodded shortly, then shook her head.

“Please, forgive me for staring. You are so wonderful to look at.” Artemis shifted, obviously uncomfortable.

“Coming from a Karritch Gleighdor,” she mumbled, “thank you.” Raven leaned into Artemis, wishing she had eyes like that. Her eyes were dark, spooky, and she hated them. Of all the monsters in the vastness of the planes, and she had to be a Soul`Reaver. She had chosen Vampire. She ended up with bloody, black tears, and the sun as an enemy. Selari, Sala, Allanna and Rinn were more beautiful than she by far, but Artemis loved her, and that was enough.

333 “I will bring out Allanna after she regains consciousness. Until then, do either of you have any questions?” Raven looked up at Artemis and nudged him secretly with a finger. He nodded to her, yet remained silent. It was obvious Raven was to speak for herself. Taking a deep, nervous breath, Raven decided she would open up to Selari.

“I need to be trained by the Essence Witch Guild Master, Mitcheio. She resides in Gaunten. I need to be there as soon as possible. Can you advise me on this?” Openly shocked, Selari's perfect eyes widened as Raven waited for her reply. She looked at Artemis, who gave her a look that confirmed Raven spoke the truth. Nearing Raven, she raised a hand to the side of her head, but not

touching her.

"May I touch you?" Raven tilted her head into Selari's hand willingly and without hesitation, instantly wishing she would be her friend. Selari closed her eyes for only a moment before gasping. Stepping back, she broke contact with Raven, glanced toward the Healers Guild, then back at her.

"By Vannar's blade, Raven. You, you are a -" Selari shook her head, eyes wide in wonder, mingled with shock, touched by fear. Raven looked to Selari, suddenly desperate.

"What am I? Selari finish what you were going to say, please." Selari denied Raven's request as she composed herself with difficulty.

"If you are in need of training at her hand, you are special indeed." Reaching into her cloak, Raven brought out her storing sack and opened it. She reached in and retrieved the diamond encrusted chest and raised the lid. Raven withdrew the letter from Rinn and handed it to Selari.

"This is from a very close friend of mine." Selari took the note, opened it, and began to read as Raven put the chest away. Selari read it over three times, then slowly folded the note and handed it back to Raven, who quickly gave it to Artemis.

"Raven," Selari stated, "I will do everything I can to get you to Gaunten immediately. I will inquire of my Guild Master now. Stay here, or at the fountain, until I return." With no more talk, Selari departed, breaking into a full run. Artemis watched Selari leave, and then looked to his Raven.

"You sure do have an effect on those you meet, don't you?" In utter soberness, Raven looked at Artemis without answering him. Artemis turned his attention to the note, read it, then folded it carefully and handed it back to Raven. As she placed the note in her Storing Sack, Artemis stared at her in silence. Putting away her Storing Sack, she looked at him, seeing in his eyes, noticing the same expression of one who had just encountered a phantom.

"Artemis, it's me. You know that, right?" The reply he gave her scared her

badly.

"I've seen ravens mass in great numbers as war draws nigh." Raven leaned into him, desperate to know his mind. He pulled her close, closing his eyes.

"I knew you were mischief the moment I laid eyes on you. No, not mischief . . . trouble." His comment disturbed her.

"What are you saying? Everyone speaks to me in riddles." More frightened than ever, Raven suddenly felt warm and sick to her stomach.

"Crows and ravens always gather before opposing forces engage in war. They know the carnage to come will become food for them. It is ironic that you, who are of Raven blood, are the balance – as Rinn stated in the letter." Raven buried her face against Artemis's chest as a piercing sensation shot through her stomach.

"But, what does this mean?" She grunted, then abruptly pulled away from him, fearing she might, without knowing, harm her fiancé. Kneeling in the center of the stone circled bench, she calmly shut her eyes and began meditating.

"I remember when we first met," she growled through clenched teeth. Artemis frowned.

"It's happening again, isn't it?" She nodded, gritting her teeth.

"Hurts. Please be wary of me. I don't want to hurt you. I need to focus." Artemis watched on in silence as Raven began to sweat and tremble, crimson tears breaking loose and streaking her face.

He felt helpless in this situation, and wished he could take on her pain. He would give anything to ease what was about to rip in to her like a volley of arrows.

"Artemis, I thirst," she moaned as her face appeared to shrivel slightly, as if suddenly losing moisture. Artemis instantly scooped her up in strong arms, and bolted further into the grove.

As he ran, she laid the side of her head to his chest, shivering violently, hearing the sound of his heart. She focused on it, drawing strength from the music

it played. She felt water touch her mouth and instantly drank deep and long.

“More,” she desperately begged. Again she felt water pouring into her mouth. As much as she could take in, Raven quenched the burning she felt within.

Laying face down on a soft bed, Allanna suddenly lifted her head and screamed, as if the hands of torture were upon her. She began to claw into the mattress and writhe, as if some unnatural thing had seized upon her.

“Water,” she begged. The elderly Healer motioned for assistance. Quickly, three robed healers approached in haste.

“Bring much water, hurry. She needs to drink. Go!” All three departed at a run. Crimson tears began to seep from her eyes, falling to the bed as she pushed herself up. Shaking her head, Allanna began to sob and choke.

“I didn’t know . . . forgive me . . . forgive me!” she screamed.

“There is nothing to forgive,” Raven cried out, growling viciously. “There is only we . . . now, only I.” Raven focused all her will on being one . . . one . . . in two, just one . . . two as one . . .

Agony!

Thirst!

One!

Darkness!

Allanna screamed, filling the entire Healers Guild with the startling and unnatural cry of the monster she had suddenly become. Then came on the Dark, wherein she drifted in agony upon a sea of Death.