

Raven  
“Darkness Falls”  
Book 3

Copyright © Michael G Giles All Rights Reserved

Slowly opening her eyes, Raven returned to consciousness, even as an exhaustion threatening to take her back into sleep. As her vision focused, she found herself staring into the face of a woman with ash-black skin and hair. Her almond-shaped eyes of green struck her as two glistening emeralds; the only contrast to her blackness. Gently, the woman raked her fingers through Raven's hair.

"Welcome to the land of the living. When you gather your senses, rise from your bed. We have much to discuss, you and I." Her voice was soothing, as if she were of bardic blood. Groaning, Raven wrapped an arm over her head, covering her eyes, and waited for her head to stop aching and spinning.

"Artemis?" she whispered.

"He is not here. Of you three, it is only you and Allanna. Your fiancé is staying at an inn not far from here. You can visit him anytime, and you do not have to stay here.

After what felt like forever, Raven slowly sat up. As she opened her eyes, she looked at her black wings . . . from behind. Turning, she saw Allanna sitting up as well. The odd thing about all this, was Raven was looking at a Sagen Gleighdor, as well as herself. On the other hand, Allanna was looking at a Karritch Gleighdor, as well as herself. In unison, she and Allanna both lifted a hand, then lowered it. Then, it all came back to her in a flood of memories.

"I remember. I know, I know," she said in hardly a whisper. Like her, Allanna was of the species of Gleighdor, but of the Sagen breed. Her kind loved the freedom of the lofty mountains, whose natural stone towers and eyries ascended far into the sky, sculpted by the timeless hands of nature itself. Raven perceived many deeply guarded secrets of the regions they called home, and even deeper secrets which lay in the hearts of most all the Sagen Gleighdor.

Steadily, Raven exposed her teeth, hoping beyond hope they were back to normal. Watching through Allanna's eyes, she began to expose herself for what she was, then let the smile go. Well, at least she knew just how much of a smile farmer joe would take before running away. Wrapping her arms about herself, she shivered.

"I hate myself," she thought.

"Raven, do you know who I am?" Rather annoyed, Raven took a deep breath and steadied her mood.

"You are Mitcheio."

"Yes. Raven, who gave you my name?" Raven looked down into her lap, locking her fingers together.

"The Locust Magician Queen." Raising an eyebrow, the Witch persisted.

"Why would she give you my name?" Raven kept her eyes upon her hands, but did not answer.

“Raven,” Mitcheio soothed, “I’m glad you are here. In you, I sense the intensity of great loss, both in family and time. If you will allow my assistance, let me guide you.” Raven sighed.

“I’m finally here,” she whispered. Raven lay back down, exhausted. Mitcheio threw both Raven and Allanna a curious look.

“If you are willing, I will be your mentor for a time.” Raven felt relieved, but more than that, exhausted.

“Please,” she whispered, “I would like that, thank you. I am Raven, and this is Allanna.” Mitcheio placed a hand over her own heart, bowing slightly.

Tell me, Raven, what are you? What have you done?” Sighing, she now knew rest was truly at an end, at least for now. She should have faked sleep and stayed down. As it now was, there was no getting around this. Raven stood, stretching her wings. The white-haired woman stood as well, doing the same.

“I am a Soul`Reaver.” The black Witch looked at both of the women without expression.

“What will you tell your future husband?” Raven turned to her other self and drew close, lifting a hand up as the other did the same, matching hands and fingers perfectly together.

“Well,” the two said in unison, “he must know.” As Raven looked at herself, as well as her other self, a memory flashed in her mind. It was brief, yet significant. She had a plan.

“What happened to Allanna?” Mitcheio inquired. Since she had come so very far to speak with Mitcheio, and had been commanded by the Locust Magician Queen to do so, she let go, holding nothing back.

“In the beginning, when the Shaedling took her, Allanna lost her soul. Allanna was devoured, digested, undone. When I imprisoned the Shaedling within me, I knew I had the right to the corporeal form of the once Allanna. At that point, it no longer mattered. Mitcheio, I perceived an opportunity to increase myself and took it without hesitation. To be two, yet one, would increase my range of abilities and power. You see, I have not committed any crime, for Allanna's form was the creation of the Shaedling. It looked, felt and sounded like her, but it was not.” Mitcheio solemnly shook her head.

“Raven, I strongly caution you to keep this a dead secret.”

“Of course, but not from Artemis. With him, I must be as the newly crafted pane of glass; clear and see through - I have nothing more to hide.” Raven waited for Mitcheio's reply.

“So be it. Are you hungry? You have been sleeping for a full moon as a battalion of Guardians escorted you and your finance here. Even so, it was done with the uttermost secrecy.”

“A full moon?” Raven lamented.

“Yes,” the Witch stated, suddenly very interested in the turn of this conversation. Raven thought for a moment. Why was she always missing out on things? Sighing, Raven shook her head, feeling depressed.

“I might try some food, please. Maybe this time it will be different,” she mused.

“Raven, what would happen if you or your other half died?” Raven thought about the question. Reaching up, she caressed the white hair of her other self, and could feel it, as if she were Allanna.

“Wow, you - I - have silky hair. I could get used to this . . . if I died, and she yet lived, I would remain alive. I don't know what the side effects would be, or if there would be any, but I would continue living.” Allanna tilted her head back and opened her mouth as Raven looked in.

“Let's see those teeth,” she whispered. All normal, unlike mine. Allanna closed her mouth. She frowned at Allanna. She was beautiful, flawless.

“Chrysalis,” Raven whispered. You will no longer carry the name of Allanna. You are Chrysalis.” Turning, Raven looked to Mitcheio, wondering what would happen now?”

“Raven, why would you choose that name?” Mitcheio inquired.

“Less confusing that way,” Raven replied, keeping it simple. Of course, she knew better.

“I know what a chrysalis is. Is there is a purpose behind the name?” Raven shrugged. Mitcheio gave her a flat look, causing her to fidget.

“My soul purpose is to make sure Artemis is never left alone again. Mitcheio, I am going to tell you something, and I hope you keep it in the strictest of confidentiality.” Stepping toward Raven, Mitcheio locked eyes with her.

“As long as there be no adverse effects upon my king and the people under his jurisdiction, I swear an oath to you, that I will keep your next words in the strictest of confidentiality, with the exception of Katcha, my life-long companion and Guardian. I have spoken.” Raven thought about her words for a moment, then proceeded by telling Mitcheio her tale, leaving absolutely nothing out. She also told the black Witch things she had experienced while in her tomb; things she dared tell no other. Many of the occurrences she was forced through, while in her tomb, she now recalled with vivid sharpness. Most of the time spent there was during a time of blackened, blessed slumber, yet it was not always like that.

Her tomb was the most confusing part of Raven's existence, but she left nothing out. Raven unfolded to Mitcheio everything she could remember. After half a day, she finally stopped, her tale ending in the very present.

“You see, Artemis had many wives, and kept his honor with all of them. One by one, he sat by their bedside as each drew her last breath, not only leaving this earthen plane, but wounding him, inflicting his heart with permanent scars.” Raven took in a quivering breath. “One more time, and Artemis's heart might shatter. It quickly became my soul purpose to mend the fractures of his heart and soul with all my love and nurture. I love him more than myself. That is why, against his will, I infected myself with his blood. I will never leave him. If I die, Chrysalis will carry on my devotion to that wonderful, honorable man.” Mitcheio' eyes filled with tears.

“Raven, that is the most noble thing I have ever heard.” Mitcheio quickly dried her eyes.

“No, no, I am fine. I just became emotional, that is all.” Mitcheio smiled lovingly at Raven. “It’s nothing to be concerned about. Training has commenced.” Raven gave Mitcheio a strange look.

“Mitcheio, you weren’t talking to me just now, were you?” The Sardakk Elf Witch shook her head and smiled, fresh tears welling up within her eyes.

“I was speaking to my Warder – My Guardian. He and I share a mind-link when we concentrate on the connection. I let down my guard, and he felt my emotion, instantly knowing I had become overwhelmed with emotion and empathy. He is always there when I need him, day or night.” Raven thought she understood, but Mitcheio’s response confused her. Filled with sudden questions, she thought it best to remain silent, for now.

Mitcheio pointed, drawing Raven’s attention to her hair, which was attached to Chrysalis’s, as if each strand on both their heads had become one. Raven stepped back and looked at her hair rise and pull tight with Chrysalis’s. Pulling back, she managed to separate the ends with a little difficulty. Fascinated, the Guild Master witch moved closer, watching on, with a look of utter fascination.

“I have witnessed many strange things in my life, Raven, and this ranks up in the top most memorable scenes I can recall.” She walked over to both of them and took a handful of each girl’s hair. Slowly, she touched the two ends together and watched. Nothing happened. Letting go, she motioned them together.

“Raven, embrace Chrysalis.” Doing as instructed, Raven turned her attention to the snowy-haired Gleighdor. Looking at her was like looking into a mirror, and yet she was the reflection staring out at herself from within surface of the mirror’s image. As she looked upon her, Raven was in sudden wondered at what she had done. Reluctantly, she embraced the Sagen Gleighdor.

“Do not stop. That’s it, tighten your embrace. Enjoy the comfort of each other.” As they held each other, the Iris’s of the Sardakk Elf Witch’s eyes began to glow, illuminating from green to a golden-brown as she focused on Raven. Startled, Raven looked at Mitcheio in abrupt apprehension. As if she already knew Raven would be caught off guard by what she was doing, Mitcheio held up a hand.

“Be not afraid, my friend. Go ahead, shut your eyes, both of you,” she said as she closed hers. “No matter what, keep them closed. Trust me. No harm will come upon you.” Raven and Chrysalis shut their eyes and waited. Raven wondered what Mitcheio was doing.

“Why did your eyes turn golden?” Raven whispered. The only answer she received was a sudden power that washed over her. So intense was this energy, she began to tremble. She felt Mitcheio move to her ear, and heard her whisper, “Being two may complicate your life. I can make it possible for you to be one person, with the power to shift into either form at will. This

would lessen the complications of your life. Would you like that?” Raven felt Chrysalis as herself. There was much more than merely belonging between them.

“I could still be me?”

“Yes, Mitcheio whispered, clenching her teeth. “I cannot hold such a window of opportunity open for long. There may be another time this can be possible, but know this: Would he truly accept two of you to share his life with?” Raven instantly thought of Artemis, knowing full well what the black Witch was referring to.

“I - I don't. What should I do?” Chrysalis said.

“This is your choice. I have but a short time now.” Raven pulled away from Chrysalis, keeping her eyes closed.

“I can't. I'm afraid. I'm sorry, but this is too much,” she said, her voice laced with sudden anxiety. The power in the room faded quickly, and for a few moments the sound of wind moved through the room, then subsided.

“You may open your eyes. We are done here for a time. Raven and Chrysalis opened their eyes. Raising a hand to her chest, Raven balance her self upon a nearby chair and hung her head, exhausted. Chrysalis made her way over to the bed and slowly laid down. Closing her eyes, Chrysalis let go of consciousness. Walking over to where she lay, Mitcheio looked down upon her.

“She is yet pure Sagen Gleighdor, which means her race has not been altered, as yours has. In this, she is more susceptible to the exhaustion effects which taxes the mortal frame. Raven, I needed to test your resolve. I needed to know. The sudden apprehension you felt, and the rising panic I beheld in you told me everything I needed to know about you, about the two of you as one.” Raven looked at Chrysalis.

“There is more to just me causing this to happen, Mitcheio. When Chrysalis fell, I felt something I cannot describe. This wasn't just my idea, I can feel it in my bones. I wanted it, but I was not the power behind the making. Does that make any sense to you?” She looked at her mentor, hoping she had an answer for all this.

“Strange things happen to those mantled upon by the Essence of Eternity. There are more things in this existence than I could explain, should I live a thousand lifetimes. I don't know, Raven. We can explore this later, if you so choose. First, we need to begin with the basics. I have some things I need to attend to. You are weary. Rest for a while, and I will come for you later.” Raven sat down by Chrysalis and began absently playing with her feathers.

“Thank you,” she whispered, not wanting to wake Chrysalis. The black Witch smiled slightly and left the room, gently shutting the door.

Raven groomed Chrysalis's wings and straightened her hair, after which she began massaging her temples, working her way down to her feet. As she began to work the muscles in her feet, she noticed how perfect her toes were. Kicking off her left boot, Raven looked at her own toes, and cringed.

"I need a bath," she whispered. Continuing her massage, she glanced about the room, taking in her surroundings. A bed, soft-chair, small table and a plain crafted wood chair. There was a simple throw rug by the bed, and a candle holder with a half-burned candle in it. Looking to the back of the room, she spotted a closed door. Assuming it was a bathing room, she finished working her feet over, then kicked off her other boot.

"Please, please, please let there be a bathing tub. Please, please, please." She opened the door and walked in. A table with a round water basin and fresh towels stood over by the left wall, past the door. To the right she was surprised to see a very large basin, filled with steaming water. Curious, she approached and tested the water with a finger. It was perfect. She noticed towels on a nearby shelf, sharing the space with a dozen colored soaps and a simple brush. Walking over, she picked it up and looked at it.

"An entire moon without brushing my hair," she pouted. "I must remember to buy one of these." Grabbing a green soap square, she smelled it. The smell of mint was all she needed to make up her mind on what soap to use. Taking two towels, she turned to the tub and pointed at it.

"You are my best friend," Raven stated in all seriousness. Quickly, she pulled off her red gloves, then removed her outfit and slowly stepped into the water. The bottom was not slippery at all, so she pulled her other foot over the side and lowered herself down into blissful comfort. Tilting her head back, she adjusted her wings for comfort and dunked her head back into the water. Coming back up into sitting position, she laid back and closed her eyes, just as a knock came at the main door to her room.

Startled, she sat up, focusing on her other self to answer the door. Chrysalis must have been fatigued, for she would not wake up. Quickly, Raven got out, grabbed a towel and wrapped it about herself.

"Be right there!" she yelled, tucking in the end of the towel to secure it. She ran to the door and opened it, keeping behind it to shield herself from the eyes of the visitor. As the door opened, Artemis smiled and extended a single red rose, the water dripping from Raven's hair catching his eye. He looked down at the floor below her head.

"You are pouring like a waterfall. I will come back later. Enjoy your bath." He smiled and turned to leave, but Raven caught his hand.

"Oh, no, no, no," she said, "There is a chair in here. You can put it just outside the bathing room door. I need to talk to you about something." Frowning, Artemis remained where

he was.

“Please?” she asked, giving him a hopeful look.

“Alright. Close the door and I'll count to thirty, then enter.” She smelled the rose, threw him a smile, then shut the door slowly, watching him.

“Okay, count to thirty slowly.” Before the door shut, she saw him roll his eyes. Smelling the rose again, she retreated to the bathroom with it and waited. She listened until she heard the door open, then softly close.”

“Allanna, is here?” She heard him whisper as he moved the chair close. Smelling the rose again, she grinned. Focusing, she tried with all her will to wake Chrysalis up, and succeeded.

“Yes, she needed to talk to you as well. Hey, we are in Gaunten now.”

“That is why I came. If you would like, we could go shopping tomorrow if you don't have any plans.” Raven placed the rose to her lips and inhaled.

“None that I'm aware of.” Chrysalis was now fully awake. Now might be the perfect time to tell him.

“I'd love to buy something. Artemis, I need to tell you something, but I don't know exactly how.” She waited.

“Bluntly – I don't mind.” With a nervous grin, she sighed. Chrysalis yawned and stretched, catching Artemis's attention. Artemis turned, watching her slowly rise from the bed.

“Good evening”, he stated as he respectfully stood. “I hope I didn't wake you.” Chrysalis shook her head, not answering. Walking over to the bathroom, she passed by him, throwing him a friendly smile and running her fingers through his hair. Confused, Artemis ran a hand through his hair, fixing it. He watched Chrysalis enter the bathing room.

“Good to see you too, I hope,” he whispered, shaking his head.

“Thank you for the beautiful rose,” Raven called out to him as Chrysalis exited the bathroom holding the flower to her nose, enjoying the scent. Artemis gave her a look that would have made her laugh if she wasn't so nervous.

“Raven, what is going on? I'm confused.” Chrysalis sat back on the bed and stared at him in silence.

“Artemis, I can see clues aren't going to work. Here it is,” she said, slowly getting out of the tub. She grabbed the towel, wrapped herself again and walked out to face him. Instantly, he turned away.

“Look at me, Artemis, you may want to sit down as well. If I don't hurry with this, I will run from telling you. I'm really nervous here.” Slowly, her Vampire turned back, but remained standing. Artemis cleared his throat, throwing a nervous look back at Chrysalis.

“I'm listening.” Raven glanced at Chrysalis sitting on the bed, then looked him directly in the eyes.

“You see that beautiful woman sitting on the bed over there?” He nodded in silence, suddenly apprehensive.

“Well, that is me.” She looked at him, studying his initial reaction.

“What?” he said in disbelief. “You are playing a trick on me. Funny.” This was nerve-racking, and way too complicated. Already, doubt was stabbing at her. Truth be told, Raven was terrified. If she lost him because of this, because of what she now was, she was doomed. She tried so hard not to get emotional, but the tears came.

“I can see you are going to leave me if I continue. I was joking, yes. It was a stupid thing to do.” Both girls wiped their eyes as he watched them. Within a few seconds, his eyes slowly widened.

“No, it's true. The comments on the beech and on the ship . . . the strange behaviors. No, it's true.” Artemis turned Raven away, so she was not facing Chrysalis. “Hold up the same fingers together,” he whispered softly in her dripping ear. Looking up at Artemis, she began to tremble.

“Am I in trouble?” Raven whispered holding up four fingers. Artemis watched the other woman stand and slowly hold up four fingers, her pinky finger not extended. Artemis looked back at Raven, amazed.

“No, you are not in trouble. Allanna, what is the name of the Leprechaun?” Raven looked into Artemis's eyes and mouthed his name as Chrysalis answered it out loud.

“Simeon,” Chrysalis stated. “And you showed me the stars, laying out the course of your wives to me . . . warning me about my future with you.” The answer was whispered by both women in unison. Raven tip-toed and whispered in Artemis's ear the word, Chrysalis, as the white haired Gleighdor said, “Chrysalis,” then stood and walked over by Raven, handing her the rose.

Both women embraced Artemis, who slowly wrapped his arms about the two. Raven could see how hard it was for him to embrace her other self.

“It is true,” he whispered. “Raven what have you done?” Raven sniffed.

“If she dies, I live on. It is the same if I die. We are one.” Taking in a quivering breath, Chrysalis looked at Artemis, beginning to panic.

“Will you send me away?” Anthemis's heart was openly pricked. His eyes began to sting with tears as he pulled them both tight.

“I love you Raven. I love you no matter the mischief you cause.”

“Artemis, I wanted this, but I did not cause it. I don't know how this happened.”

“Well,” he said, obviously trying to accept this turn of events, “I just hope you keep being honest with me. I like that.” He kissed Raven on the forehead.

“I should have brought two roses,” he whispered.

After Chrysalis and Raven were bathed and dressed, Artemis set the soft-chair by the night stand and sat down, watching the two in silence as they sat on the edge of the bed. After a short time, Raven began to fidget. It felt as though he was studying her. At length, she leaned her head against Chrysalis's shoulder and closed her eyes.

“Artemis,” Chrysalis whispered with open reluctance, “I know this is not going to be easy for you. I remember what you whispered to me after you carried me up onto the beech.” Artemis seemed suddenly uncomfortable, but said nothing. “Artemis, there are Humans, Elves, Dwarves, Shallants, and many other races in the vastness of Utaemia. As a great and steady ocean current, I am born as another race among many races. I may be the only one at present; a forerunner of my species, but I am still here, and belong to this world. I hope you can see that. Artemis, I’m still me.” She sighed nervously. “Maybe Utaemia is not ready for a creature such as I. Two - yet one - is not normal. I did not choose this, but I feel it is right.” Artemis stared at Chrysalis for a moment, and then sat up straight, his countenance brightening.

“Chrysalis, did you know the Sardakk are a race of Elves that can be found in only one place? It is called Sardakahn Citadel. Their skin is blacker than night, just as the region in which they dwell. I recalled being in a town quite some time ago. I saw a Sardakk Elf – there were none others like him. They treated him with disdain, distrust and contempt. They either ignored him, or were openly hostile. To make a long story short, they drove him from the town.” He looked at Chrysalis, shaking his head. “Bigotry, biased to the end. Had they known what his heart was like, and just how overly-loyal that man was, they would have left their doors unlocked at night without fear. This one man would have protected them with his very life, and I dare say, half the fathers in the town would have begged him to marry their daughter, had they known the noble heart that pumped within his chest.” Tears on blackness slipped from Raven's closed eyes, but she said nothing. Chrysalis was openly shocked.

“That's terrible,” the beautiful Sagen Gleighdor whispered, her eyes watering. “What happened to him?” Artemis chuckled.

“He left them without a fight, made his way to Gaunten, the city we are now in, and became a secret ambassador for the High King, Nishane Asmond. He never spoke a word of it to anyone. If I hadn't seen it for myself, I would have never known.” Without opening her eyes, Raven asked, “How do you know all that?” Artemis smiled.

“I followed him. I was extremely curious about this man, and his culture. I'm glad I trailed him to this great city. I would not have given Solenti his sword back had I not known of the Sardakk Elf I had followed.” Chrysalis gave Artemis a sly look.

“Please, go on.”

“Had this Sardakk Elf informed the king, there would have been dire consequences for those townsfolk. It was ironic to see such a man, who could have slaughtered them all, walk

away, and then be given the charge to protect the vicinity wherein that town lay.” Raven shot off the bed and threw her hands up.

“He is their protector? How did the townspeople react to that, once they found out?” Artemis laughed, watching Raven with a gleam in his eyes.

“Wow, when you get animated, you get much prettier,” he stated, pointing at her. “Stunning, to say the least.”

“So, you are politely telling me to calm down.”

“You are wonderful, and I love you with all my heart.” Raven blushed.

“I am? You do?” She already knew he loved her, but being called wonderful made her absolutely happy. She never thought of herself as wonderful.

“Yes and yes,” he laughed. Subdued by his admiration, she sat back down, laid her head back on the shoulder of Chrysalis, and closed her eyes again. Artemis looked at Chrysalis and continued.

“Now, you are no different here. You are Sagen Gleighdor, Raven is Karritch Gleighdor. Either you will be hated or liked. Raven has already been the recipient of violence, yet she simply walked away. She could have killed them for striking her, but she did not. I love how she has a deep-set conviction to walk the path she does. The truth of the matter is, I just have to get used to you, so I do not feel as though I am betraying Raven.” Artemis continued talking to Chrysalis far into the evening, and seemed to enjoy her. At length, he pointed to her.

“Is she sleeping?” Chrysalis gave him a look that indicated he has just asked a stupid question. Artemis raised his hands and shrugged, then shook his head.

“My apologies. You are right; this is new. I will do my best to get my head on straight about this, I promise.” Chrysalis gently laid Raven back onto the bed and stood. Turning, she held out her hands, motioning him to stand. Slowly, Artemis stood, nervously slipping his hands into hers.

“Will you please kiss me?” she whispered. Artemis looked at Raven then back at her, sudden fear twisting into his eyes. She gave him a look that coaxed him to kiss her.

“It's alright, I promise.” Letting out a quivering breath, her Vampire slowly, leaned in and gently kissed her. As their lips met, he stiffened. She opened her eyes to see him looking at Raven. Reaching up, she ran a soft, gentle hand down his eyes. She tenderly kissed him with all the love she felt in her heart for him. Slowly, she felt Artemis relax, then return her affection. As they parted, she opened her eyes and smiled.

“Now we have taken the first step.” She looked over her shoulder, drawing her fiancé's eyes to Raven, who sat up and stood, smiling happily. Chrysalis surrendered his hands to her other self, then sat down. Raven embraced Artemis tight, hugging him.

“So, you said we were going to look at a wedding ring for me and you?” Looking at Chrysalis he nodded.

“We better get you two rings.” Raven shook her head.

“I don't need two – just one. I really don't expect more than that.”

“You know, if I ever had any doubts about this, you just laid them to rest.” Raven laughed.

“I would have been so jealous,” Raven growled.

“And that's not a pretty sight to behold, no, not at all,” Artemis assured her. Raven pulled his head down and kissed him as Chrysalis laughed, her eyes shining like the sun off freshly fallen snow.

“Two roses are better than one, fangs. Don't let her fool you, she and I both know we each need a ring. Otherwise we'll fight over who gets to wear it.” Artemis grinned, trying to pull back from Raven. But laughing wickedly, Raven would not let him go.

Artemis, the Ardenoth, surrendered to an evening of laughter, enjoying his fiancé's playful and delightful spirit. By morning, Chrysalis had fallen asleep, curled up in his arms as Artemis enjoyed the comfort of his soft-chair. Raven was at his side, her head laying across the arm of the chair, content as a cat basking in the sun.

When morning came, Artemis stood, cradling Chrysalis in his arms. Gently, he stepped over to the bed and laid her down, taking great care of her feathers. He smoothed out her long white hair, gently tucked her in, then placed a blanket over her. When he was done, he turned to see Raven standing at his side, watching him, a warm smile playing across her face.

“Do you need to be tucked in as well?” She lowered her head, eyes narrowing at him.

“It felt good. Thank you. I've always woke up to you holding and sheltering me . . . protecting me. Now I know what it looks and feels like in every aspect as a living girl, and I very much like it.” He took her hand and turned to Chrysalis.

“I must say, her lips are very soft, and she has the most gentle touch. She's incredible. In fact, had I known her before you -” Raven reached up and wrapped her fingers into his collarbone and twisted, giving him a wicked grin.

“Artemis, now you are making me jealous,” she stated. Leaning close to him, she look him square in the eyes. “My lips, my gentle touch,” she stated, grinning. Placing a gentle hand to the side of her head, he returned the warmth of her smile, then pushed her away, knocking her to the floor. Slowly, she stood, giving him a look that plainly stated, “Let's do this!” Raven pointed at Chrysalis.

“Are you going to make me - my other half - a Vampire?” Feigning indigence, Artemis raised a finger and shook it slowly.

“No.”

“Why not? I want to do it.” Artemis's expression became suddenly stern.

“No, and that is final.” Laughing, Raven readied herself to launch at him, but Artemis shook his head.

“No,” he said, holding up a finger at her.”

“Take me shopping,” she begged.

“Yes.” Looking much relieved, Raven sighed.

“I was beginning to think no was all you could say.” Artemis stepped up to her and began running his fingers through her coal-black hair, obviously enjoying it. Reaching up, she rested a gentle hand over his heart, listening as it sang to her.

“I will take her” Artemis pointed at the sleeping beauty, “shopping.” However, Raven, you need to be here for training.” Faking a pout, Raven gave him a distressed look. Not giving her a chance to say anything, Artemis gripped her hair in both fists and tilted her head so he could look into her eyes.

“Please be careful, Raven. The type of training you will undergo here is far more intense and dangerous than any normal guild. Don't take any undue risks. Can you do that for me?” She grinned, reached up and caught him by the back of the neck and pulled him into another kiss. After she got what she wanted, she let go and nodded.

“After you get back, can we fight?” she eagerly inquired.

“Yes, of course.” Raven grinned from ear to ear. It was so wonderful to feel so good. She thought about all they had gone through to get here. It was mind boggling to think she had made it to Mitcheio. “From now on”, Raven thought to herself, “things are finally going to get better.”

For a long while, she worked the neck and shoulders of her very own Vampire. As she manipulated each and every strand of muscle, an unpleasant thought came to her.

“Artemis, what if it happens again while you are gone?”

“Well, I will have you with me still, right?”

“Yes, of course, but you know Chrysalis will feel it also, and her body is not as strong as mine. She won't be able to weather it. What I'm saying is, she'll make a scene.” Artemis looked at Chrysalis.

“Then I will take her quickly out of the public eye. I will not hesitate, I promise.” Pacified, Raven began to work his neck over again.

“Wow, you are good at this,” he said with a look on his face that, not only flattered Raven, but began to break her down her will to resist him. “Raven, whenever both you and Chrysalis are in public, you need to act separate - play the part. You know, like we do.” Raven smirked.

“Like us?” Tilting his head back, Artemis gave her a serious look.

“You know what I mean.” Flipping her head, she let her hair fall into his face, then pushed his head away. “Raven, how do you remain so light-hearted? Your life has been a living torture chamber. How to you do it?” Raven walked around the chair, jumped lightly into Artemis's lap. Feeling euphoric, she put her arms about his neck, placed her forehead against the

side of his head and closed her eyes, trying desperately not to eat him alive.

“Because I have the most wonderful fiancé in the world. You fill me with purpose and hope for the future. You are kind and understanding, lenient, yet strict. I could go on, but I won't. I know who you are, and that is saying something. You are the fuel to keep me burning. Artemis, being in my tomb for so long makes me feel like a puzzle that is missing many of the pieces. I have to tell you, though, many of those pieces, though vague and dreamlike, are beginning to surface in my memory. They call to me.” Artemis looked surprised.

“Do you want to share any of those experiences with me, or are they too painful?” Raven cringed, feeling herself losing the battle against his charm.

“Are you alright? You are trembling,” he asked, suddenly concerned. Stopping him from moving, she nodded, clinging to him.

“It's you, not me. I do wish you could turn it off, mister vamp' boy.” He suddenly laughed.

“I'm sorry, I wish I could to.” Raven laughed, desperately hanging on to a thread of sanity.

“Artemis, most all the memories which have come back to me, especially the darker ones, I refuse to let into my waking thoughts. I keep them buried deep inside my head, clouded over, so I cannot see them. I know they are right there, on the verge of discovery, but I don't want them.” As she spoke, she began to recall one particular memory. Whether it was in a dream, or if it was reality, she did not know. The recollection caused her to shudder. Artemis watched her carefully, his face twisting in pain and sympathy.

“It's okay, Raven. If someone were to cause you pain, I would deal with them, and quickly. I hold to that same rule with myself. Let it go if you can. The majority of my life's work is for you and other's to feel at peace. You have given up so much for me, and I feel compelled to make you happy.” Raven stared deeply into his eyes, as if she were attempting to discover everything about him. With her thumb, she began to play with his left eyebrow, all in wonder at this wonderful man. She would share anything with him, at any time, in any place. She trusted him without hesitation, without reserve.

“I remember standing upon a vast pinnacle, overlooking an expanse of woodlands, unlike any other I've ever seen, or even heard about. While I stood there, looking down, a wind struck me, threatening to dislodge me from the precipice I stood upon. Feeling as though I was being watched, I looked behind me. To my astonishment, I beheld a man to my right, yet back two paces, as is the customary escort of a Guardian. I noticed he was Sardakk Elf, and thus I did not fly away. He wore a plain and simple band of black-gold upon his ring finger. He was donned in exquisite clothing and bathed in obsidian shadow. Remembering Solenti, the Knight of Vannar, I smiled at him as he drew close. But as he looked at me, I beheld the bitterness of the

unholy burning within his eyes. Frightened, I tried to leap from the pinnacle, but he caught hold of my right wing, denying my ability to soar away. He then began to inspect me, as if I were a mere piece of property, a thing. As he grabbed my jaw and turned my head this way and that, he forced my mouth open, scrutinizing my teeth. He liked what he saw, I suppose, for he forced me to come with him. Frightened of this man, I decided not to fight. I thought if I did, I would be slain. Besides, his grip was powerful; I knew I could not break it. I did not try.” Raven struggled to continue, taking in a few breaths to calm her emotions.

“Where did he take you?” Raven flinched, as if Artemis had suddenly jumped out of the shadows.

“To his castle, into his castle. Within a massive courtyard, expertly paved with the rotted and bleached heads of countless victims, he made me go. At its center, I beheld a tower of bone. In through an alcove, crafted from the ribs of some great creature, he dragged me, forcing me up a massive spiral staircase. When we reached the top, he pulled me through another alcove, also crafted from the rib cage of a massive beast. There, he released me and pointed down into the courtyard from whence we came. I looked down as I tended my badly bruised wing, witnessing a horrific scene below.” Raven shuddered, then continued.

“As I stared down, a dark and sinister feeling fell upon me. From alcoves all about the walled courtyard marched all manner of undead, until they filled every open space. In silence they stood, riveting their attention upon me . . . not on the man who brought me there. I looked into the empty and void eye sockets of every Skeleton, Zombie, Ghoul, Mummy, Lich, Revenant, and many other types of Undead, until I had looked at them all. I soon realized what this army was for. I turned to the man, to ask him a question, but he was no longer with me. I was alone. Again I looked over the edge, taking in the macabre scene below.” Raven shuddered and took in a number of quivering breaths.

“Suddenly, from behind, I was pushed from off the tower, even as every undead in that terrible place threw bones up into the air, making it impossible for me to fly. I fell into the mass of the un-living, striking the boney ground with great impact. I tried to get up, but many unnatural hands grappled with me, holding me down as my body regenerated from the fall. After I was whole again, they set me upon my feet, pushing me toward a massive set of gates, crafted from the skeletons of great creatures. One of the undead, a Revenant, gripped my wrist, placed it on the great gates and pushed it open, using my hand. As the gates opened, to my dismay and horror, I beheld a slope descending into a sea of undead, beyond which I beheld an ocean of pure blood. From this ocean emerged thousands of undead.” Raven shivered and moaned, as if in pain, but continued.

“All of them knelt before me, every last one, even the Revenant. There were also great skeletal dragons, which paid homage to me.” Raven stared at her love, fixing his hair with trembling hands.

“Artemis, I was bred to rule them; they are mine. Artemis, this army is real. Please don't ask me to tell you more. Please.” Artemis stroked Raven's hair tenderly.

“I will only say this once, Raven: You are more special than you know. I can feel it. Whatever side you choose to join will be strengthened, just as Rinn stated in her letter to you. Raven, now I know what you truly are. I know I've said this before. But, in light of the information you just gave me, it is perfectly clear. Your evolving should have given the nature of what you are away, but I was blinded by my own love and infatuation for you.” Raven's eyes widened.

“What am I?”

“Gorgonoth. I am confused at why you are here, but that will be revealed in time, I hope.” Raven felt a chill flow through her.

“What is a Gorgonoth?” Artemis let out a breath and shook his head.

“A leader, a commander of a chaos legion. Raven, you have been bred for war.” Raven instantly panicked.

“I don't want this. I hate it.” The scene of her carrying Artemis's body out of the cabin of the ship flashed in her mind. She had killed every one of them, and when she was finished, she was covered in gore and blood! What kind of a future was that?

“Artemis, please, help me. I don't want to hurt anybody. I just want to be free with you. What you say I am makes sense to me now. Now, all those other memories make sense . . . perfect sense! I hate them for doing this to me. I hate them!” She cried as crimson tears began to streak her face.

“Easy, easy,” Artemis soothed as he took her into his arms and began stroking the back of her head. It took some time, but, with his help, she managed to calm down. Raven felt belonging and purpose when she was with Artemis. Indeed, he was her anchor to sanity. Burying her face in his neck, she wept for a long while. Once she was calm, Artemis began to whisper gently in her ear.

“One thing yet remains a mystery to me. Gorgonoth are Vahkrin, dwellers of the Underworld. You are Karritch Gleighdor. I wonder at this, and there can only be one other explanation. Raven, based on my past experience with such a race type, Krysha, I believe you are a Figment. You are a creature of pure intelligence that resides within the Plane of Intelligence. You have been brought into a physical body. Now, after a thousand years, you are nearly ready, should you be willing, to take your place as the queen of that undead army. That is why you were labeled as 'Queen'.” Raven blanched at his words.

“I don't want to be anyone but me, just me. Why does this have to be so complicated?”

“Just remember one thing, Raven. You are not Vahkrin, and your birthplace is not the Underworld. I don't believe that for a moment. You are free to choose what you will be. Nobody can take that choice from you. I am here for you. You have healed a great wound in my heart,

and I honestly adore and love you with all my soul. Don't forget that." Raven seemed to shrink into Artemis's embrace. She just wanted peace, happiness, to belong, and not to a blood-dripping mindless army of husks and filth. The thought made her head spin. She didn't feel well.

"Artemis, I need to lay down."

"One more question, if you don't mind." He pointed at the sleeping Chrysalis. "Does she help you with what you are going through?" She gave him a questioning look.

"What do you mean?"

"How you are now, does being two, yet one, give you strength, make you happy? Does it make things easier to deal with?" She thought about his question for a minute.

"Evolving does not pull me away from shadow, but the appearance of Chrysalis in my life gives me some comfort, yes. Artemis, it's you that keeps me grounded. Also, being in this place will help, or I hope it will. It seems my life is taking a turn for the better. That is what makes me happy."

Artemis smiled, falling into silence. She was weary, but before her waking thoughts ceased, Raven wondered what training Mitcheio would give her first. Whatever happened next, she would do her best to succeed. She also wondered what the next stage of her evolution would bring, and how it would effect Chrysalis, who was in direct contrast to herself. Chrysalis was a social being; a complete opposite. She liked that. It made being cordial so much easier.

From now on, Raven would create a social atmosphere between she and her other self in which others would see her as two separate people. Looking to her, Raven noticed Chrysalis was dreaming about riding on a great winter dragon. Chrysalis was not dreaming, she was . . . in a daydream.

As soon as Raven focused her thoughts and mind, Chrysalis's dream ended, even as she rested against Artemis and shut her eyes, falling instantly into a blackness, wherein she fell victim to mind-chilling nightmares.

Chrysalis slowly came to and stretched from head to toe. She sat up and extended her wings, working the sleepiness out of them. Chrysalis was so beautiful, like a herald come from Vannar. She looked at Artemis, suddenly grinning from ear to ear. Settling her wings down against her back, Raven raked her fingers back through her hair, fixing it into place.

“Good morning Artemis,” Chrysalis cheerfully greeted him. “Good morning Raven,” she added. She was practicing. Artemis glanced at Raven, who looked at Chrysalis and ignored the look he was giving her.

“Morning,” Raven cheerfully replied. I trust you slept well?” Raven's other half walked over and sat on the arm of the chair and began playing with her Vampire's hair. Artemis shook his head ever so slightly.

“You know how she - you - slept.” Raven looked openly shocked.

“Artemis, I'm practicing my public social adequate.” Chrysalis's fingernails pricked his scalp, causing him to cringe.

“I understand. My apologies ladies.”

“Oh, it's no problem at all, Chrysalis soothed as Raven growled. Chrysalis began caressing Artemis's scalp as she glanced at Raven, a disapproving look etching into her face.

“Raven, be nice.” Raven stretched up and snapped her teeth at Chrysalis, then fell back against her Vampire.

“I'm just playing around.” Wiping his face, Artemis reached up and wrapped an arm about both of them. Pulling them tight.

“Remember me in all this, please,” he begged. “Chrysalis, I like your name. It really fits. This in your permanent name then?” Chrysalis nodded.

“I am Chrysalis, yes.”

“Are both your ring fingers the same size? Hold them up, both of you.” They both shook their head, declining.

“Same size . . . we checked,” they stated in unison.

“Okay, shall we go shopping then?” Both women stood, bubbling with sudden excitement. As he stood, they both hugged him.

“Thank you,” they stated as one. Chuckling, he kissed Raven.

“You are a joy. Thank you for saying yes. I know it's been so long for you. I admire you, truly I do.” Raven blushed slightly, her face filling with joy. Tears welled up in her eyes, then cascaded her cheeks. She was so happy. As she wept, Artemis took a single tear upon his finger and looked at it. It was clear as pure water, yet faceted like raw crystal.

“The tears you shed are neither black, nor red. They are like glass, or crystal. I wonder why?” She smiled happily, and placed a gentle hand over his.

“I would love a silver diamond in a black-gold band. Keep it simple, so the ring is out of

the way as an obstacle. I'd hate to get it caught on something in mid-flight. Well, I would regenerate, yes, but the ring might get lost. However, for Chrysalis it would be bad. Chrysalis piped up happily.

“Raven is right. Oh, I would love a silver-diamond in a white-gold woven band.” Raven suddenly glared at Chrysalis.

“Are you trying to out class me? You are pushing your luck.” Artemis closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Practice or no, will you please take it easy on me? I feel like I'm talking to myself. You are both getting in my head in a bad way. Raven, we need to work on social adequate, just you and I. Maybe Mitcheio would be better suited to help you.” The look on Raven's face quickly compelled him to add, “I will spare no expense on the rings. Also, I insist you both buy full wardrobes and matching jewelry for every occasion. How does that sound to you?” The stunned look on Raven's face quickly melted away, replaced by a chuckle.

“I apologize for driving you crazy, Artemis. I'll do my best. We will do our best. I hold to what I said long ago. Tell me when I'm getting to be too much. Thank you for letting me know. I promise to do better.” Artemis sighed in relief.

“You know, Raven, sometimes you scare me. Most of the time you drive me crazy, but in a good way.” Bringing her hand to his lips, he formally kissed her knuckles. He then did the same to Chrysalis, who beamed with delight.

“I'll see you when you get back,” Raven said, hinting that he should leave. Artemis stood.

“I would enjoy having dinner with you this evening, if you are free,” he invited, admiring her with his eyes. “You look absolutely stunning . . . for a Vampiric, Soul`Reaving Gorgonoth.” She smirked.

“I look foreword to being with you for dinner as you eat.” Artemis laughed.

“I'm sure you will eat what is placed before you at dinner. That is a promise.” Her eyes widened.

“Really? I hate food.” Her Vampire laughed.

“Yes, but the food we will be eating, I'm sure you will love. Chrysalis and I will be back in a bit.” Opening the door, Artemis smiled at Chrysalis.

“Ladies first.”

“Thank you sir,” she said, and walked through the door. Turning back, Artemis caught Raven's eye and winked.

“See you soon.” Raven waved him away.

“Love you,” she whispered as the door to her room shut.

Chrysalis soon found herself out of the guild on a wooden porch. Artemis stepped up beside her, offering an arm. Taking it, she followed his lead as they stepped into a back street, known as the Lonely Alley, and began walking toward the more busy part of the city. Chrysalis looked back at the guild entrance. Wooden beams held up the eave of the building. The planks the porch was constructed of resembled the planks which the side wall of the guild was fashioned with. It looked mundane and thrown together; nothing special.

“Is this an alleyway?”

“This guild is out of the way of the common crowd. Looking at it, one would think it a private storage area of some sort.”

“Shall we go find some rings milady?” His question caused Chrysalis’s eyes to light up.

“Do you know the ring I would love to have?” she asked. Artemis bumped her gently. Chrysalis stumbled and would have fallen, had she not been hanging onto his arm.

“Chrysalis, my apologies. Forgive me, please. I’m used to Raven’s surefootedness.” She steadied herself and glanced up at him with no expression.

“Raven is definitely more balanced than I am. But, you know what I love about being weaker and more soft?” Her fiancé shook his head and placed a hand over hers. She could tell he was still a bit uncomfortable with the idea of her. Of course, he had become dedicated to Raven. After walking down the empty back street for a ways, he looked at her.

“No, what?” He looked back down at her arm through his, distracted.

“Are you alright?” she inquired. He nodded.

“Please, just give me time. I’m used to Raven, that’s all. Anyways what do you love about being weaker and softer than Raven?” Chrysalis turned her hand over and intertwined her fingers through his.

“I can be the social aspects of my life, mingling with others who won’t feel intimidated, or frightened by me.”

“Chrysalis, when we get to the main road, I want you to do something. I want you to secretly watch the eyes of the people, and listen to the comments they make about you. You will, no doubt, be surprised at what others think about a Sagen Gleighdor who is blessed with unnatural beauty.”

“No, I don’t want to know.” Artemis laughed.

“I bet the men take one look into those eyes of yours and stop dead in their tracks, or trip and fall.” Chrysalis exhaled quickly.

“You mean like you do with me at times?” Laughing, Artemis beamed a smile at her, completely charmed.

“Exactly! Yet with those not used to you, it will be more obvious. They won’t stand a chance.” Waving him away, she lowered her head, blushing.

“So, you think I'm soft do you?”

“I do?”

“That's what you said.” Artemis shook his head, but Chrysalis preceded him. “I said weaker and softer than Raven . . . to which you replied 'weaker than Raven . . . and soft'. You didn't say softer than Raven, just . . . soft.” Artemis smiled.

“I did say that, didn't I?” Chrysalis smiled and looked at him.

“You know, the way you used the word soft had nothing to do with that part of my question. You, my Vampire, were talking about something else.” Reaching up, Chrysalis brushed a hand through his hair, causing him to stop dead in his tracks. Artemis turned on her.

“I know it's you. I really do. There is no doubt about it. Why is this so difficult for me?” She thought about it, watching his face.

“Artemis, in the predominant society, a man takes on one woman, and the woman knows she has her man. It's a one-to-one relationship. It's most always like that. There are a few races who take on more than one wife. I look at it and wonder how the women get along. With you and I, it is different.” Chrysalis bit her bottom lip thoughtfully, just as Raven always did. Then she slowly placed her hands on his chest, feeling just how nervous he was.

“Don't be afraid of me.” She slowly ran her hands up and around the back of his neck, feeling her fingers combing up into his collar-length hair. Gently she guided him down until their lips almost met, and stopped.

“I love you fangs. I always will.” She felt him relax, then give into her as he wrapped his arms about her waist, pulling her close.

“I love you more,” he whispered, then kissed her ever so gently. After their second kiss, they parted, both smiling at each other.

“Now the ice is melting away,” he said with a cunning look. “I'll have to do this more to break it.” Raising her eyebrows, she threw him a look that made him nod. She was really enjoying this – a simple commoner pulling the strings of a Vampire!

“Your eyes are mesmerizing,” he whispered. Another string pulled, she mused. Laying her head against him, she looked back the way they had walked. In the distance, she saw the figure of a man, or so she thought, standing as the center of the street, watching them. At first, she thought nothing of it, until he spread out bat-like wings, crouched, then launched into the sky, vanishing over the rooftops. Pushing away, she pointed.

“I think we are being watched. A black winged humanoid just flew up and over that building. Artemis looked where she was pointing, daggers flashing into his hands.

“Chrysalis, there are many races which are welcome in Gaunten. We are not the only foreigners here. Yet, just to be safe, let's continue to the main street.” In haste, they moved on, Chrysalis staying close to Artemis as they jogged out into the full sun and into a busy street filled with travelers, locals, guards and playing children.

Chrysalis was happy to be out in the public, but instantly overwhelmed. Never in all her life had she seen so many people, and never had she dreamed she would see a castle of such magnitude and beauty ascending into the sky. She glanced down at Artemis's hands, relieved to see them empty.

He led her into a river of people, leaving the small and lonely street behind them. Chrysalis looked back as they made their way down the heavily packed avenue, searching for a dark winged humanoid she hoped she would not see. She did not focus on any comments others might be making about her. The body language, and the way the winged man looked at her, had disturbed her greatly.

"It's okay," he stated casually, "I wager he was just taking the same route. No doubt, he is as nervous of us, as we are of him. Chrysalis looked at Artemis.

"Either way, I reported it to Mitcheio. She is training Raven at the moment." Artemis caressed Chrysalis's hand.

"A wise choice. We will be a bit quicker than expected. At the first opportunity, we will return. Chrysalis, what's wrong?" Frowning, she gave Artemis a disappointed look and came to a sudden halt.

"We are to return to the Guild right away. Katcha, Mitcheio's Guardian, has been dispatched to escort us safely back." Without hesitation, Artemis took Chrysalis's hand and led her casually to the other side of the street, where the flow of people would not hinder their return.

Once they neared the alleyway, Artemis guided her across the street, directly through the hustle and bustle of the crowd and into the alley. Quickly, he scooped her up into his arms and ran back the way they had come. They had gotten about halfway back when a group of black-winged figures landed, cutting off the way before them. Skidding to a stop, Artemis turned back only to be cut off again by six more. They were penned in. Artemis set Chrysalis down, throwing her a nervous glance.

"Do everything I tell you to do, go it?" Chrysalis nodded quickly as the winged humanoids began walking cautiously toward them.

"Mitcheio says to lay flat on the ground, now!" Chrysalis yelled. Artemis pulled her under him as they both dropped to the road's surface. Instantly a shock wave of energy ripped through the alleyway, engulfing their attackers. Chrysalis twisted her head back to see the bones of every last one of them fall to the ground, smoldering like freshly doused camp fire logs.

They lay there for the space of ten breaths, waiting, all sound about them silenced. Artemis looked down at her, moving as if time had slowed almost to a stop. As he looked into her eyes, she could see nothing but concern for her, and the deepest commitment to keep her from harm. His eyes shaded to black ever so slowly as his fangs extended.

Wrenching her arms free, she reached up and put her left arm about his neck. She knew

that to evolve into what she needed to truly become, she had to be Raven's true opposite. All her efforts to become more would be wasted if she died now.

Slipping one arm up towards his mouth, she held Artemis tight for leverage. Taking her free hand, all she had to do now was roll it up into his fangs as hard as she could. It would be quick and easy. As she braced herself, she looked into his eyes, seeing him watching her, the recognition of what she was doing setting in. A sudden feeling of guilt pierced her heart at the look he was giving her, causing her to quickly abandon her design.

All in a moment, time caught up. A black warhorse skidded to a stop directly over them. Artemis gave Chrysalis a confused look as a heavily armored Guardian leapt from his steed, landing on the ground with heavy impact.

“Up, both of you!” he commanded in a deep stern voice. “I have them both milady. They are unharmed. Yes, your spell cleared the alley.” Artemis rolled out from under the horse, then helped Chrysalis out as quickly as he could without hurting her. Katcha began walking his steed back to the guild, keeping the both of them between his plated warhorse and himself for protection. Artemis took up the rear, behind Chrysalis, so she walked in the most secure position.

As they moved toward the guild, a large red-skinned humanoid with cloven hooves landed, striking the cobblestone road before them. The impact split the roadway, throwing rock and dirt in all directions. Chrysalis suddenly grinned as its eyes locked onto her. Without hesitating, Artemis began to advance, daggers at the ready.

“No, this one is mine!” the Guardian commanded. “No offense Ardenoth, but I want this one!” Backing down, Artemis slipped back to embrace Chrysalis, shielding her.

“No offense taken!” Artemis called out as Katcha ripped a blade forth from its sheath with blinding speed. The moment the sword was drawn, a terrible energy began pulsing from it, coupled with a thrumming that filled the air about them. Chrysalis watched Katcha's sword, her eyes locked onto its deep-red blade. On the entire surface of the weapon, she could see thin, black, worm-like runes twisting and writhing; living glyphs of power.

The cloven-hoofed monster snarled, brandishing two blades of its own in answer to Katcha's challenge, eagerly accepting the invitation to duel. As its curved sickle-like blades hissed forth, the air was filled with the voices of seemingly countless people, both men, women, children, and the distinct voices of inhuman creatures, screaming, crying, moaning and begging for mercy. Chrysalis recognized these souls as locked in torment within this foul creature's blades. Shuddering, she looked away, covering her ears to shut out the chaotic symphony of misery, tears of blood quickly spilling from her eyes.

Without a word, Katcha advanced, a grin spreading across his face as if he craved this confrontation. The creature laughed mockingly, advancing as well to meet him in open combat, also eager to do battle.

“Sardakk Guardian, you should have fled while you could. You cannot win. It is hopeless for you now.” Mocking Katcha, it growled out in diabolic laughter, increasing its speed toward Mitcheio's Guardian, who's eyes hazed over with golden runes of power. Katcha's plate armoring took on a sheen of golden light as he moved against his foe.

Chrysalis looked at Artemis, blood streaming her face to stain her beautiful dress. Her sobbing abruptly stopped as she stared at him. Horrified, Artemis locked eyes with her.

“What is it Chrysalis?” he called out to her over the tumult of painful chaos filling the air. The only answer she gave him was a sudden grin as a shadow filled the entire alley, as if the sun had been blotted out.

Katcha ignored the distraction and evaded both the blades of the heathen, flattening himself to the ground and sweeping his adversary off its feet. His counter move was so sure and swift, the fiend had no time to regain its feet before Mitcheio's Guardian buried his runed blade into the skull of the beast and leapt over it, evading an instant counter attack meant to cleave his legs.

“You talk to much,” Katcha growled as he stomped its wing, snapping it at the shoulder. Even as its wing broke, he ripped his blade from the fiend's skull and drove it deep into its back, between the shoulders, finishing his offense with a shield slam to the neck.

With a strong back-hand, the beast sent Katcha hurling into the side of the nearest building, cracking the structure. As he fell, he landed on his feet, instantly sprinting toward his enemy again, not giving it the chance to regain its feet. With all his strength, he kicked it up under its arm-pit, at the closest area by its heart. Multiple bones snapped as the beast was hurled against the opposite side of the street, slamming into the structure.

The sudden realization that this creature was receiving no wounds frightened Chrysalis. Katcha had no idea what he was fighting, and this just might be his undoing.

Taking on a defensive stance, Katcha watched in terrible fascination as this creature leapt to its feet and charged.

“It's using the trapped souls of its victims to block the damage!” Chrysalis called out.

Hearing Chrysalis's warning, Katcha felt sickened. Still, he felt compelled to destroy this thing, no matter how long it took. He had to win, for Chrysalis's sake. This was a fight he would never willingly walk into, but there too much at stake. As the two began to stalk toward each other a sudden scream from above - an unearthly cry - caused all but Chrysalis to stop and turn their gaze upward. Chrysalis grabbed Artemis with both hands.

“The queen is coming!” She screamed with sudden, disturbing delight. At that moment, Raven descended between Mitcheio's Guardian and the monster, landing with an impact that shattered the street beneath her feet. Raven slowly stood and pointed at the monster.

“Put up your blades! Your weapons are no use against me!” she viciously screamed. Artemis took an involuntary step back, so fierce was Raven’s presence. He had never seen her like this, and it truly took him off his guard. In answer, the beast snorted, giving her a confused look.

“Do not make me . . .” she seethed, her eyes blazing with a solid black fire, that ignited, burning up into her hair. Narrowing her eyes, she bore her teeth and took a step toward the creature. Again, it snorted, then backed down, slowly sheathing its weapons. As its blades returned to their sheaths, the chorus of misery filling the area was quenched. Lowering its head it bent to one knee, bowing in submission.

“My queen.” it whispered in subdued, utter reverence. Raven slowly approached it and placed a hand upon its massive shoulder.

“Look upon me,” she commanded, her voice softening. Slowly it raised its head in obedience. Raven’s face softened, and the dark fire of her eyes diminished to a smolder. She looked into its eyes for quite some time, as if she and the creature were silently communicating.

“Vrog,” she whispered, “I need you to realize, I just saved your life. This Guardian is far beyond you. Let your pride go, now. It is me, remember? Us?” Vrog took in a deep breath and exhaled, slowly relaxing. As it did, she embraced it lovingly, holding it tight.

Artemis instantly tensed, and would have moved toward the filthy creature, but Chrysalis grabbed him. As he looked at her, she shook her head in silence.

“Wait,” she whispered. “Watch.” Artemis turned his attention back to the scene playing out before them.

“My queen,” Vrog whispered reverently, wrapping both its arms gently about her. “I have missed our campaigns, our adventures.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been gone so long. I am going to come back, but not quite yet. I have important things to do before I return to Crimson Citadel. I won’t be long. Vrog, these people I’m with won’t hurt me. I’ve been building trust with them.” She lowered her voice so only Vrog could hear. “The more I know, the more trust I gain, the more they let me in, the harder they will fall.” Vrog stroked her wings gently, unaware that its fingers began to bleed.

“I cannot. I was sent to bring you back now. Can you not come with me now? He is there, and wishes audience with you. I am to give you this message:

A thousand years in the forging of your dark soul has been completed. It is time to fully evolve into what you were made for. Remember your oath.

Raven’s eyes suddenly widened and she pulled her head back, looking into the face of Vrog. Reaching up, she stroked its horns. A single memory surfaced that she had forgotten, and it shocked her to the core of her soul. She tried to speak, but failed, then tried again. She felt as

though she was choking on her words. Caressing the Vrog's mane, she nodded. Closing her eyes, she focused on her will to speak.

"I remember now. I remember my oath. Thank you Vrog. Again, you have upheld me. You were always there for me, even when I first met you. We were both fledglings. Do you remember the first time we met?" Vrog nodded and placed his forehead against her's.

"I will never forget that moment. You came into being, winged and wonderful to me. And I, a loathsome beast, knew you would despise and reject me." Raven laughed and gripped Vrog tight.

"Well, you feared wrong. When I was introduced to you, I don't know what it was, but my new beating heart latched onto you so firmly as to forge us into inseparable companions. Though I never told you this, I fell in love with you." Vrog was openly shocked at her words.

"I have loved you since they placed you within this body. I never knew you loved me. How is it possible to love something like me, by something like you?" Raven whispered to Vrog.

"Say you have not found me yet. Can you do that without risking your life?" Vrog shook his head.

"No, he knows and sees and hears through my eyes when he focuses on it. At this moment, he is not present. I'm sorry, my queen, I was sent to bring you back home, now." Raven kissed the winged humanoid on the neck and smiled.

"But I'm so close. Can you not come for me in one moon's time?" Shaking its head, the beast shot a death glance at the Guardian, who waited, ready to attack. Artemis looked openly dumbfounded, an expression of doubt creeping into his face.

"My queen . . ." it whispered in Raven's ear, then pulled back, watching her with a gleam in its white eyes. Raven thought for a moment, then pressed herself against its body, smiling as she rested her hands on its chest. Chrysalis shuddered, gripping Artemis tight as they witnessed the scene before them.

"Hush and be still my love," Chrysalis whispered to her Vampire, kissing him. Confused, Artemis forced her away.

"What are you doing?" he whispered, a tone of desperation in his voice. As if suddenly enjoying herself, she winked at him and closed her eyes.

Raven nestled into Vrog's arms and kissed it up under the chin lovingly, then lunged with all her might upward, sinking her fangs into its neck as she extended her claws, piercing deep into its heart. She could feel its soul resist as its body froze. With all her will she fed, pulling its life essence and blood up through her fangs, drinking deeply, as she slowly bound its essence and consumed it. Sensing its heart stop, Raven pressed into its neck deeper, sucking every shred of soul remaining until she knew it was hers.

As she Digested Vrog's soul, Raven tore power from it, keeping it for herself, adding it

to her own. Unsatisfied, she tightened her bite all the more, feverishly feeding, searching for more as it slowly withered. Breaking loose from the hold she had on it, Raven grabbed the hilt of one of its blades and unsheathed it. Instantly the air was filled with misery and torment, as before. Holding the blade up before her, she began to sob.

“I am so sorry. Please forgive me.” Closing her eyes, she bit down upon the blade, piercing the mettle as if it were clay. Instantly, Raven began to claw at the blade, like an animal, a predator, drawing the many souls into her being.

As the last soul was forced into her, screaming, the blade shattered into a thousand shards. Taking in a deep breath, she gasped in euphoric wonder, then pulled the other blade free. After feeding every last soul into her being, the blade shattered as well.

“Vannar help me,” she whispered, struggling against the temptation to keep the power she now harbored within. She felt invincible, unstoppable. Shuddering, she looked upon the eternally frozen husk of Vrog, narrowing her eyes.

“I am Raven! I am a monster! I am a monster!” she screamed. In an instant, she tore into Vrog's corpse, reducing it to shreds of lifelessness over the cobblestone street.

Standing, she backed away from the withered gore upon the ground and beat her wings, a golden hue beginning to glow within the darkness of her eyes. Her frame shook, as if some internal battle raged on within her. Beating her wings furiously, she scattered Vrog's remains and shrieked, gnashing her teeth at her fallen adversary.

“I am Raven!” Throwing out both hands, palms raised to the heavens, Raven gazed up into the sky, tears of blood, mingled with the black of night, flowing freely from her eyes.

“All but Vrog and the Shaedling, I release. Go, go to your eternal destinations. Go in peace. Forgive, forgive me my past . . . please, I beg you.” Thousands of glowing orbs instantly flowed out from Raven's body, just as they had in the depths of Rinn's abode, swirling about her in a magnificent column of light. On the air, a chorus of whispering could be heard.

“We forgive . . . you were not to blame . . . we forgive . . . avenge the lost . . . make it right.” Twisting in a brilliant column of multi-colored lights, the once trapped souls, the victims of her past, ascended into the sky and vanished. When it was done, Raven fell to her knees, her wings dropping to the street beside her. Looking at the remnants of Vrog, she grit her teeth, a great pain filling her countenance.

“You are no soul. I created you, I now unravel you forever.” A red orb escaped Raven's chest just over her heart, screaming in rage as it began to unravel and shred before her. As the last fragment of Vrog vanished, Raven fell back to the street, gasping and mourning the loss of a once trusted and true ally.

“Vannar, thank you. Thank you,” she whispered, then fell still, as if she were dead. Chrysalis fell to the cobblestones and became still as stone. Artemis looked at Katcha, who sheathed his blade.

“Milady, the enemy has been abolished. I see no more danger.” Katcha waited a moment, then nodded.

“We are on our way now.” Katcha looked at Raven, then Chrysalis.

“You bring Chrysalis. I will bring Raven. We need to get them back to the guild quickly.” As he spoke, Raven gasped, arching her back, Chrysalis doing the same. Slowly, Raven struggled to her feet and turned to Artemis, resolution etched into the features of her countenance.

“Artemis, I have much work to do.” Chrysalis nodded, agreeing with her other self.

“Much work to do,” Chrysalis repeated. Raven placed a hand to her head.

“Regret,” she mourned, then staggered. Instantly Katcha reached out and supported her. She gripped his arm, shaking her head.

“Most noble Sardakk, an army is coming, bent on the destruction of Gaunten. After Gaunten has fallen, it is the design of this army to invade and take over of the entirety of the Zurkel Mainland.” Without comment, Katcha led Raven, carefully supporting her as they made their way back to the guild.

Once inside the back door of the guild, Raven parted from Katcha, turned to Artemis and staggered toward him, pulling her wings in with great effort. As her strength began to fail, Artemis took Raven up into his arms and followed Katcha back to their room in silence. Chrysalis was spent of physical strength, and grabbed onto Katcha's arm as he guided them through the hallway.

“I'm jealous,” she whispered. Katcha gave her a strange look, to which she quietly laughed. Rolling his eyes, he tended her to the door of her room in silence.

Once inside, Mitcheio's Guardian escorted the three into the room. Once inside, he looked at Chrysalis as she wiped blood and dirt from her eyes.

"Are you harmed?" he sternly inquired as Artemis lowered himself with his back against the wall, refusing to be parted from Raven. Chrysalis watched Artemis, a thin smile playing across her lips.

"No. Thank you sir. I'm just tired. Katcha, if you had killed it, it would have only become stronger, feeding off the souls it had stored. Artemis growled softly, obviously frustrated.

"Raven, you spoke to it, as if you knew it. Can you tell me anything about that? Please," he added. Sighing heavily, Chrysalis nodded, feeling her strength beginning to wane.

"Yes, I will try. That creature is known as a Harvester Vahkrin. It comes from the Underworld. Those weapons wielded were known as Harvester Scythes. When those blades take a life, the victim's soul is stored - forever trapped in its blades - to be used, consumed each time the wielder receives a mortal wound. Katcha could have struck it down a thousand times before it finally died. Don't worry Artemis, that particular Harvester Vahkrin was not real. It was a dream creation. Although it had the appearance of a living creature, it was not. There is one thing that confuses me - the souls trapped within its blades should not have been real. Something is wrong, but I cannot put a thought to it." Chrysalis shivered.

"So each time he killed it, or should have, a soul would have been consumed to evade death. That is diabolic."

"It is," Chrysalis lamented, sliding down the wall beside Artemis.

"Artemis, that is not all. When Raven was a child, she was beaten frequently and locked up. Denied the necessities of life at the hands of cruel parents. All she had left in life were her dreams." Chrysalis struggled to continue. "For years, she built a dream world of fantastic things and places, some of which were terrible. While she walked within that world, she was their queen, they were her people. For a time, she found joy therein, and for years she continued to build and expand its many realms, little by little." Chrysalis shuddered, clenching her teeth to keep from crying out. Artemis adjusted Raven carefully, making her comfortable. Lovingly, he brushed the hair from her face. As he did, Raven slowly opened her eyes, looking away to avoid eye contact.

"I created all of it, even Allanna, who needed rescuing. She made me feel needed, wanted, in control."

"Are you saying she is not real?"

"No, she is very real. I created her, but I never caused us to be one, which is a mystery to me. I recently gave her half my soul so I could . . . so I would not feel so alone. Artemis, I have existed for centuries in my dark tomb. It is my fault she was taken. Had I waited, as you said to

do, I could have saved her.” Artemis closed his eyes.

“I curse the day I left you there!” Tears began to fall into Raven's hair as Artemis choked and broke down. “I am so very, very sorry.” Raven lifted a hand to the side of his face, slightly shaking her head.

“Artemis, while I was in my tomb, dreams were all that kept me going as my life faded into memory. I was letting go. If not for the girl child, I would have died.” At the mention of the girl, Katcha raised an eyebrow. Seeing his reaction, she sighed.

“Solenti, a Knight of Vannar is one of your people, Katcha. Do you know him?” Katcha nodded once, but did not say anything.

“Ask him about our conversation. She came to me twice, telling me I was worthy to stand. Who is she, and what does that mean?” Katcha knelt down, looking Raven over.

“That is something only she can tell you.” He then moved to Chrysalis, supporting her. Raven looked at Katcha, rather disappointed.

“Solenti told me the same. If that is how it must be, then I will wait and hope.” Shaking his head, Artemis gripped her in a tight embrace.

“But you are here now. You know that, right? Deep down inside, you must have so much regret and hatred for this fool.” Raven instantly became defensive, like a mother cat protecting its kittens.

“No, no, what happened was my fault. Artemis, that day you came back to camp wounded, I saw the blood on you. Before helping you, I scratched myself on the arm. I lied to you. I wanted so desperately to belong to you forever, that I did the unthinkable. You see, now it must be you who hates me.” The wonderful man holding her shook his head.

“I cannot forgive you, Raven. I cannot forgive you for something I knew about. You see, I knew what you had done, and, beginning to love you, I faltered. I allowed it. So, you see, there is nothing to forgive you for. Again, I beg your forgiveness for being selfish.” Raven caressed the side of his face, wearily smiling.

“What you just called selfish, I see as a lonely man reaching out . . . to fulfill a life of happiness. Isn't that what we all want? I cannot forgive you for something you are not guilty of.” She curled up in his arms and closed her eyes.

“There will now be war. They will do anything to reclaim me, even if they must take you to control me. It is out of my hands now.”

“Why? It's your creation. All of it is yours. Can you not dissolve it; make it go away?” Hearing his heartbeat, she smiled without feeling the happiness that usually accompanied such an expression. There was something else in all this chaos, something he needed to know. She was remembering more and more, and she needed him to know. There would be no secrets between them.

“There is a place called the Dream Dimension, where dreams are born and come to life. I

believe Vrog was a test to see if my dream minions could be controlled against me. When I saw Vrog, I recognized it as mine, though it had undergone centuries of servitude to another. Still, Vrog was mine, and no one else's."

"Another?" Artemis stated, suddenly concerned.

"Yes. There is another who broke into my world and upset the balance. As a child, I feared him and fled, never to return. That's not all. To feel safe, I created an opposite world . . . a world of heroes and mighty beings to counter my dark world I now feared. It was glorious, but fleeting. As I grew into a young woman, I was forced to study under a cruel Locust Magician master. In time, all I kept of my dreams was Allanna, and actually doubted her existence. Now I fear she was the anchor this being, this stranger, this invader from the Dream Dimension, needed to enter into the world we now live." Artemis slowly stood, helping Raven to her feet.

"Are you alright?" She shrugged, then nodded.

"Yes." Chrysalis stood as well, with Raven's help.

"Artemis, Katcha, whoever took control of my dream world is out there, somewhere . . . and he hunts me. I don't know why." Katcha placed Chrysalis's hand upon a nearby dresser.

"I am needed. Do not leave the guild." With that said, he departed.

"Thank you, Katcha," Artemis and Raven stated. When he had gone, Artemis walked over to Chrysalis, holding out an arm, which she took.

"Raven, why did you name her Chrysalis?" Sighing, Raven walked over and stood before the two.

"Because she is the catalyst in my evolution." He gave her a curious look.

"How so?" Raven began running her fingers through Chrysalis's hair, gently combing it out.

"Physically, she is everything I admire and want in myself. Think about what I am going to tell you next, and please allow me to finish before you say anything. Keep your expressions to yourself as well. Let me say what I need to say. Do I have your word of honor on this?" Artemis looked at the white haired beauty, briefly, then turned his attention back to Raven.

"Raven, what are you doing?"

"Artemis, your word, please. Or I will keep this to myself." Sighing, he reluctantly gave in.

"You have my word or honor," he whispered, suddenly looking as though he had seen an apparition. She noticed his hands were trembling. Raven took his free hand in hers. She looked deep into his eyes for the longest time, then began weeping tears of sky-blue.

"All my life has been pain and misery . . . until you rescued me from that frigid mountain top. I spent so long in the dark of my soul, fleeing the light of day. All of it is yet unbearable. I am beginning to recall memories, events which weigh heavy upon my shoulders." She turned her attention to Chrysalis, a spark of hope igniting deep within the void of her eyes.

“I created her, then took possession of her physical body. There’s more to this I don’t understand, as I said before. Still, I poured half my soul into her, granting her real life. She is me, and I wish to complete her by giving her the other half of my soul when the time is right. I will live on with a fresh new life. My memories of all hardships and journeys through darkness will fade away, but there is healing in that. I will be new, and all my dreams will fade away, leaving that invader trapped in nothingness forever.” She turned back to Artemis, who looked like she had just struck him through the heart with a blade.

Tears cascaded freely down his face as a look of terrible regret carved into his countenance. He looked at Chrysalis in silence for a while, making sure she had nothing more to say. When she gave him a look that meant she was done, he grit his teeth and struggled for words.

“I am not in love with her. I like her very much, but it is the Karritch Gleighdor I am so in love with.” Artemis turned and walked out, leaving Raven standing there. She watched him, hesitating briefly, then ran after him.

Mitcheio silently appeared, stepping out from the surface of the wall, a troubled look plaguing the features of her countenance. Slowly, the Witch’s eyes widened in absolute astonishment.

“Vannar help me to help her. This one must find the Golden Path, or she may very well fail, consumed by a power she understands not. She will be the first casualty, or my first nemesis. Vannar, master, this is much more than I can handle without your help. Please help me, help them.”

“Artemis, Artemis,” Raven called, her voice breaking down with emotion. He turned, facing Raven and tried to smile like he meant it.

“Yes?” She stopped before him, scared and shaking.

“It was all I could do, I didn't,” “Think of anyone but yourself,” he whispered, cutting her off. “But have you checked with Mitcheio about your plan? Ask her. She is a great resource. You could have completed Chrysalis without Mitcheio's help. If that is your plan, and it is set in stone, then why did you come here?”

“Rinn told me to,” she whispered, feeling a dread building within her chest. For having a dead heart, it was hurting badly right now, and the pain was worse than the misery of her tomb.

“Don't you see, Raven, that you have gotten yourself into mischief again? Now you say an army is coming. Something has to be done here, and quick, otherwise more weight is going to be added to your shoulders, if you survive it.” A single black tear escaped her left eye as she listened to him.

“I'm sorry, Artemis. I'm so sorry,” she said without sound. Artemis grabbed Raven into a tight embrace.

“You are like a child in this world, not knowing what to do from day to day. But as you have grown, matured, you are still making mistakes, but you get up and keep moving on. This is fixable, it has to be.” Raven pulled her head back.

“What do I do? Tell me, and I will do it.” They did not see Mitcheio listening off to the side, within arms reach, a disturbed look twisting into her face.

“Come with me, now,” the witch stated, revealing herself and interrupting their conversation. Holding up a hand to Artemis, Mitcheio motioned him to stay. “No, just Raven.” Mitcheio motioning Raven to follow.

Raven wrapped her arms about Artemis, hugging him tight, then broke away to catch up to her mentor

Sighing, he returned to the room and entered without knocking. Fully aware he was still with Raven, he turned and looked at her, knowing his words and actions might play a part in whatever Mitcheio had in store for her now. How Chrysalis felt, Raven felt. It was the same.

“I'm sorry. I just needed you to think.” Her delicate chin quivered slightly. This was ridiculous. Leaving the room, he turned the way they had gone and broke into a run.

“Raven, wait!” he called out. Within a moment, he saw her running back down the hallway toward him. When he caught up to her, he picked her up into his arms and kissed her. After a time, Mitcheio cleared her throat.

“Okay love birds, time to go.” Artemis lowered her to the floor of the hallway and smoothed her hair back.

“Remember, I love you Raven. Whatever you do, I’m with you. You have that ring as a reminder. I’ll be in the room with Chrysalis when you return.” Wiping her face dry, Raven snuck in one more kiss then jogged back to Mitcheio, who put her arm around Raven and guided her back down the hall. Just before vanishing around the corner, Mitcheio turned her head and threw Artemis a look of approval.

After entering back into the room, he shut the door and locked it. For a moment, Artemis thought about his fiancé, and silently asked Vannar to help her. No, he begged Vannar to help her. He then turned and walked over to Chrysalis, who was watching him.

“Is it possible to be in the presence of such beautiful women and retain my mind for myself?”

“Yes,” she replied, wiping her eyes, “but not likely.”

“So, whatever you feel, she feels, right?” Looking up, she nodded.

“Yes sir, that is true.”

“Okay then . . .” Artemis pointed to the rug at the center of the room. She rolled her eyes, then laughed, her voice still cursed with emotion.

“Lay on your stomach.”

“Mitcheio just told me to get serious.” Artemis chuckled and kissed the side of her head. Reaching to the back of her head, she gathered up her hair and pulled it to the side and laid down.

“What now?” Chrysalis laughed, all in wonder. Artemis began a full massage, starting with her scalp, and ending with her feet. By the time he finished, she was sound asleep. Gently he took her up into his arms and cradled her as he sang his favorite song. With great care, he sat in the soft-chair and held her until she awoke on her own.

Mitcheio led Raven into a small room with a blue velvet pillow positioned at its center. As she followed the Witch in, Raven's eyes widened in astonishment. Into all the walls, ceiling and floor were etched palm-sized runes, taking up the entire visible surface of every board. Mitcheio stopped, turned and placed a hand on her arm, gently squeezed, then exited the room and shut the door. Rather nervous, Raven looked about the room for a minute, not liking that she was alone. Looking to the center of the room, she decided to kneel on the pillow. As she did, Raven looked about, waiting for something to happen, but nothing did. Standing, she walked slowly about the chamber, running a finger over rune after rune, noticing a few shimmering and trying to stretch off the surface they were crafted into. One of them she recognized as a Locust Magician spell.

"So many spells," she whispered. What she wouldn't give to know them all. Raven looked up, peering at those above her, recognizing a few more.

"Gargantuan," she stated, rather perplexed. "Hmmm, that's not Locust Magician. I believe that is Druidic." Raven knew she should not be able to read that one, but, well, there it was. Focusing on it, she watched it begin to writhe and twist, as if it was alive and trying to work itself out from the wood. Soon it separated from the ceiling and fell. As it descended, Raven stepped back to keep it from dropping on her. As it landed on the floor, all the runes in the entire room shuddered.

She watched the rune in fascination as it changed, turning green and brown in color right before her eyes. Slowly it began to grow, steadily increasing in size. Then, another dropped.

"Mitcheio, these runes are coming off the ceiling!" she called out, glancing over at the door - that was no longer there! "Mitcheio, the door is gone!" Panicked, Raven took a step back from the green and brown rune that was now beginning to form into a tiny cluster of trees. To her surprise, grass began to sprout around it, spreading outward across the floor in all directions. Behind her, a loud crack caused Raven to jump and spin about.

"Mitcheio, please! This room is coming apart, and there's a tree growing in here that's moving. Mitcheio!" she yelled, but no answer came. Quick as she could, Raven started feeling the walls about the room for an opening, throwing a frightened look at the growing tree as she frantically searched for an escape. As she clawed at the walls, the blanket of grass silently continued to spread outward.

"You said I could leave if I wanted to. You liar! You can't keep me in my room forever! And when I escape, I'm going to burn the house down around you!" Raven screamed in terror as the ceiling shuddered, then split down the center from wall to wall. As it did, a groan fill the room, drawing her attention to the cluster of trees. The once small tree had grown to half her size! It was also sprouting legs and arms.

"Gargantuan," she whispered, realizing this situation was fast getting out of control.

Backing into the furthest corner of the room, Raven witnessed runes falling to the floor, like drops of water falling from a forest canopy after a thunderstorm. The moment they struck the surface, each began writhing and struggling, taking on the physical nature of the spell.

One of the runes formed itself into a little dust cloud, spinning around in the grass like a tiny tornado, slowly growing and picking up momentum.

“Why that? Of all things, why that?” she lamented. “Please don't be what I think you are. Just stay small,” Raven growled in frustration, noticing an oval-shaped light rising from a tiny hill growing by the Gargantuan which began walking slowly about the room. As quick as she could, Raven ran over and stomped the tiny whirlwind into the grass, then fled back to the corner and spun about, eyes wide with fear.

“Mitcheio! Mitcheio, help!” she cried out as the floor split open at the opposite corner of the room and travel noisily across the floor until it ended between her feet.

Boards rattled and splintered as runes fell, struggling and moving, growing and coming to life all around her. The wood in the room that no longer held any runes cracked and broke, falling to pieces all around her. Something had gone wrong, terribly wrong. Now, looking at the growing Gargantuan, she feared she would pay the price for not stomping it into the floor while she had the chance.

The growing oval of light upon the small hill caught her attention. She had seen one of these before, when she and Artemis had traveled back from Twilight to the clearing where everything had started.

“The portal is the way out,” she said, hoping she was right. As the growing tree came near, she moved forward, eyeing it warily as it passed by without giving her any notice. Then, just when she thought all this madness might end, finger-sized humanoids with spears, shields and bows begin to march forth from the portal, quickly growing in size.

“Portal,” she whispered as the last of the walls and ceiling broke down all around her, showering her in a hail of wooden debris, leaving her standing directly at the center of a growing conflict; a war between an army of Goblins and Humans.

“I don't want to be here!” Raven yelled as she spun in a circle, suddenly realizing she was no longer within the room her mentor had guided her into. “Mitcheio! She screamed, only managing to attract the attention of the Gargantuan, which quickly began stalking toward her, growing to enormous size.

Arrows began to fly over her from both sides of the battlefield, some piercing the ground about her. The Gargantuan was caught between the two volleys, many of which struck it. Enraged, it turn away from her and began stomping the ranks of the Goblins, instantly scattering them.

Raven looked around as thunder shook the air about the area. Turning, she found herself

face to face with a woman in blue robes, who skidded to a stop before her, startled, as if she hadn't noticed Raven until it was too late. Jumping back, she pointed.

“Methsala!” she cried in a loud voice. Instant pain seared through Raven's chest as a beam of gray light struck her. Staggering, Raven cried out, instinctively raising a wing between she and the robed caster. Glancing down at her chest, Raven touched the wound with her finger, quickly realizing how deep it was. Instant anger filled her as the woman dodged the attack of a rushing Goblin and cast the same spell upon it, ending its life. She then turned upon Raven once again! This time Raven would not give her the chance to cast! In a desperate rage, she leapt at the caster, even as she pointed at Raven. Without hesitation, Raven slashed and tore into the woman, her claws ripping flesh, and splitting the bones of her enemy. Falling, the woman cried out in agony then became still.

Seeking safety, Raven launched into the sky with an unearthly scream, blood filling her throat and mouth. Ascending, she struggled to gain altitude. The wound in her chest was painful to bear, making flight difficult. Still, she had to get out of this chaos. Thrusting upwards, she pushed herself to get out from the center of the chaotic fray, but even this was in vain. The safety she sought in the air was soon taken from her as Gargoyles began to appear on the horizon. Halting her ascent, Raven watched their approached.

“I don't believe this, Raven growled under her breath.” She looked down, watching the battle below, still not believing what was happening. The Gargantuan was stomping the ranks of the Goblins with devastating effects as the Humans rushed in, hacking and slashing, increasing the death-toll even the more. Glancing at the incoming group of Gargoyles, she noticed they were nearly upon her. She had to do something, and quick. Even though most of them were diving into battle, attacking anything that moved, three were headed directly toward her.

To the side of the hill, where the portal set, skeletons burst up from the earth in the hundreds, and launched an attack against the Gargantuan and the Gargoyles which dove into their ranks, eager to do battle. Raven tucked in her wings, falling from the sky, a burning fire set within her chest. As she dove, the three Gargoyles on her broke off their attack, veering toward the Gargantuan. As she fell, Raven focused on the light of the portal below. From there, she would fight her way through the Goblin ranks to the portal. The way out of this mess had to be the portal.

A breath before impact, she pulled out of the dive. As she spread her wings to slow her descent, a terrible pain tore through her chest. Twisting in mid-dive, Raven shrieked in pain as her tunic filled with blood. Raven's reaction to the tearing sensation in her chest caused her to make a fatal mistake in flight. There was no way to avoid impacting the earth below her. Cursing her self for a fool, Raven folded her wings behind her, ducked her head and pulled her legs up, letting her wings take the brunt of the impact, which struck her into a blackness so deep and violent, she instantly blacked out.

Chrysalis screamed, arching her back. Rolling off the bed, she landed on the floor gasping and spitting up blood. Artemis, who was sitting in the soft-chair, leapt to her side, even as both her wings snapped. Gagging, Chrysalis began struggling in vain to take in a breath.

“Raven, breath! Please, breath!” Artemis yelled, panicking as she clawed at her chest. Shuddering, she began to writhe in agony as she looked to him, her eyes filled with a silent plea for help. Slowly, steadily, she became still, twitching as Artemis watched on, helpless to do anything for her.

Mitcheio waited outside the door for a while, giving her latest apprentice time enough to do what she had to do. She hoped Raven had been successful just as she had been sixty years earlier. After a time, she opened the door to witness Raven laying on her back, bloodied, broken and still.

“What is this?” Mitcheio whispered in shock and surprise. Mentally, she called for Katcha to come to her in haste. Quickly, the Witch darted to Raven, kneeling beside her still form, and placed a hand upon her chest. Closing her eyes, she reached deep within to harness the Essence of Eternity, and tapped into its source in rich abundance. A light instantly emanated between her palm and Raven's blood-soaked tunic. As the light brightened, the muscles in Mitcheio's jaw tightened and sweat formed on her forehead unnaturally quick. Then something occurred that took the Witch by surprise. The instant she made the connection with the diminishing spark of Raven's life, she perceived another. Gritting her teeth, Mitcheio focused on this other, suddenly wary of him.

“What are you?” she forced between tightly clenched teeth. Yet, even as she perceived his presence, he slipped from her awareness without a trace. With no time to spare, she forsook pursuit in order to save Raven. It silently enraged her to discover Raven was being stalked.

Raising her free hand up, she waited but a moment before Katcha ran into the room. Without hesitation her Guardian gripped her hand in silence, the silver runes bordering his Guardian Robes flashing to life. Katcha knelt beside Mitcheio and closed his eyes in meditation, yet only for a moment, even as Mitcheio kept Raven alive by the sheer power she wielded.

“Do it,” he stated, narrowing his eyes, “now.” At his command, she focused the energy pulsing through her, and as she did, the light between her hand and Raven's chest burst with sudden brilliance. Mitcheio's hand instantly began to tremble, but she did not waver in her resolve to fix this situation. Within moments, Raven's wings snapped back into place, and as they did Katcha groaned as both his shoulders cracked. Turning to her Guardian, Mitcheio shook her head.

“Katcha, don't. It is enough. I think I can heal her,” she said, instantly concerned for him. Raven abruptly convulsed, spitting up blood. Sucking in a breath, she instantly choked on her own blood, drawing Katcha's eye.

“She has no time!” he growled, shrugging his shoulders, annoyed at his sudden injuries. “Give it all to me, now.” Looking back to Raven, Mitcheio shook her head and closed her eyes. In a breath's time, the hole at the center of Raven's chest closed. As the wound closed, Katcha's eyes shot wide open then narrowed as blood began to seep through his armor plating. Shaking his head, he laughed, blood flecking his lips.

“All of it Mitcheio. She must make it through. Everything, now!” Growling in frustration at her Guardian, the Witch placed her hand above Raven's forehead, hesitated for the

space of a single breath.

“Brace!” she growled, then ran her hand down the entire length of Raven’s body, ending at her feet. Katcha groaned, but remained kneeling, gripping her hand tight. It sickened Mitcheio to hear multiple bones snapping within her Warder’s body as the bones within Raven instantly mended. Looking to Katcha, Mitcheio’s eyes filled with pain he took upon himself the damage of her apprentice.

“Katcha?” she said, her voice filled with concern. Shuddering, Katcha grit his teeth.

“Is that all you have to give me?” he growled. Exhausted, Mitcheio stopped, her eyes instantly filling with tears as she looked upon her best friend in all her world. Katcha was a bloody mess. Noticing the gleam in her Guardian’s eyes, she shook her head in disbelief.

“It is done,” she wept. Slowly Katcha regained his feet, letting go her hand. Looking down at Mitcheio, he gave her a look, smirking, as blood dripped from him lips.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he forced himself to say. Mitcheio stood, then quickly knelt once again. Her strength was heavily taxed. Panting, she looked back to Raven.

“It was difficult to snatch her from death’s hand, Katcha. I have no strength left to heal you, and you have no time to wait. You are a mess.” Nodding in agreement, Katcha turned and limped out of the room.

“I am going to go find a Healer. Do not weep for the living – save such sentiments for the dead.” Mitcheio watched Katcha leave, astounded at her Guardian’s strength and fortitude. In the past, he had demonstrated greater acts of loyalty and strength through the many conflicts they had shared together. As he departed from the room, leaving a crimson trail of his passing, she reluctantly turned her attention back to Raven.

“Easier said than done,” she wept. “Hurry if you can.” Katcha had ever been there for her. From the first day they met, up until this moment, he had fought, starved, bled and killed for her. He was walking honor, justice and mercy; perfect in its balance. His gentleness with the helpless, especially children, solidified her love for him.

Lifting a hand, Mitcheio stared at the ring on her finger. Looking upon Raven, she took her hand, feeling the engagement ring on her finger. Artemis and Raven were not yet joined.

“If I can,” Mitcheio whispered, “I swear you will have the wedding you wish.” Reaching over, Mitcheio placed a finger at the center of Raven’s forehead and whispered, “Wake up.”

Artemis held Chrysalis in his arms, making his way through a maze of halls in search of help. She wasn't breathing! Despair began to set in at what had happened to Raven. In great haste, he rushed through the halls, calling out for help until, without warning, Chrysalis struggled, taking in a deep breath and gasping as if she had just come up from deep water, only to make it just in time. Shaking her head, she looked at Artemis, confused.

"Where are we going?" she asked. Abruptly, he stopped, nearly dropping her. Not knowing how to reply, he set her down and looked at her in astonishment.

"You already know the answer to that," Artemis accused, reigning in a sudden surge of emotion.

"I do," she confessed. Thank you for caring so much, fangs. I'm okay now. Mitcheio and Katcha saved me." Without another word, Chrysalis began walking back to their room, leaving Artemis shaking his head.

"Drive me crazy," he muttered, then followed after her.

Raven sucked in a breath of air, opening her eyes to a war raging all about her. Shaking the earth, the Gargantuan charged over the top of her, its great rooted feet impaling deep into the soil dangerously close.

“Time to get up,” she said to herself, and leapt to her feet, noticing she was no longer wounded.

“Thank you Mitcheio!” she yelled. Looking around, she saw something she wished she had not. Upon the entire battlefield, the dead and wounded lay. Blood soaked most of the entire area, strewn with mangled parts of the living, some still struggling, hanging onto life amidst the field of shattered bones. Positioning her wings defensively, she side stepped a Goblin's blade, then shredded it with one rake of her claws. In a moment, she dispatched two more Goblins as they mindlessly charged her from opposite sides by spinning her wings. As their heads rolled away, Raven sprinted for the only way out she perceived . . . the portal.

Diving through a hail of crude arrows, Raven spun in mid-air, just off the ground, then continued toward the shimmering oval light on the hill. She was close, but many foes were set between her and freedom. Recalling the battle upon the ship, Raven took courage. These were lessers'; easy to take down. For a moment, that terrible scene flashed in her mind.

Raven beheld a battalion of Goblins surrounding the portal. She thought of calling in a swarm, but abandoned the idea. Focusing on casting such a spell would demand she slowed her flight, and would give numerous enemies the time to focus their murderous intentions upon her. It would take just as much time to get to the portal as it would to cast the spell, and a single, well placed, arrow could end everything she had struggled for. Determined, Raven focused her attention upon the light and hurtled toward it, even as a cloud of arrows was launched into the sky by Human archers in the distance. Cupping her wings stalled her progression forward in mid flight. Letting gravity take her, Raven fell towards the ground. She had practiced this very maneuver so many times in the peace and safety of her companions, and in other places. This time, it was different. This time death waited at every angle, intent on bringing her down.

Like a falling star, Raven fell, ignoring those shooting at her from below. Focusing all her attention upon the earth, she waited for only a breath's time before pulling out of the dive, skimming the blood-soaked grasslands below her, then cupping her wings. She then dropped into a free fall three times her height, landing hard not far from the hill. The moment she hit the ground, Raven raised her wings, shielding herself from the cloud of death now arching above her. In a moment, arrows began strike the ground about her, increasing in numbers as they fell to the earth to pierce both flesh and skull. As the hail of piercing death filled the area, Raven adjusted both wings, turning each arrow falling down upon her as a mass cry of despair and death arose up all about her on the battlefield. The moment the last arrow struck the ground, she leapt forward, bolting up the hill. That last volley had slain nearly all the Goblins guarding the

portal, and so she made for it in haste.

She would have been free to simply enter her destination, but from out its shimmering light leapt a leather-clad humanoid who appeared as a sleek half-rat, half-human. Instantly, and without delay, it ripped an arrow from the quiver on its back, knocked it, and shot her. She just managed to turn and deflect the arrow with her wing when it released another. With incredible speed, it let loose with a number of arrows, one after the other, until its quiver was empty. Each shot had been aimed at different areas of her body, but Raven managed to avoid every strike as she twisted and spun and blocked every attempt to take her down.

When the Ratman's arrows were spent, it snarled, dropped its bow and sprung at her, leaping off the hill and coming down on her like a shadowy assassin bent on her destruction. As it fell upon her, she latched onto it, hugging it close as they tumbled down the hill. For its build, the Ratman was stronger than it looked, and much quicker. Snapping and snarling, it struggled to end her quickly. Embracing it tight, Raven sensed the quick beat of its heart. She could feel blood pulsing through its veins like a thousand streams of rushing, glorious life calling out to her, beckoning her to feed and grow in power. All she had to do was sink her teeth into it, and it would end. It would be so very easy.

Frantically, her foe began struggling against her, raking her back and wings with its claws in a maddened attempt to not only win, but to get away from her. She felt the sting of its talons slice into her back in its relentless attack. Raven gripped harder, wrapping her legs about it like a spider, subduing it physically as she stole a glance to make sure there were no other attackers in the vicinity. She could do this if no other foe jumped into the fray. If there was another, she would have to resort to something other than merely overcoming this raging monster.

As it began to gasp for air, she tightened her grip even the more, feeling its blood pump irregularly within its chest. Raven thought about the Werewolf she had killed, and smirked aloud at this creature that was so beneath her skill to defeat. The real monster in this situation was the sudden desire to feed. She was so close to a source of energy . . . so very close. The craving she felt fast eroded her resolve to never commit such a terrible act. As it began to twitch and jerk, struggling for oxygen, she slid her teeth across its neck, inhaling. A white tear slipped from the outer corner of her left eye as she felt her quarry relax, exhaling its last breath.

“Knight of Vannar, keep your honor,” she heard a voice, like a whisper on the wind. Slowly, with great reluctance, Raven released the now unconscious Ratman and stood, pushing it off her. She nudged it, licked her lips, then turned her attention to the portal at the top of the hill.

“I am not a monster!” she suddenly raged as two arrows whizzed dangerously by her head. “My honor is my own to keep! It is mine!” she screamed, then turned and kicked the unconscious Ratman. Leaping into the air, she flew into the brilliant light of the portal, focusing her thoughts on the room with all the runes.

After Artemis had cleaned Chrysalis up, they both found themselves sitting on the bed. She was eating the end of a loaf of fresh baked honey bread, and he was sipping hot mint tea. Slowly, she picked out the warm insides of the bread, then stared down into the loaf's hollow.

"Artemis, I can't see." Concerned, he set his tea cup down.

"What's going on?" Shaking her head, she picked a bite-sized morsel of bread out and put it in her mouth. After chewing and swallowing it, she coughed. Artemis grabbed his tea, leaned forward and placed it in her free hand. She took a drink, forcing herself not to cough, then handed it back. Swallowing, Chrysalis returned to her bread with interest.

"This honey bread is so good. No, I'm not blind. I just can't see through her eyes anymore. I know that seems odd, how I referred to my other self as her, but it's the only way I can describe it. I can feel her, but I can no longer see through her eyes." She took another piece out of the loaf and smelled it. Artemis sipped his tea and watched her, a worried look on his face. Chrysalis did not seem upset, and this calmed his fear for Raven.

"This is a rare luxury nowadays. I hope everything is okay. What happened a while ago was frightening. You really scared me." Chrysalis smiled.

"I'm glad you are with me. I'm pretty scared myself, but I feel a sense of wonder and confusion. I wonder where I am?" Artemis sipped his tea as Chrysalis adjusted her wings.

"I will not leave you. And when we leave this place, it will be with Raven as well. I'll watch over you in your sleep tonight, so you can relax in peace." Chrysalis brightened up.

"Will you sing me to sleep?"

"I would love to, but only for a trade."

"Anything," she said, throwing him the most loving smile with her eyes. Artemis blinked, not being able to respond for a moment. She bit her lip and chuckled. Clearing his throat, her Vampire took a deep breath and let it out.

"In trade, I would love it if you would let me brush and tend your hair." Laughing, she made a face at him.

"What a trade," she stated, eyes filling with glee. "You have a deal sir. But, I have to say I'm getting the better end of the bargain." She ate the remainder of the bread, then began tearing the crust apart, eating it piece by piece until it was gone. When she was finished, Artemis gave her the rest of his tea, which she gladly accepted and finished.

"I wish to add to our bargain, if you would be so kind as to allow," she stated, her voice smooth as silk.

"I don't mind at all, but it cannot include me leaving you alone." Shaking her head, Chrysalis laughed, holding up the cup as if making a toast.

"I would like a kiss, please." He smiled at her, then became suddenly stern.

"Were you going to infect yourself with me earlier today?" I saw what you did."

Chrysalis's demeanor changed instantly. Her face turned red and she averted her eyes.

“Yes,” she stated in a quiet whisper.

“Why would you do that? Why do you think you need it?”

“I stopped because I saw your reaction. But, Artemis, I will be blunt and honest with you. I need to change as Raven did, or my - our - evolution cannot be completed. My journey will fall short, and I will fail.” Artemis got off the bed, grabbed the soft-chair and returned, setting it near the bed. Sitting down, he reached out and patted the bed in front of him.

“Sit here with your back to me.” She gracefully stood and walked across the bed, turned her back and knelt down before him. Artemis produced a brush from his coat and began at the ends of her hair.

“Tell me something. I’ve noticed my natural charm does not effect you, or that is the way I am seeing it. Why?” She laughed.

“Fangs, shut up,” she whispered. “Men can be so very blind - especially Vampire slaves that do my bidding.” Artemis grinned happily.

“Same Raven I saw riding the spider. Same ol’ Raven.” Reaching behind, she took the brush and began brushing her own hair, as if he was a child that needed to learn how to do it.

“Okay, alright, I just got distracted,” he said and took the brush back. “Hey, I thought the changes you were going through were ended. Are they?”

“What? Did you say something?” she whispered, as if she hadn’t heard. Ruffling her scalp with the tips of his fingers, Artemis sighed.

“Your not going to tell me.” She turned around, giving her Vampire a thoughtful eye.

“I’ll make you a deal. When I have a ring on my finger, I’ll tell you everything. Until then, you will just have to guess.” The gleam in her eyes meant that was her final answer, and there would be no more negotiation on the subject until her finger was adorned with a solid commitment.

“Well then,” he stated in all seriousness, “I better get you that ring.” White tears formed in her eyes.

“I’ve been engaged far too long, Artemis. I’m beginning to wonder if it’s meant to be.” Chrysalis brushed a lock of black hair back from his eyes. “Every time we plan on the day, it is stopped. I’m just getting to the point where either I marry you, or . . . her voice trailed off, a look of sadness piercing his heart like a knife. She was right, and he knew it. Slowly, he put the brush down in the chair and pulled her near, then kissed her tenderly.

“I love you with all my soul. I will get the rings, even if I have to trade my kingdom for them . . . when Raven returns. Then, I will put the ring on her finger, then yours. I will take you both on a honeymoon, the likes of which you will never forget. I promise.” Chrysalis grinned and wiped her eyes dry.

“I’m okay with being second.”

“You are manipulating me, Chrysalis – Raven.” She grinned.

“I would never, sir.”

“I'm not going to marry you just because I want to know more of your foolish plan. I will marry you even if you never told me anything more about it. How can I be more blessed than if you accept me?”

“Stop. Now, you are making me cry more.” Artemis reached inside his trenchcoat and pulled out a handkerchief. Handing it to Chrysalis, he gently pulled her into his arms, cradling her.

She always loved it when he held her like this. She was happy.

He began singing and softly caressing her feathers. She smiled, suddenly content, and closed her eyes, laying the side of her head against his chest. Though it wasn't the same, she listened to the steady rhythm of his heart until he finished singing. Raising her head, she squinted her eyes at him sentimentally and raised a hand to his lips.

“Can I see them?” At first, he tensed, then caved in. Her beauty alone would cause an army to stay their hand. Her appearance alone was a dream come true . . . a dream he had not yet experienced. She was physically and socially perfect in every way. He thought about her in this state, never changing, and it pleased him.

“I think I understand now,” he ventured. She smiled, but said nothing. Artemis continued. “If you are immortal, or become a Vampire, we can be together always. Gently scratching his neck, she nodded.

“I have no other purpose. Artemis, I am for you. I never want you to mourn the loss of another mortal wife again. It is not fair to you. You do so much good for so many. You have given your all for me . . . for us. Now, let us give our all for you.” She could see him thinking; see his wheels turning.

“Raven, you are the most unique person I have ever met. Okay, no tricks. When the time comes, then we do this the right way, in the right setting. Until then, don't break my trust, and I will keep my word with you.” Extending his fangs, he smiled a little, exposing them for her.

Instantly intrigued, Chrysalis slowly, carefully, reached up and touched one with her forefinger. Rising up to face him, she kissed him, feeling his fangs, then pulled back.

“You are so beautiful,” she whispered.” Flattered, Artemis glided down the side of her cheek, gently grazing his teeth over her perfect skin until reaching the soft of her neck, just under her jaw. As he did so, she whispered, “Of course, you can alter the deal by doing it . . . I don't mind.” Warily he sensed her heart rate increase, knowing her commitment was beginning to shatter. This was getting dangerous, but he continued to trust her, giving her his faith. Turning to face him, she kissed him and smiled.

“You are not such a mean Vampire. In fact, your kind of nice.” She kissed him again, fervently this time, exploring his fangs. “Can I keep you?” Artemis nodded, pulling her tight.

Running her fingers through his hair, she shuddered, feeling her promise and commitment being challenged. All she had to do was prick her tongue or lip and she would have what she needed. She thought about it for a while, enjoying his full attention; a rare moment she ever craved.

“Deal, fangs. You can take Raven on our honeymoon first. I think you deserve it.”

“No, we go together. We have quite a trip ahead of us, and I don't want either of you to miss out on any of it. I know places . . . secret places . . . and you need to experience them. There are regions very few know about. No, you both have to be there.” Her head began to swim dangerously. Forcing herself to turn away from him, she knelt back on the bed and handed him the brush.

“A mystery I can't wait for.” He began brushing her hair again, his fangs ever-so-slowly retracting, even as he himself struggled to keep his part of the deal.

“You know,” he whispered, fighting off the desire to turn her immortal, “you are not the only one who is effected by the charm of another.” Looking back, she threw him a look.

“Really?” she whispered as the room began to spin.

“Really. And it's not fair what the Sagen do to men. You need to tone that power of your down just a . . . lot.”

A day passed, then another, then another. He waited with Chrysalis, patiently serving her every need. More days turned into weeks, in which Artemis began falling endlessly in love with Chrysalis. This was, he discovered, the gentle side of Raven. She was attentive, loving, beautiful beyond description and ever thoughtful. She laughed with him when he needed to smile, and held him when he missed his Raven. Accommodations were always there for them, but they never saw anyone other than Mitcheio.

When one moon had passed, Artemis grew restless. Chrysalis watched him, concerned at his diminishing desire to read to her.

“Artemis, do not fret about Raven. If something happens, you will know immediately. Irritated, he looked away to avoid offending her. Quietly, she came to him, placing a gentle hand on his arm. He turned to her, forcing a smile.

“If she can wait so long for me, I can do this. Yet, again, she vanishes without a trace. Well, I have you, so not without a trace. I hope I did not offend you just now. If you were gone, like Raven, I would feel the same way. In fact it would destroy me. Forgive me.”

“No. Fangs, there is nothing to forgive. It is normal to feel the way you do. As odd as it sounds, I miss her too.” Artemis had a sudden idea.

“Chrysalis, what if you were to go to a guild and study one of the arts?” She cringed, squinting her amethyst eyes.

“No. I won't need to once I am no longer without Raven.” Artemis ran a gentle thumb across her left eyebrow, a thought coming to mind.

“Would you like to go find a couple of rings? Though you make it bearable, I'm tired of being in this room.” Brightening, she stood on her toes and threw her arms about his neck.

“Yes, yes please,” she eagerly exclaimed.

“Alright then, let's get out of here.” Walking her to the door, he opened it to see Mitcheio approaching. He gave her a look that plainly stated, “Here we go again.” Chrysalis frowned as Mitcheio stopped before them. Artemis bowed formally, prompting Chrysalis to do the same.

“Have we worn out our welcome here?” Artemis said, worry in his voice. The Sardakk Witch raised an eyebrow.

“Hardly. Were you two going somewhere?” Chrysalis nodded, but said nothing as she pulled close to Artemis, wrapping her arm up through his. Mitcheio looked at her, then Artemis.

“You can go do whatever you like, but I must tell you, Raven will be coming back this evening. My guess is about three hours from now. It could be sooner or later.” Artemis looked at Chrysalis, then at Mitcheio.

“What of the army?”

“It never came. I believe Raven had something to do with that when she destroyed the

Harvester Vahkrin, but I am not sure on that subject.” Chrysalis fidgeted, stretching her right wing out a little.

“Mitcheio, I can only feel her now. It's like she is a stranger to me, and yet I am her.”

“Chrysalis, Raven is not within the boundaries of this earthen plane. It is evident by what you are describing, that, when you two are on different planes, you will sever to some degree. What degree versus the distance you are apart, I don't know. You will be yourself when she arrives.” Mitcheio smiled at Chrysalis. “I promise.” Mitcheio placed a fist over her heart, formally saluting them both.

“I need to prepare for her arrival. If you will excuse me Artemis, Chrysalis.” Bowing, they both watched the Essence Magician Guild Master gracefully depart. When she was gone, Chrysalis turned to her Vampire, excited.

“We have enough time to shop, yes?”

“Yes. Now, before fate stops us, let's get out of here.” They both exited the guild, stepping out onto the porch, both feeling renewed hope. Artemis put his arm about her, escorting her out into a less traveled back street; an avenue called the Lonely Alley.

Mitcheio entered a large room filled with books, tables and chairs. Hundreds of maps hung on every wall about the room. At the center of the room stood Katcha, as if he had been waiting for her.

“Your command?” Mitcheio walked over and looked at him, open admiration and love in her eyes.

“No commands, but I would ask of you a favor.”

“Name it,” he flatly stated, a military heir in his response. She placed a hand on his rune-etched chest-plate.

“Always so stern and formal.” He gave her an odd look, then twitched his lip.

“I am now less formal, milady.” Laughing, Mitcheio rolled her eyes.

“Will you follow our two guests - keep them safe?” Raising a plated hand, he touched the side of her face, then exited the room.

Mitcheio brought her hand up, touching the side of her face where her Guardian - her husband - had touch her. She smiled.

“It has taken nearly one-hundred, fifty years, but I think he's starting to relax,” she mused.

Standing inside the Gem`Cutters Corner, before a renowned master of masters jeweler, Chrysalis held up a silver ring with a white diamond fixed into it, all in amazement at its splendor. She slipped it onto her finger and held it up.

“I love it,” she said, all in wonder. “This is the one I want - need.” The jeweler looked pleased.

“A fine pick for your complexion and beauty; a perfect match, if you ask me.” She nodded.

“Oh, I do ask you sir.” Both men chuckled as they watched Chrysalis almost coo over the ring. Looking at the bright-eyed gentleman, Chrysalis suddenly wondered.

“Is it a fine pick?” she asked with all sincerity. The jeweler huffed, enjoying her innocense.

“Indeed it is, pretty lady.” After paying for two rings, one of which he did not allow Chrysalis to see, they both walked out onto the port, taking in the hustle and bustle of the city. The sun was bright, and the energy of the day was high.

“Are you going to let me see Raven's ring?” She begged with too much enthusiasm. Artemis shook his head.

“Nope. It's a surprise, and you would ruin it.” With a devious grin, she begged him.

“I won't tell.” He laughed, ruffling her hair to distract her.

“You will have to wait.” Pushing his hand away, she began fixing her. As they entered into the busy street, the people around them suddenly parted, moving to either side of the busy avenue, staring behind the two. Letting out an exclamation of irritation, Artemis instantly turned, stepping behind her, his attention instantly drawn to three large men in blackened chain-mesh armor. As they approached, Artemis put his arm about Chrysalis and began moving to the side.

“Let's take her,” one man barked at the other two, his attention upon Chrysalis. Spreading out, they positioned themselves in a triangle about the two. Artemis pulled Chrysalis tight up against him, a black dagger suddenly brandished in his other hand.

“When they attack, fly.” She glanced at him in fear.

“Where do I go?”

“Just up, and out of reach. Not too far.” She understood, though she didn't like this. Why couldn't they be left alone for one moment. It wasn't fair.

“Okay, at least we have the rings this time.” Artemis laughed cynically.

“True, true.” Turning his attention to the one barking out orders, Artemis sighed, as if bored.

“You never let up do you? You are like parasites that cannot be fully exterminated. Do you realize all have failed and died trying to do what you are about to attempt? I am giving you

the warning now, so you don't have to plane travel to your final destinations without a choice.” The leader of the three pointed at them.

“All we need is the woman, and we'll leave without killing you. You have but a moment to say goodbye. Be quick!” Artemis abruptly laughed and hurled a dagger into the throat of the one on his left with blinding speed. Without so much as a cry, the man fell to his knees, then fell forward onto his face. Holding up a hand, Artemis's dagger instantly dislodged from the dead man's throat and flew back into his hand.

“Your mothers were offspring of fat pigs,” Artemis mocked, his eyes shading to night. Many of the people nearest him gasped, falling back. “Fly,” he whispered. Chrysalis wept black tears as she crouched.

“I love you,” she whispered and leapt into the air. As she parted from him, another black dagger appeared in Artemis's hand as he walked calmly toward the leader, focusing his attention mainly on him.

“You are a fool, Ardenoth!” That was the last words he spoke before an armored hand gripped him by the back of the neck from behind by Katcha, who suddenly appeared at his backside. Surprised, Artemis smiled, grateful for the back-up. Without emotion, Katcha squeezed with a strength that paralyzed and drove him to his knees.

“I want them alive, Ardenoth,” he commanded in a deep voice, void of emotion. Instantly strands of silver light descended from the sky, entwining the last foe. But another appeared behind Artemis, dangerously close and advanced quickly on him. Katcha nodded his way, signaling the danger. Spinning about to face the fourth assailant, Artemis readied himself for a counter move that never came. Panicking, the fourth turned and fled down a nearby alley, vanishing with astonishing speed. Katcha squeezed as the leader of the four tried to break loose. Looking into the sky, Mitcheio's Guardian motioned Chrysalis to him.

“Come to me, now!” Katcha yelled. Circling around, she quickly landed by him, wary of the man Katcha had subdued. Artemis looked down the alley, then bolted after the last assailant, bent on not letting him get away.

“No, Artemis! That one is taken care of! There are more here!” Stopping, Artemis turned and instantly retreated to Chrysalis's side, shielding her between he and Katcha.

“Who has the one in the alley?” Chrysalis asked. Looking down on her, Katcha's weathered, black eyes glinted dangerously.

“Nightmares,” was his only response.

“Mitcheio, we have three in custody. Do you want them? A forth is dead.” Katcha paused for a moment, as if listening. “Yes milady, they are both safe. We will return now.” Katcha lifted the leader off the ground as a blood curdling scream came from the alley.

“Nightmares,” Katcha repeated, glancing at Chrysalis. The other knelt motionless on the road, shimmering sliver strands of rope-like energy wrapping his entire body, like an invisible

spider snaring its prey.

“Thank you Katcha,” Artemis gratefully stated. Chrysalis was shaking, obviously terrified, which drew Katcha's attention. Pulling her to him, he wrapped a strong arm about her and whispered, “Courage of the Fearless.” He then let her go and gently ruffled the top of her head without messing up her hair. Artemis noticed her trembling had ceased.

“My pleasure, Artemis,” he stated. Then in a loud voice, Katcha called out to any others that might attempt the same.

“We will not be so lenient if there be more of you here. Tell your coward Vahkrin master, I invite him to come and join me in a dance with death – if he possesses the courage to take my challenge!” His gaze fell upon a now very still and silent crowd, who watched him in apprehension.

“Citizens of Gaunten, it is now safe!” Katcha yelled as he began to frisk and disarm his captive.

“Why do you want me?” Chrysalis abruptly asked the man.

“Not here,” Katcha said, lowering his voice. “Come.” Wrenching his captive around, the Guardian pulled out a cloth and wrapped it about the man's head with no gentleness. He then compelled his captive to walk backwards toward the guild. They both followed Katcha.

“Katcha, what about the other two, and this man's belongings?” Artemis asked.

“The other two men will be taken to the guild. As for this ones's belongings, let the crowd take what they want, to sell for money they may need. I care not.” At this point, the man tried to speak, but let loose with a strangled cry as Katcha increased his grip on the man's neck.

“Silence. Move, peasant.” Katcha did not look at his prisoner. It was as if he cared less whether the man was there or not. Artemis almost felt sorry for him . . . almost.

Chrysalis pulled her fiance's arm about her, throwing him a frown. Pulling her close, he winked at her and held up her wedding ring. After a few moments, she could not help but grin. He offered it to her. Taking it, she slipped the ring on her finger, suddenly distracted from the present troubles. Artemis was watching her, a slight smile on his face. In silence, Chrysalis held up the ring, turning it this way and that, watching it glitter in the sun.

“So easily distracted,” Artemis thought to himself.

They made their way back to the guild but not directly. Katcha led them through a maze of streets and alleys for a long while before Chrysalis finally recognized the lonely street and the guild entrance. In silence she followed Mitcheio's Warder, suddenly realizing he had openly wandered the streets to disorient his prisoner, and to bait out potential enemies. He was challenging them openly. None showed themselves.

As they entered the guild, Chrysalis felt relieved to be home. Here, she felt safe and sheltered from the threats of the outside world. Once inside, shadow instantly enveloped the prisoners, seeping from the walls at either side. Freezing, she watched in sudden apprehension, witnessing the prisoners lose all their strength and fall to the floor. Katcha released his hold on his prisoner's neck and watched emotionlessly as the man was forced to the floor, as if unseen hands were controlling him. A few moments later, the door opened. Another hooded prisoner fell motionless into the hallway, wrapped in silver strands. Chrysalis did not see who it was that brought him in, and was not about to look. All this was unnerving.

Katcha motioned Artemis and Chrysalis to follow him. Silently they did so, trailing behind him as he led them deep into the guild. As they walked the corridors, Chrysalis turned, looking back.

“These halls don't make sense. We've not gone up or down any stairs or ramps, and we just turned right for the forth time.” Artemis shrugged.

“The halls must be getting shorter, which means we are about to come to a central room, or chamber.” She shook her head.

“I've counted my steps . . . these hallways are the same length.”

“You would make a fair Maze Runner,” Katcha stated as he took yet another right-hand turn. Quickening her pace, she fell in step with Katcha.

“What is a Maze Runner?” she asked as he turned his attention upon her. His stone-hard countenance felt very intimidating, yet her curiosity compelled her to stay at his side.

“That class traverses structures.” Stopping for a moment, Katcha turned on her, causing her to stop and take a step back. This man was highly intimidating. “You dislike violence, so maybe Healer, Empath, maybe Psychic.” Continuing, Katcha became silent, leading them in circles down what appeared to be the same hall.

“Thank you,” she said, and dropped back to Artemis's side. She could feel his eyes on her. Lifting her hand, she smiled happily, then looked up at him, meeting his gaze.

“I would love to have a Guardian by my side.” The Ardenoth winked, but said nothing. Squinting at him, she mouthed the words, “I love you,” provoking a smile.

Three more right turns, and a long hallway, took them before a set of large iron-wood double-doors. Chrysalis could see strange glyphs etched into the surface of a snow-white door frame.

“This looks as though it was built to withstand a battering ram,” she whispered, stepping up to it. Katcha held up a quick hand.

“Do not touch it.” Moving close to the door, he placed the sleeve of his Guardian Robes to the door, then waited a moment. Chrysalis saw Mitcheio's name glow on the hem of his sleeve.

“You have her name embroidered on your sleeve,” Chrysalis said. Katcha opened the door, pushing it inward.

“I am her Guardian, thus her name appears. Come, but touch nothing.” Chrysalis waited for Artemis to go in after Katcha, taking his hand as he followed. As she entered, she found herself in an enormous room. About them many others were silently going about their business as a winged girl, who looked to be in her late teens zipped by, throwing her a wave. Circling about them three times, she stopped before Katcha, grinning with too much enthusiasm.

Vur na lena betheen (who are your friends), Katcha?” she said in all innocence. Her voice reminded Chrysalis of music and bells of polished silver. Her hair seemed alive when she moved and her eyes plainly shouted, I'm curious about anything. Katcha sighed heavily and looked at her.

“Nur ama (not now),” he replied. Pouting, she neared Katcha, glancing at both Chrysalis and Artemis.

“Navu len Catha Missila neya na ari (will you please introduce them to me)?” Turning, Katcha held a hand toward Chrysalis.

“This is Chrysalis, Artemis. Chrysalis, Artemis, Gameedee.” Gameedee threw Katcha a pout that instantly melted back into a smile as he turned his attention back to her.

“Niree ahn Velinn na Veisha na Sylis (we have business to attend to sylph),” he stated gruffly, then continued walking. Gameedee frowned, then smiled brightly again. Focusing on Chrysalis, she landed before her and looked her up and down.

“Hello,” she whispered in open admiration. Chrysalis glanced at Katcha, who was walking toward the center of the massive chamber.

“Hello,” she returned, then ran after him. Undaunted, the Sylph turned her attention upon Artemis, who smiled and walked after Chrysalis.

“You are beautiful,” Gameedee whispered as he passed by. Artemis did not answer, but instantly felt the slender woman's heart begin to quicken. Gameedee shrugged and zipped straight into the air.

There were six levels of walkways surrounding the entire outer edge of the room, all connected by long wide ramps. Dozens of Guardians watched the area, silent and attentive to their duties. About the area were circles of stone which no one walked upon or touched. The most interesting object set at the center of the area. It appeared to be large gate-posts, crafted from mirror-like steel. The only thing lacking was the actual gate between the posts.

Chrysalis wondered what was going to happen next. She hoped Mitcheio would come soon. Artemis took her hand, raised it, and gently removed the wedding ring from her finger. She then watched him slip it into a small velvet pull-string bag and place it into his trenchcoat. When he looked at her, she threw him a brief smile.

“Raven will come here, through this gate,” Mitcheio whispered. Chrysalis jumped,

startled by the Sardakk Witch's sudden appearance. Turning, she saw Mitcheio standing close by. Quickly, Chrysalis bowed in respect, as did her fiancé.

“What is this?” Chrysalis asked, pointing to the posts.

“It's similar to a Plane Gate, yet more powerful. When someone is traveling from another gate like this one, to this gate, it will illuminate with a blue and purple aura. The other side, or other gate, will do the same as you pass from here to there. I have interrogated your assailants. They all spoke of you, Chrysalis, in regards to you being a queen. I could get nothing more from them . . . for now.” Chrysalis felt chills creep across her arms as the Witch spoke. The way she said, 'for now' instilled a gratitude in her that she was a friend.

“I didn't have the time to enter into their weaknesses and exploit all their knowledge and designs. But, after Raven returns, I will continue.” Chrysalis stared at the gate in anticipation for the return of her other self. Lately the emptiness within had been growing, and the void she felt was beginning to weigh her down. A gentle touch to the shoulder snapped her from distracting thoughts. With a twitch, she looked to see Mitcheio standing close, a look of concern on her face.

“Chrysalis, are you alright?”

“Yes,” she lied. Mitcheio gave her a questioning look.

“You were not responding to my questions.”

“I'm sorry, I was just thinking. Maybe I should be with Raven.” Chrysalis pointed at herself discretely, lowering her voice. “Did I make a mistake by doing this?” Mitcheio gave her questioning look.

“It is a very rare and unique thing, your existence. I see it can be very beneficial, should you use it in the right manner.” Chrysalis blinked back a wave of emotion, trying not to make a fool of herself. After a few moments, she took a deep breath, her eyes fixing on the portal once again.

“Do I possess the same power as Raven?” she asked. Mitcheio stared at Chrysalis for a bit, then softly answered her question with a question, whispering so only she could hear.

“Are you Raven?”

“Yes, of course,” Chrysalis replied. Raising her eyebrows at Chrysalis, Mitcheio prompted her with a look, persuading her to think. Chrysalis turned her attention to the time when she split from the other half of her soul. It was an unexpected opening she took. Within this body, she poured an equal portion of herself, dividing it perfectly.

“Mitcheio, I want to learn what my other self is learning.” Chrysalis embraced the black Witch, throwing her arms about her and holding on tight. Katcha instantly moved toward her, but was stopped with a motion of his Ward's hand as Mitcheio returned the Sagen Gleighdor's embrace.

“I was wondering when you would ask. I was hoping you would go with your other half,

but all things work themselves out as destiny unfolds. Time moves on, carving out events which shape the future.”

“Did I make a mistake?” Chrysalis whispered, a sudden love kindling for Mitcheio, as if she were her blood-kin mother. Parting, Mitcheio touched Chrysalis's face, nodding.

“Yes, but you would be shocked at the way I stumbled through my training. Nigh alone, I had to learn, grow and master the power on this path. Katcha was with me, and was a great support, but he did not understand. He saved me many times from being devoured, merely by his unconditional love for me. I survived what three others had been undone by. Now I can help others avoid the obvious pitfalls which often consume those with our gift. If I train you, I cannot promise you full protection. Are you willing to continue?”

“Yes.” Mitcheio smiled and stroked her white hair with such tenderness, it invoked an instant bond between the two.

“Then your training will begin after Raven returns. After you - if you - grasp this gift -”  
”When,” Chrysalis gently interrupted with firm resolve, cutting her master off. Mitcheio looked at her thoughtfully, waiting for her to finish, then continued, emphasizing her first word.

“When you grasp this gift, you will then continue your training together as one student.” Chrysalis agreed, her mood instantly lightening. She suddenly felt strangely drawn to the ornate posts of the gate. Something was about to happen! Letting go Mitcheio, she grinned happily.

“She's coming,” Chrysalis said. “I'm finally coming back.” A few moments later, a low humming sound filled the air about the room as Chrysalis excitedly neared the gate. A bright smile spread across her face as the two posts began to glow with a bluish-purple light that arced upward, coming together at the center-point above and between the gate posts, forming a half oval shape of pure energy. Mitcheio gave Chrysalis a look of surprise.

“No one has ever known beforehand when the Essence Gate would open.” Shaking her head, she threw Katcha a curious look, then turned her attention back to the gate, waiting.

“She's here! I'm almost through!” Chrysalis beat her wings excitedly, raising up off the ground, pointing with glee as Raven emerged from the energy of the Essence Gate and stopped, looking around the room, fixing her eyes on Chrysalis, who touched down gently and folded her wings in.

Both Gleighdor walked toward each other, grinning, and stopped. Instantly they embraced tight as pure white tears flowed from both their eyes. Like snakes, every strand of every hair on both their heads moved, as if within a deep still body of water, flowing together as one, attaching at the ends.

“Where have I been?” Chrysalis whispered happily, no longer feeling empty. Raven gently touched Chrysalis's face with her fingers, and glided them down her cheek to her delicate jaw-line.

“I always had you in my mind. I never forgot you. Chrysalis, where I have been, you

must also venture.” Looking at Artemis, she laughed quietly and pulled away, separating her black hair from Chrysalis. She turned to Mitcheio.

“Hello mother.” Mitcheio's face filled with pride as she took Raven's hands and lifted them up to her forehead, bowing slightly.

“Hello daughter. We can talk later, when you are ready. Until then, I believe there is a perfectly honorable man here who has been patiently awaiting your arrival.” The dark Witch let go Raven's hand and withdrew from the room with her Guardian, leaving the three to themselves. For a moment, Artemis stood there in silence, unblinking.

“Are you still my Raven?” She gently smiled, exposing the tips of her teeth.

“Forever and always,” she replied. Looking deep into his eyes, she gave him a curious look, tilting her head slightly, as if looking for something.

“Are you still my Vampire?” Embracing her suddenly, he lifted her off the ground and spun her around.

“Forever and always, I am,” he returned without hesitation. Raven laughed and combed her white nails through his hair. Chrysalis observed them both, watching the happy reunion of the two as she grinned from ear to ear. Artemis lowered Raven to the floor and tilted her head back, looking at her eyes, suddenly curious.

“Your eyes are different. I can see vertical pupils -” “Not here, Artemis. Can we go to my room and talk? I'll show you there.” Without another word he took her by the hand. Holding out his other hand, he smiled at Chrysalis, who laughed and grabbed it. As they exited the chamber, a Guardian left his post and guided them back to Raven's room. Once there, he bowed and departed, leaving the three standing at the door.

Raven wrapped an arm about Chrysalis's waist and pulled her into the room. Artemis followed, watching them with fascination from behind as their hair came together. He shut and locked the door.

“Why does your hair do that?” he inquired. Both of them shrugged in unison, and stated as one, “I don't know.” Raven and Chrysalis pulled apart, separating their hair. Once apart, Chrysalis walked over to Artemis and hugged him tight.

“I'm tired. I'll sleep while we talk.” She let go of her fiancé and turned to go lay down. With a gentle hand on Chrysalis's shoulder, Artemis stopped her. Pulling her back, he gently held her for a few moments.

“Sleep well,” he said. Melting into his arms, she smiled, happy to feel belonging back in her life again. She then retired to her bed and drifted off to sleep. Artemis took a blanket and covered her, gently tucking her in as Raven watched. After Chrysalis was settled in, he turned to Raven and stared at her.

“What,” she asked.

“Nothing. I just need to look at you. It's been a full moon's time since I last saw you.”

Shaking her head, Raven sighed heavily.

“Only a moon, you say. And it happens again. Artemis, it has been so much longer than that for me.” Coming to her, he knelt down with her on the carpet at the center of the room.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Resting her head against his shoulder, she nodded.

“Yes, but not yet. You mentioned my eyes. I'll tell you about that first, since it's simple. It's a good beginning .” Motioning to the soft-chair, she stood. Standing with her, he walked over and sat down, pulling her into his lap and cradling her against his chest. Raven looked at him, as if suddenly deep in thought, or distracted by something.

“I have pupils now. They aren't normal. They are vertical and deep red. Most don't notice them until light shines in my eyes, or I become, well, emotional. Then they glow lava-red.” She waited for a reaction, wishing she had explained it better.

“Interesting. So, is there significance to this?” Cringing, she nodded.

“Yes.” Artemis briefly squeezed her tight.

“Are you going to make me guess, or tell me?” Snapping her teeth, she melted against his chest and blew out a long breath.

“When they glow red, I feel an increase of power. When they shine white, I can absorb . . . whatever it is I am trying to take in. When my eyes are filled with stars, perception and calculation are enhanced. The color of my pupils is the sign of what I'm focusing on. Now, when they are a blend of each color and type, as I just explained, it's a little of each power and my focus, perception and calculation is also added with an increase of mind and spirit, not the physical. Am I confusing you?” She noticed the beating of his heart was steady and even. She loved the drumming it played for her. Licking her teeth, she focused on the blood within him. Like a symphony, she enjoyed every pulsing vein, heart beat, and every breath he took in and let out. Hunger filled her as she absorbed it into her senses.

“You smell so good,” she whispered, placing her hand over his heart. Shifting, Artemis chuckled, as if he thought it funny.

“Of course I'm confused. This is a bit beyond me.” Placing a hand on the side of her face, he tilted back her head. “Show me, please.” Slowly, she opened her mouth, and let him explore into it. As he lifted her lip, she tilted her head to the side, giving him the best possible view into her mouth, watching his face closely as he looked.

“All your teeth are now as your fangs.” he stated, impressed, touching and testing their strength by applying pressure to them. Gently, he raised her front lip, wonder filling his eyes.

“Fantastic . . . wonderful - so beautiful.” He gently released her and ran his fingers through her hair, combing through it.

“You know what I think?” Artemis asked. Raven licked her lips, still hearing that wondrous symphony playing for her. Narrowing her eyes at him, she bared her teeth.

“That I truly am a very powerful monster?” Kissing her, he smiled.

“No.”

“That I am far more dangerous now, than ever before?”

“No.”

“That people need fear me?” Artemis's smile faded.

“No,” he whispered, suddenly cautious.

“That because I placed the better half of my soul into Chrysalis, I retained the more horrific part in this body?” She reached up and gently ran her nails down the side of his face, grinning in a way he did not like.

“I got you something while you were away,” he said, changing the subject. “I want you to see it.” Reaching into his coat, he pulled out a small pouch. As he did, he felt Raven tense. Curiously, almost cautiously, she watched him untie the bag and pull the top open. Slowly, he took her hand and turned it, palm facing up. Tipping the bag upside down, Raven saw a ring land in her hand. It had a band of black-gold, etched with overlapping raven wings which came together, twisting about a modest black diamond. Her eyes widened in sudden shock and disbelief as she sat forward and gazed at it.

“I remember when I described the wedding ring I wanted. This is it. It's so perfect. I - I don't know what to think now. Oh no. Artemis -” she struggled to say more, then stopped, an expression of regret etching into her black eyes. Slipping it on her finger, Raven shuddered. It was a perfect fit. She shook her head, then looked at him, the cat-like pupils of her eyes changing to blood-red as she placed the tips of her fingers against his chest.

“I have to kill you. No!” Artemis froze, staring at her waiting, unmoving. “No, I won't do it!” she screamed in a sudden rage that caught Artemis off guard. “I'm coming back for you, liar!” Raven leapt off his lap, growling like an animal. Artemis quickly stood and cautiously placed a hand on her arm.

“Raven, what's going on?” She could feel his heart quickening. He was scared, but not for himself, as always. Turning on him, she growled again, seething in anger. His apprehension instantly broke her heart. Wrapping her arms about his neck, she held on to him. Even though she knew he was the real monster, she ignored that fact, playing with the diamond fixed into her wedding band, trying desperately to keep from ripping him to pieces.

“No, no, no,” she seethed, “you are the monster, not him. Liars and betrayers - soul thieves! I love you, Artemis.” Beyond worried, Artemis held her tight, praying silently for Vannar's help. Even should she attack him, there was no way in existence he would hurt his Raven. He remembered finding her, so alone and nearly frozen to death, how he took her in . . . then fell for her.

“Don't leave me again,” they both whispered in each others ear. Raven pulled her head back, wiped ink-black tears from her eyes, and faked a smile, feeling an overwhelming sense of love for this man.

“I never wanted anything but to settle down with you on a farm surrounded by a log fence. I can just see all the animals in all their pens . . . chickens going about the yard, pecking at the ground.” She sniffed, emotion catching her in the throat. “A window in the kitchen overlooks the back yard where you are teaching our child to ride the dog. The sunlight streams in through the window, warming me. I laugh as I watch you and our sone enjoy each other.” Artemis smiled.

“I want the same. Let's build it. Then we can be done with all these not so important things, like invading armies and bad monsters. What is important, it that you are happy.” Raven let out a short burst of emotional laughter.

“You really mean it?” He nodded, wiping her tears with a gentle hand.

“Yes,” he assured her, “always”. Squeezing him tight, she wept.

“I'm going to shred your soul, liar.”

“Raven, who is this liar?” She flinched at his question.

“When I entered the other side, there was a man who found me . . . took me into his care. He gained my trust, then taught me more than I wanted to know. Artemis, I think he is the one that entered into my childhood dreamworld. I know you are not him. I know it.” Artemis caressed the back of her head.

“He looked like me?” Raven growled hatefully.

“Exactly like you. It was you. That's why I trusted him. When I came back through that portal, I knew you were my enemy. I played as though I was happy to see you. Then when we were alone, I was going to end it once and for all.” She scratched his back and shoulders, trying to balance her emotions.

“So, what changed your mind?” he whispered. Fresh tears began falling as she raised her hand and showed him the wedding ring. She looked at it, her vision blurring.

“Not once did he ever mention the design of this ring. Others he mentioned - beautiful rings - but not this one. I told you the design I wished to have, and he mentioned others, as if I had never told him what I wanted. I became suspicious, though I hid it from him. Then, when the chance presented itself, I came back to the portal. Artemis, when you dropped this ring into my hand, I realized the fiend I had been with for so long was using me to kill you. I almost did it.” Artemis sighed in relief, holding her.

“It's over now. He is there, I am here. It's over. He failed.” Raven shuddered, and hissed in sudden, deep hatred.

“Raven, how long were you on the other side?”

“I'm guessing, about nine years.” She could feel him tense. “I must go back and destroy him. But, not in his world. This time he will be in mine.”

Sighing heavily, Artemis caressed her back, pondering the situation. Raven was, and always had been, an emotional person; no doubt a Karritch Gleighdor trait. Throughout their

travels, he had found that sincere distraction worked to calm this explosive woman.

“How would you like a nice hot bath?”

“Yes, that would be so nice. I almost married him . . . I will not almost kill him.”

“Bath first, then - ” “Okay, bath first, I get it. I must smell foul.” She chuckled. “Get it?” Artemis laughed and kissed the side of her head, relieved to hear some humor.

“Yes, I get it . . . you have wings like a bird, and birds are fowls. Very clever.”

“Shut up,” she whispered, slipping out of his arms and shuddering in diminishing horror. “Just shut up.” Grinning, her Vampire took the ring from her finger and carefully put it back in his pocket.

“I’ll be giving it back to you soon, I hope.” Turning, she walked away, heading for the bathtub. Before she entered the bathroom, she stopped and turned back to him.

“When?” She asked in earnest.

“Whenever you wish it,” he returned without hesitation.

“Then, let’s finally -” she stopped and took a deep breath, holding it for a bit. Slowly, she exhaled, remembering that Artemis loved her, and would do anything for her. “Tomorrow?” Artemis grinned.

“Raven, I will do anything you wish, go anywhere you ask me to go. I will be anything you need. I will bleed, even die for you milady. Most of all, I will live for you. Tomorrow it is.” Raven burst into tears, speechless. She suddenly felt happier than she had ever been as she entered the bathroom and shut the door.

Artemis sat down in the chair, watching the bathroom door. Retrieving Raven's wedding ring, he looked at it, deep in thought, even as Chrysalis opened her eyes, secretly watching him from the bed where she was supposed to be sleeping.

“This Dreamweaver will pay the ultimate price for the mere thought that he could waste even a moment of your time. I swear an oath that I will never rest until he is destroyed.” The Ardenoth holding Raven's ring growled softly, inhumanely, animal-like, as he stared at the ring. His fangs extended as he glared at the ring.

“Oh my precious Raven, I love you.” Tears began to slip from his darkened eyes as veins of black appeared at his temples, cascading down his face and neck.

“Vannar help me retain my honor,” he viciously hissed. The shadows gathered in as his body began to violently tremble.

“No,” he forced through clenched teeth, “No. I am not a monster. I am Artemis. That is not the path I choose, and I reject it utterly. I am Artemis, the proud son of a just king. I live, I bleed, I love, and I will die with my honor unblemished. I will let no harm come to Raven or Chrysalis.” Calming himself, Artemis focused on peace. Slowly his trembling subsided. Gently, he returned Raven's ring to his pocket and stood. Walking over to Chrysalis, he looked down at her, gently adjusting her blanket to keep her warm. Gently running a hand across the feathers of her left wing, he smiled. Sitting down beside her, Artemis began to massage her wings, humming softly for a few moments. He then stood and left the room in a sudden hurry.

After he had gone, Chrysalis opened her eyes and sat up, kneeling on the bed. Looking at the door, she frowned. The bathroom door opened slowly to reveal a dripping wet Karritch Gleighdor.

“Well, I know he is the Artemis I love.” Chrysalis nodded, a slight smile playing across her perfect lips.

“Yes, he is mine.” Both women looked at each other. Chrysalis yawned, lay back down as Raven returned to her bath.

As Raven slipped down into the water, her long hair snaked down into the water behind her. Pulling herself forward with her heels, to create room behind her, she pulled her wings into the water and slowly pushed herself back against the back of the basin. Laying back, she adjusted her wings to accommodate her entire body. The warmth of the water on her wings was soothing and welcome, lulling her into sleep. Slowly, Raven began to drift into a wonderful sleep, in which she and Artemis moved into a modest home on a farm with a log fence that surrounded the entire property.

Artemis shut the door quietly, then ran through the hallway.

“Mitcheio!” he yelled. “Please, I need to speak with you!” Taking a right at the end of the first hall, he continued to run, desperately seeking anyone who could direct him in this strange and confusing place. After turning right a dozen times, Artemis stopped.

“I’ve been going in circles,” he whispered, frustration building. “Please, Mitcheio, I need your help! Raven is in great danger!” He had just finished his plea when he felt a hand rest upon his right shoulder from behind, startling him. Looking about revealed the winged Sylph.

“Gameedee, I need help.” Placing a hand on the left side of her hip, she tilted her head to the side, smiling slightly and looking him up and down in open approval.

“Come with me,” she laughed and slipped her hand into his, gripping it tight. Running down the same hall, she led him, taking right turn after right turn. As they ran, she looked back at him and laughed, as if she had no cares in all the world.

“You are beautiful, for a Vampire.” Artemis rolled his eyes.

“Thank you,” he replied, not really knowing how to respond to the compliment. “You are beautiful too. Thank you for helping me.” She stopped suddenly and turned on him, keeping a hold of his hand and pulling close, almost touching his lips with hers.

“Do you like me?” Artemis stiffened. He could feel her breath washing gently over his face. “Am I not wonderful to look upon?” she asked in all sincerity, her elven-like eyes of silver glowing with an inner light as she spoke. He looked at her and nodded.

“Gameedee, you are stunningly beautiful, and that is the truth. I do like you, but I am not attracted to you romantically.” His eyes lowered, looking at her mouth. “Please, I need Mitcheio.” She pouted for a breath or two, then quickly kissed him. Instantly, Artemis backed off, pushing her away, and pulling his hand free.

“What are you doing, Sylph?” he asked, rather shocked. She laughed.

“My name is Gameedee, and it is obvious I am a Sylph. You need not remind me of the obvious. Artemis, I’m helping you find Mitcheio. You asked me to help you, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but you kissed me. Why?” Like silver bells, she laughed and moved up to him again, raising a finger.

“If you will kiss me three times, I will take you to her. Deal? I love the feeling of a kiss; it makes me so happy.” Frustrated, Artemis waved her away.

“Are all Fairies this manipulative?” Puffing with sudden indignance, Gameedee threw up her hands, turning her back on him.

“Sylph, Artemis, Sylph. I am no Fairy. Fairies are annoying.” Shaking his head, Artemis contemplated the situation.

“Sylph, my apologies. I have never met a Fairy, or a Sylph, until you. Please forgive me. I recall my father teaching me how Fairies trick men into kissing them, then do not deliver on

their promises. They are deal breakers, following no honor. Even when they give their word, they lie and betray those men who snared in their webs of deceit.” Gameedee folded her arms and turned about, facing him.

“That’s a Fairy for you, and I forgive you.”

“You, Gameedee, are a Sylph. I won’t forget that fact. I trust you now, knowing you would keep a bargain, should we make one.” Brightening, Gameedee nodded.

“Of course I would. We Sylph would never go back on our word, or a fair deal.” She neared, giving him a sly look. “It burns bridges, if you get my meaning.” Artemis took a step forward and smiled, taking her hand again.

“Your breath smells like freshly cut mint. I will make you a deal, one you and I cannot break.” Suddenly excited, she raised up off the ground until she was eye-to-eye with him.

“What’s the deal?”

“I will kiss you three times, as you asked, if you will take me to Mitcheio right away after the third kiss has ended.” Folding her arms across her chest, Gameedee grinned, suddenly very excited.

“Not just a peck. You have to really kiss me, deal?” Pulling her hand free, she offered it to him formally. Artemis extended his hand and they both shook on it, sealing the agreement.

“I promise. How can I resist you anyways?” She grinned, landing before him, closing her eyes and tilting her head up, beaming with anticipation.

“I am ready.” Artemis smiled slyly, took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. Gently he kissed her knuckles three times, taking his time. After the third kiss, she opened her eyes, suddenly pouting.

“You tricked me. You tricked me.” To her delight, Artemis smiled fondly at her and gently placed his lips on her forehead, kissing her a fourth time. He could feel her defenses crumbling, and knew he had her in the grips of his vampiric charm. Placing a hand on the side of her head, he caressed her temple with his thumb. Melting, she leaned into his hand happily sighing.

“Alright, you win. Look behind you.” Turning around, he was surprised to see a door that was not there before. Turning back to her, he slowly removed his hand.

“Gameedee, I’m sorry I had to trick you, but I had no choice. If I was not betrothed to Raven, I would not hesitate to kiss you, and more than three hundred times. You are honestly and truly beyond gorgeous.” Feeling a little guilty, he waited, hoping she would forgive him.

“I know that,” she stated as a matter of fact. “I was just testing your loyalty to the girls.” She laughed and zipped away, blowing him a flirtatious kiss. Turning to the door, Artemis sighed, exasperated.

“Now I know a bit more about Sylphs,” he whispered as he knocked on the door.

With her head resting against the incline of the bathtub, Raven's eyes moved back and forth under her eyelids. With a jerk, she sat up and screamed. Artemis was instantly by her side, kneeling down at the edge of the tub.

“Are you alright, my dear? I heard you cry out.” Confused, she looked around the bathroom in a sudden panic that quickly subsided. Leaning back, she took his hand and smiled. Smiling back at her, he reached up and played with her soaked hair. Slowly, she closed her eyes again, using his hand as an anchor of moral.

“Thank you, Artemis, thank you.”

“My pleasure,” he whispered as his eyes narrowed menacingly. “I will always be here for you. Rest up. You are safe now . . . safe.”

Katcha answered the door.

“What is it Ardenoth?” he quietly asked. Artemis quickly bowed in respect.

“Raven is going to bring a Dream Weaver into her dream in the attempt to kill him. She needs help.” Katcha moved to the side to reveal Mitcheio behind him.

“When,” the Witch inquired, very concerned.

“When she next sleeps. I believe she will do it tonight, if not while she is bathing.” The Witch slid her hand around Katcha's arm and looked up at him.

“We need to hurry,” she stated. Katcha instantly ducked through the door and made haste down the hallway with Mitcheio. Artemis followed behind the two, who moved in perfect unity toward Raven's room.

“Keep up,” Mitcheio called back over her shoulder, “I am going to need your assistance with this.”

Chrysalis awoke in a tub of water, warm and soothing. Lazily, she turned her head to the right to see Artemis kneeling by her, holding her hand and Caressing her hair with his other.

“Hi,” she whispered. Rather surprised, a slight grin etched across Artemis's mouth.

“Well, well, well. I had no idea you were also anoth - so beautiful. What is your name?”

“Chrysalis. You know that,” she whispered, smiling at him. Artemis looked at her with a pleasant smile.

“Of course I do. Just seeing if you are fully awake.” Chrysalis began to sit up, then quickly abandoned the idea.

“Artemis, I'm not dressed. Why are you looking at me?” Artemis shrugged.

“I'm a Vampire. We don't care about such things, you know that.” Confused, she looked at him, feeling at a loss.

“Oh, ummm, I forgot.” Lazily, she closed her eyes, drifting back into the warmth of the water.

“Sing me a song,” she mumbled as Artemis grinned and looked upon her, as if he was a predatorial wolf who had come upon a rabbit in a snare.

“I would love to milady. Wow, two of you.”

Raven stood up and pointed at a robe on a hook next to a smoke-stained window.

“Can you please hand me that robe?” Quickly, Artemis retrieved the robe and handed it to her, smiling wickedly as she put it on and tied the braided cord about her waist. Looking up, Raven threw him a curious look.

“What are you smiling about now? Did you just think of something funny?” Artemis laughed and helped her out onto the floor. She saw his smile vanish as he caught sight of the ring she wore. Pretending not to notice, Raven grabbed a towel and began drying her hair, a cold feeling washed through her chest. Keeping her composure, she smiled at him.

“So, what are you doing today?” she casually inquired as the cold in her chest spread throughout her entire body. She hid the emotion of being violated by this monster as she waited for his answer.

“I thought we could walk the property and fix any fencing that might need mending, unless you have something in mind.” Running her fingers through her hair, she shook her head and flipped her hair back.

“No, I don't have anything to do. Fixing fences it is.” Grinning happily, he walked out of the bathroom.

“When you are ready, I'll be outside . . . waiting for you.” he stated with less than no love in his tone. He then departed. The way he spoke caused a terrible dread to fill her.

“I bet you will,” she mouthed in silence, her lips curling into a soundless snarl.

Quickly, Artemis followed Katcha and Mitcheio into the room. Walking quietly over to Chrysalis, he noticed wet footprints leading from the bathroom door to the edge of where Chrysalis lay sleeping. Her hair was drenched, the blanket over her was dis-shelved and damp, and her pillow was soaked from absorbing the water from her hair. Looking down upon her, Artemis noted the beating of her heart, which was slow and consistent with someone sleeping peacefully.

The strange and quick beating of a heart within the bathroom, drawing his attention. In silence he pointed, then cautiously approached the door. Wrapping his fingers about the door handle, he slowly, carefully, twisted. As it unlatched, the door creaked open. Gently, he pushed it inward.

“Let me,” whispered the Witch, her eyes suddenly alight, illuminating like two golden embers. Stepping back, Artemis let her slip past him into the bathroom. Katcha motioned him further back, then stepped to the doorway behind the Witch, the symbols about the entire border of his Guardian Robes illuminating.

An unearthly snarl from within set the hair on the back of Artemis's neck on end. Within a few seconds, the door shattered into a thousand shards as a black-winged creature tore through it with incredible strength, darting into the room. Slipping past Katcha, it came to an abrupt stop before Artemis and lashed out. Artemis leapt back, evading the attack.

“Raven, it's me.” Artemis said, then bent one knee to the ground as Katcha slowly flanked her. Mitcheio walked out from the bathroom, focusing on the creature now stalking Artemis. Holding out a fist, he opened it revealing her wedding ring and waited, ready to move.

Catching sight of the ring, it blinked, then hissed, hesitating, as blood-like tears began to fall from its eyes. Artemis watched unmoving as its eyes transformed, appearing as though they filled with molten lava, burning like fire. Locking its attention upon the ring in his hand, it ignored Mitcheio, who calmly approached and placed a forefinger to the creature's forehead in one smooth motion. Recoiling from her touch, it snarled, turned, and lunged furiously into her, slashing and clawing with a fury that struck fear into Artemis. But each strike failed to harm her in any way. On the other hand, Katcha staggered back two steps before bracing himself, arms crossed and raised up to ward off the strikes to his neck and face. Artemis watched on as his armor suffered deep lacerations as this creature doubled its efforts to destroy the Sardakk Elf Witch. It was at this very moment when Artemis realized the power of the Guardian class. This is what he needed to protect Raven, and he would not forget.

The moment he saw an opening, Artemis lunged onto Raven's back, using all his strength to subdue her. It was obvious by the way Katcha's armor was failing, it would not be long before it would no longer be a protection for him. Wrapping his arms about the creature, he forced it hard to the floor with no gentleness. There was no room for error at this point, and he supposed

he would only have this one chance.

“Raven, stop!” he yelled. “We are not the enemy!” Spinning, Raven snarled, attempting to use her wings to throw him off. Gripping with all his might, Artemis managed to hold on, desperate to give Katcha an opening.

The moment its attack was diverted, Katcha lunged onto his target, assisting Artemis. In a brief contest of agility and strength, the two pinned Raven down as she screamed like a netted dragon.

Once in control, Mitcheio knelt by the creature’s head and placed her hands together, closing her eyes as if she were meditating. Instantly a terrible energy washed through the room. As her power flooded the area, the Witch slowly opened her eyes, now burning like molten gold.

Artemis was suddenly torn as to whether he should flee the room, or keep a firm grip on Raven. This Witch radiated an energy more terrible than he had ever experienced in all his centuries of life. With all his will, he closed his eyes and remained where he was as Raven’s screams silenced. Just as Artemis thought he could bear no more, it ceased.

“Katcha, put Raven on the bed next to Chrysalis, quickly!” Artemis let go and rolled away from Raven, dazed and confused, feeling as though he had just been trampled by a herd of buffalo. Opening his eyes, he watched as Katcha scooped Raven up off the floor and placed her on the bed. Slowly, he stood and staggered, catching himself on the wall by the shattered bathroom door. The room around him warped, as if he was seeing it through clear, shifting water.

Standing, Mitcheio looked about the room, her eyes still shedding that golden light. Noticing Artemis’s struggle, she neared and placed a hand on his arm.

“Raven needs you. Stay with me on this.” Looking to her, Artemis shook his head, trying to balance his mind and control his perception of the warping and twisting room about him. When the room ceased dancing and twisting, he shook his head and looked to Mitcheio.

“What do I do?” he asked, hearing his voice echoing unnaturally. Looking at the two women, the Witch pointed.

“Lay in between them. I am going to send you into her nightmare. Once there, stay hidden. Kill the Dream Weaver quickly, or he will kill you. One chance, one chance only. Be swift and don’t hesitate . . . don’t hesitate . . . don’t hesitate,” her voice echoed.

Staggering to the bed, Artemis crawled between the two women as Katcha picked up Raven’s wedding ring. Quickly, Mitcheio’s Guardian slipped it onto Artemis’s smallest finger and stepped away from the bed, observing him.

“Is he in any condition to do this? I can do it.” Shaking her head, Mitcheio pulled the hair of both women across their chests, mingled the ends together, then let go.

“He has to do this. He knows them, and they know him. It’s the only way. If they fail this time, I will lose two students. Artemis,” she said, thunder rolling in her voice, “power I give you

to use in this Dream Weaver's woven world of lies. Use it wisely, for it will fade as you expend it. There is no more time to spare. Good luck. Vannar go with you.”

He watched Mitcheio clap her hands together. As her hands struck together, thunder cracked within the room as if a storm had suddenly broke. Instantly she and Katcha vanished, leaving him alone in a strange bed in an unfamiliar room.

As she quickly dressed, Raven's eyes burned with a red, smoldering hatred. She tied her hair back with a strip of black silk, then stopped for a moment. She could almost remember where it came from, but it evaded her memory, like a dream she could not quite recall. Picking up a pair of long, soft red leather gloves, she looked at them.

“Where did I get these?” she whispered. “I must be getting sick.” After putting her gloves on, she grabbed a black cloak and swung it over her shoulders, then fastened it at the neck. Looking into the mirror, Raven wiped the glass with her sleeve a few times and stared at herself. Her pupils were red, which she thought very odd.

“Now, why would . . . oh, I must be dreaming.” She had forgotten about that, and all too quickly. “What was I dreaming about?” she asked her reflection. “It was important, or was it?” Taking a deep breath, she looked at her teeth, which were clean and sharp, “ready for . . . for . . . something,” she mused. Looking at herself, she noticed her tunic had a black spot on it, directly at the center of her chest. Looking down, she brushed at it, yet it did not come off. Instead, it began to expand slowly in all directions, creeping over her until her leather clothing was entirely black . . . lightless black.

Mitcheio looked down on Raven as she slowly bent over her. Katcha laid his right hand upon the back of Mitcheio's neck and intertwined his fingers through the braids of her hair, ready, focusing his iron will upon his Ward. He did not blink, nor speak, and his breathing was slow and deep as he inhaled through his nose and exhaled out his mouth in an even, constant rhythm.

"I will release her when the time is right. When she is free, I suspect she will attack. Katcha, we cannot risk death here. I have three other students who need guidance. Still, we can hold out for some time before she breaks through."

"I can hold her," he stated with confidence.

"No, she must be free to move, or she will be bound in the dream world she is now trapped within. If she is bound there, she will be helpless and completely vulnerable. It's okay, you can relax for a little bit." Letting go of his wife, he stared at the two on the bed.

"Maybe she will be like you. Maybe she will enlighten, understand, be guided by the Gold and Black Dragons. She is strong." Mitcheio set a gentle hand on her husband's arm, throwing him a loving smile.

"I love your optimism. I love your presence." Stern as steel, Katcha stared hard into her eyes.

"Being your Guardian, I have to be. I remember all the trouble that drifted right at you the moment your gift set its roots in you. Never has life been the same since. I am honored to bleed for you." Biting her tongue, Mitcheio gazed into Katcha's eyes.

"I love you seventh prince of Sardakahn. I love how you gave up your position for me. I love how immovable you are. I love how you are so straight forward. I love how you keep me safe. I feel encircled with undaunted protection when I am with you." Softening a little, Katcha placed a heavily plated arm gently over her shoulder.

"I love when you said yes." Mitcheio's eyes clouded just a little.

"This Dream Weaver made a fatal mistake in letting me see him. That will work to my advantage. On the other hand, this Karritch Gleighdor has traveled and roamed in the darkness of life for centuries. How she has not succumbed to the hunger and appetite of what she has evolved into completely astounds me. If I did not see it with my own eyes, I would never have thought it possible. She is stronger than she knows. She is like an innocent child, plagued with a raging hunger. Yet, somehow, she contains it."

"That is why she has not given in . . . she holds on to childlike innocence," Katcha stated. Mitcheio looked up at him.

"I believe that . . . children are pure. Mix purity with the Essence of Eternity and great things can happen." Pulling free of Katcha, Mitcheio returned to Raven's side and placed a hand on her brow.

“That is why I believe she will get through this.” Katcha stayed close to his Ward, once again entwining his fingers through her braids, focusing.

“Are you ready?” she asked. Nodding, her Guardian relaxed.

“I shield you from the mental, physical and spiritual. I invoke my will upon you, as is my right, extending my life as your shield. My heart beats with yours. I am nothing.” The runes all about the borders of his Guardian Robes flared to life in silver brilliance as Mitcheio felt power fill and surround her. Closing her eyes, the Witch meditated for a moment, calling up the Essence of Eternity.

“Mercy,” she whispered, then reached over and touched the forehead of Chrysalis. “Stealth and speed,” she whispered, setting her forefinger at the center of the Ardenoth's chest. She moved over Raven's still form, looking at her closely. A look of worry passing like a darkened shadow over her face. Hesitating, she looked down upon Raven, narrowing her eyes like a predator. Katcha's eyes suddenly shot open wide.

“Receive me,” Mitcheio whispered as she opened Ravens eyes with her thumbs. Like water, golden and pure, energy flowed from Mitcheio's eyes into Raven's. Katcha panicked, but held his position, unmoving. Gritting his teeth, he focused everything within him, his entire soul, on Mitcheio, hoping it would be enough . . . even as her body vaporized into a golden mist and flowed in and through Raven's eyes, vanishing within an instant.

Katcha straightened and stepped back from the three lying upon the bed, frowning.

“Always the unexpected,” he growled.

The door to the bathroom opened as Artemis stood. Within a few moments, he heard footsteps nearing the door leading into the room. Without hesitation, he turned and sped out of the bedroom. Stopping, he looked down a short hall as thunder boomed outside, shaking the entire structure of the house. Cautiously, Artemis entered into a living room he had never seen before.

Ignoring a large dog laying on the floor, he made his way into another hall and through a small kitchen. Stopping at the sink, he looked out the window into a back yard full of green, well tended grass surrounded by a log fence about the border of the property. Beyond the fence there stood a large barn.

“This is . . .” A small boy ran through the grass, and as he ran by, he looked up into the window and laughed happily, waving at him.

“Come on daddy. Play with me!” Artemis felt his heart ache, and nearly waved back, until a man that looked like him stood up just outside the window, his back turned to him.

“Oh, I plan on it son. I will be there in a bit.” Artemis watched as the other man, who looked like him, locked eyes onto the child, a wicked expression twisting into his face.

Leaving the window, Artemis fled the kitchen, and went to the front door. The huge dog looked up at him lazily, its tail slapping heavily upon the rug. Quickly, Artemis left the house, running to the outside corner and concealing himself in a large bush. Looking up, he thought height would give him a better advantage. Placing a hand upon the house, he noticed Raven’s wedding ring materialize upon his smallest finger. Ignoring it, he began to climb.

She thought she heard something in the bedroom, but when she walked in, there was nothing out of place. Distantly, she heard her son call out to his father. She smiled, headed out into the hallway and turned, making her way to the back door. Exiting the house, Raven made her way out into the yard.

“Morning beautiful”, Artemis said, turning to her. Though anger filled her with a burning, growing rage, she bit her bottom lip and beamed a smile back with her eyes.

“Hello handsome,” she faked as he approached, noticing a set of fence cutters in his right hand, which instantly made her nervous, setting her on guard. Wrapping her arms about him, Raven kissed him, smiling and feeling her skin crawl.

“What was that for?” he inquired brightly. Letting her arms slide from about his neck, she laughed.

“I could ask you the same thing.” Raven laughed. “Well, because I love you far too much.” Artemis raised the sheers up between them, and as he did, she stiffened slightly.

“Here, these are yours.” He pointed out to the barn. “There is a section of fence at the back of the barn that needs attention. You can't see it from here, but you will when we get back there. Shall we?” Agreeing, Raven took the sheers.

“Think it will rain today?” she asked, then looked up to see a cloudless sky. Confused, she turned a circle. “I swore I heard thunder a bit ago. How odd. Maybe I was only dreaming.” Artemis looked up, then back down at her.

“No rain today. It was probably just a daydream.” As if suddenly thrust into a nightmare, she began to slowly walk toward the barn, confused. With far less than a pleasant look in his eyes, Artemis waited until she was halfway to the barn.

“Daddy, come play with me,” the child beckoned, bright-eyed and hopeful. Ignoring the invitation, Artemis stalked after her.

On top of the house, Artemis watched him kiss her. His eyes instantly shaded to black as jealousy flooded through his entire soul. He heard their conversation and knew he was not sending Raven behind a bard to fix a fence.

After she had walked around the barn, and he had just entered it, Artemis waited until the boy was not watching, then jumped down and sped with all haste to the side of the barn opposite where Raven had gone. Once there, he looked up and began climbing, using the corners and cracks of each board to ascend. Soon, he was on the roof, overlooking the hay-lift, livid with anger.

Raven paced back and forth, searching for a break in the fence, or so she made it seem.

Now was the time. All she had to do was -

“It's there, just above the ground,” Artemis stated, pointing as he rounded the corner, a length of rolled up fencing wire in one hand, fencing sheers in the other. Raven looked at the fence, then abruptly blew out an exasperated breath, killing the masquerade.

Turning, she gave Artemis her full attention, exhaling a long breath, a feeling creeping through her that stopped Artemis dead in his tracks. For a few moments, it was though two feral wolves stood gazing at each other in a stand-off. Raven was always short on patience, and so spoke first, breaking the silence.

“You know,” she stated, “if you wanted me, all you had to do was drop the slightest hint. Why hide? Why here?” Her words openly amused him. Eagerly, he waited for her to say something more. When she held her peace, he slowly walked forward, stopping in front of her, just without arms reach. His eyes twinkled with anticipation and amusement, openly harboring no love for her.

“That's just it, kiddo'. I love the sport in all this. I crave it. It's not you, it's the thrill of the hunt.” Raven's eyes widened slightly as she masked her disbelief with a slight smirk.

“Will you tell me something?” she asked in all seriousness, dropping the sheers. He weighed her with a look, then slowly nodded.

“I might, what do you want to know?”

“You are the one who invaded the world I built, aren't you?”

“Ha! Yes! Then you went off and abandoned your precious dream-ruins, leaving me there to figure my way out! After too long, I managed to slip through a flaw in your crumbling world, only to be met with the resistance of your new and improved, shiny world. Oh, the race was on! I took it upon myself to get to you before they finished with you. Had you become what you were intended to be, my very existence would have been spent building up my best defenses.” As he spoke, Artemis, or this stranger, this monster, sounded nervous, even scared.

“Defenses?” she asked, feigning ignorance. Looking to his right, the man before him spat, instantly revolting her.

“Of course. I knew I had to stay with you, study everything about you. I had to know your hopes, dreams, nightmares – your strengths and weaknesses. The more I learned about you, the weaker you became. You see, I'm prepared for the likes of you.” Frustrated, Raven slapped her hands down upon her thighs.

“I wish everyone would stop talking in riddles.” Artemis laughed.

“Don't play coy with me, Raven. I've been with you since you were born. In fact, you can call me daddy, if you like. It would be fitting, I know you so well. Now, you are boring me. Well love, it's been fun. The wire in his right hand melted away, as if it had been spellbound by illusion. In its place, Artemis held a serrated, knife-like, whip. In his left hand, the appearance of the fence sheers also transformed, soon taking the likeness of a dagger. Raven watched the

length of the razor-like whip fall to the ground. As she backed up, she knew this would be the fight of her existence.

In an instant, dozens of dark scenes flashed in her memory. What this creature of darkness was now doing to her, she had done to others. Sickened by her own self, she growled and crouched, ready to rip this beast into a thousand pieces. Raven's nails extended more quickly than the release of a crossbow bolt as Artemis smiled and stalked toward her, like a cat bent upon an exhausted mouse.

"I'm done with you. You bore me." Raising the whip, he spun it about, cracking it before her, feigning a lunge to see what she would do. As her wings made contact with the back of the barn, she readied herself to fight. There was nowhere to go now. As he pulled back the whip, there was a blur of movement as another landed on him, sinking both daggers into his back, rending and driving Raven's attacker to the ground.

As the man who appeared to be Artemis exhaled, Raven watched on in terrible fascination at how his last breath disturbed the dust upon the surface of the ground. Even as startled as she was, she could not help but watch the life flow out of him. In fact, it intrigued and pleased her.

Quickly, Artemis cleaned his blades on the clothing of this victim, then stood, turning his attention upon her. Stunned, she watched his daggers vanish, as if by magic. Truly, she was at a loss as to how Artemis could have just killed himself. Holding out his hands, to show he meant her no harm, Artemis looked upon her in earnest, pity swelling within his dark eyes.

"Raven, it's me. You are safe now," he said. It was then, she spotted the ring on his smallest finger. Freezing, she pointed.

"Where did you get that?" She held up her hand to show him her wedding ring, but it was not on her finger. "How can this be happening? What is this?"

"I had this ring made for you, while you were gone. Remember?" She stopped, hesitating, not fully convinced.

"It's over now, Raven. He will never bother you again. You are free of this dream-trap you've been locked within since you were a child." As he spoke, it all came back to her . . . everything. Relief flooded through her, like a great wave of warm water. Slowly, Raven stepped forward, her nails retracting as Artemis pulled the ring from his finger and offered it to her. Nearing him, she lifted her hand, extending a shaking finger to the circlet of crafted wings; the anchor she could judge the truth by. Just as the ring made contact with her finger, the ground beneath Raven collapsed. With a cry, she fell through a web of roots which grasped and pulled her down, down, down through a twisting, spiraling tunnel filled with a stench that instantly made her gag.

Into an open cave, she fell, plunging deep into a large pool of water filled with a number of decomposing bodies. Swimming and struggling to the surface, she sucked in a breath of foul

air. Looking up, Raven saw only dirt and rock above. She made her way over to the edge of the sickening pool and clawed her way out of it by stabbing her nails into an embankment of clay mixed with blood and gore. Each time she stabbed the ground, it convulsed, as if it was alive, and a horrible cry split the stagnant air. As she desperately clawed her way up out of the sickening pool, Raven's son neared, stopping before her, smiling happily. Horrified, she looked up at him.

"Mommy, will you play with me?" The little boy - her son - laughed, then squatted down in front of her, giggling with the eagerness of a young boy his age. Struggling to her feet, Raven choked and gagged as she made her way up the slight incline of filth. Her son happily watched her struggle, then skipped up beside her and slipped his small hand into hers. Pulling her hand away, Raven growled.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she asked. "What do you want!" Finding a small tunnel, Raven ducked in and followed it, hoping to find a way out of this horrid place. In happy silence her son followed, watching her as she forced herself not to vomit. The end of the tunnel opened up into a stone cave, into which she emerged and looked around. Shocked, she beheld chains and shackles lining every wall, half of which still held the decomposing bodies of many victims . . . most of which were women. She stopped and slowly turned to the small boy, horror filling her mind and soul. A cold feeling crept like hoarfrost through her chest as she saw him smiling happily.

"What is the purpose of what you do?" she asked, black tears mingling with the filth on her face.

"To have fun mommy," the child stated innocently. "Mommy, do you want to play with me in my room?" Slowly she shook her head, taking in the nightmarish scene before her.

"So many innocent people. You are mentally twisted. Growling, Raven attempted to lunge at this abomination, but instantly froze as a force gripped her entire being and threw her back against the stone between two vacant shackles. The impact stunned Raven, leaving her helpless for a moment as the shackles attached themselves to her wrists and ankles. The little boy neared her and giggled.

"I love you mommy", he said in all innocence.

"Liar!" she screamed, and lunged at him, trying to cut him in half. The child jumped back, evading her attack with ease, then began laughing as she struggled to get to him. In a few moments, the child calmed, a seriousness washing through his countenance. Slowly, the child began to grow and shift before her, changing into a man who looked to be about fifty years in age.

"Well, it has ended . . . finally. Another trophy earned. I have to thank you for the many years of entertainment you gifted me with, Raven. Truly, you are the most unique specimen I have ever collected." Raven couldn't believe what she was hearing.

“Specimen? In all this, was I ever something more than just that? Was there ever a time when you thought more of me?” The older man ran a sweaty palm over his head and licked his lips, thinking.

“Yes, but that doesn't matter now.”

“What is your name?” Raven inquired.

“Ah, my name. I suppose you can know it, now that you will be ending soon. You know, Raven, I just want you to know that I like you very much. That is why I have to kill you.” He smiled at her, his eyes filled with regret. “My name is Janith.”

“Thank you for sharing your name with me, and thank you for being honest. Will you please tell me one last thing?” He nodded.

“Sure, I suppose you've earned it. What do you want to know?”

“Are all the dead in this place real, or did you weave them into this dream?” Chuckling, Janith looked around.

“What an odd question. Brilliant, but strange in a way. Why would you want to know such a thing?” Raven looked at him, suddenly calm.

“I need to know because, Janith, it will decide whether I can be at peace or not. But like you said, you are going to kill me either way. I want to know, that's all.” He laughed and, with his tongue, wiped a bead of sweat from his upper lip and swallowed.

“Being undead yourself no doubt intrigues you on this subject doesn't it?” Raven nodded. “Fantastic specimen!” he exclaimed. “Of course they're all real. Now, I have a question for you. Do any of them retain even the slightest shred of life? You of all my pets would know that.” Raven looked around at all the corpses. One in particular caught her eye. It's shriveled head was thrown back, a permanent reminder of the pain she had suffered before death took her.

“You mean residue, like part of their soul is yet clinging to the decomposition of their bodies?” Janith's eyes widened in surprise and instant joy.

“Yes! yes! Exactly that. Oh, I'm so glad I found you. Even more, I'm so thrilled you are not rotting yet. What do you know? Please, tell me.” Eagerly, Janith waited. Raven flipped her hair back with a toss of her head, sending water, mingled with gore, spattering against the stone. Even in this situation, as hopeless as it was, the idea intrigued her.

“Of course, I will give you my thoughts on this subject. Janith, you and I come from very different backgrounds, yet we are not so very different, you and I. If you had given me the chance, we could have discovered marvelous insights into the study you do.” Janith shook his head, raising a finger, but Raven held up a shackled hand.

“I'm not begging, Janith. I'm not asking for that now, Janith. What's done is done. But, I find the soul very interesting. I never thought about the residue remaining within the dead until you asked.” Janith stared at Raven, more eager than ever, his attention riveted on her. “Every piece of flesh and scrap of body has a faint glimmer of what it once was while it breathed. I see

it all. In fact, I can collect and build with it. I can sort it all out and, like a master chef, fit those pieces together to create a Harrowed`Soul – an undead, crafted of many pieces, to form a half-living being. I suppose if I learned necromancy, as well as advanced alchemy, I could create a living soul.” She paused a moment, shook her head, then continued. “No, not create life. I could not do that. I would animate it with intelligence.” Raven’s attention was again drawn to the screaming corpse next to her. “I wonder if such a life animation would obey its creator. I don't know. There are so many graves in this world, the study would be endless.” she looked at Janith, noticing sweat streaming his bald head and face. She saw doubt claw its way into his eyes.

“I should keep you here, comfortable. To kill you now could be a mistake. You are useful.” Shaking her head, Raven began to weep.

“All my life, all my half-life, I have known nothing but pain, Janith. I hate my life. And now you wish to keep me in here, in here? It stinks . . . I stink. No, I will do no study under these conditions. No further insights. No discoveries. Not for you.” Raven despaired, and inwardly surrendered to this one fate . . . death. Raising her hands, she looked at the shackles which bound her. “Just kill me. Let me rot and fade away like all the others.” Janith brought a hand to his chin in silence, watching her for some time before he spoke again.

“You are probably right. Even though this would be on the cutting edge of discovery, you would be too dangerous and unpredictable to trust.” Raven nodded.

“I hate myself,” she whispered, feeling suddenly ill. Abruptly, Janith’s eyes brightened, and he raised a finger excitedly.

“You know, before we end this wonderful relationship, I need to tell you something. And since your parents are long since passed away, it is the perfect time to inform you of a truth.” The mentioning of her parents was of no consequence to Raven in the least.

“I could care less about them, or any siblings I may have which were spawned from them. They were vile, horrid, creatures.” She truly felt nothing as she held Janith's eyes. Janith laughed abruptly.

“I truly enjoy this last part of a relationship. It's the grand finale before darkness truly sets into those I've played with.” Eagerly rubbing his hands together, he paused for a dramatic moment. “Okay, brace yourself,” he stated with excitement. Janith took in a deep breath and let it out, enjoying the moment. The sweat on his lips flung through the stagnant air as he proudly folded his arms.

“I made your mother and father hurt you. I entered their dreams and twisted their minds, until I controlled them like gloves on my own two hands. By the time you ran away, they were helpless to resist me. Before I began with them, I assure you they were the most loving, attentive, wonderful people anyone could meet. After you left your home, I released them just to see what they would do. Raven, they died mourning your absence. Every resource they had was expended to find you. They died poor, half starved, and without honor in some far away place I

could care less to mention.” Janith licked the sweat from his mouth again and swallowed it. Grinning, he waited for her reply. Raven looked around, not focusing on anything in particular, stunned beyond words. She felt like she was suddenly falling. Dropping to her knees, she lowered her head.

“Liar,” she whispered. “You are just trying to torture me. This means,” she waved a shackled hand at him, “nothing.” Grinning even the more, he walked away.

“I’ll be right back, love,” he optimistically stated, then vanished, leaving Raven in silence.

Raven thought about Artemis and Chrysalis, wondering if they would be happy together. At least she had done that much good for her Vampire before . . . tears of blackness began to fall like never before as she thought about what she almost had.

“Artemis, if I have a soul, I will watch over you and Chrysalis, I promise,” she whispered. Looking down at her hands, she sighed, giving up. “I can’t do this anymore.” Placing all ten fingertips against her chest, just over her stilled heart, she tensed, clenching her jaw tight. Just as she was about to end it all, a lock of her black hair changed to white, beginning at the tips and working upward to her scalp.

“What is this?” she thought, bewildered. At that moment, Raven heard Janith start whistling a merry tune in the distance. Glancing his way, she lowered her hands and wrapped her fingers about the snow-white lock of hair. Closing her eyes, Raven refused to look at the monster who cheerfully returned. She could hear him whistling, his footsteps, and the sound of something being dragged. It all stopped directly before her. Lowering her head even the more, Raven refused to look.

“Come on love, take a peek. It could be diamonds I’ve brought you. A big sparkly flawless pile of brilliance!”

“I won’t play your games anymore,” she whispered. “I’m finished.”

“Hmm, then, if you don’t look, I will move on to Artemis and Chrysalis.” At his threat, she screamed, slowly looking up, her eyes instantly filling with intense hatred.

“That’s it beautiful, take a good long look at what I’ve brought you. You should be grateful to me for reuniting you with your family; a kind gesture on my part. So you know, I saved them so you can see them one last time before I begin my final study on you.” The first thing Raven saw were the black feathers, dirty, frail, broken and half eaten away by the passing of time. As she fully gazed upon the horrific scene before her, she discerned two bodies; long since decayed husks of two Karritch Gleighdor.

Excited, the monster before her stepped on the chest of one of them, crushing it beneath his heavy foot. The skull rolled to the side, half broken as he bent over and flicked the bones away from the neck area.

“Ah, here is the medallion she wore. You remember this, I’m sure. You have to

remember this. When you were a small child, you used to play with it, remember? Think now.” He watched her in wonder, anticipating her answer and reaction as if he was reminiscing fond memories. He pulled the chain free of her mother's neck bones, snapping it loose, then tossed it in front of her.

“Open it,” he said, emotionally. “This brings back such wonderful memories.” Numb, and beyond horrified, Raven picked up the amulet with shaking hands and slowly unclasped it. Within the amulet was a folded piece of fragile paper. Taking it from the amulet, Raven carefully unfolded the parchment that threatened to crack. Janish held out a quick hand.

“Oh, carefully now. Don't ruin it before you know what it says. This is important.” Ignoring him, she managed to open it enough to read the following note:

Raven,

Where are you? We can't find you anywhere. If you are reading this without us giving it to you, just know we tried to find you. We did our best to get you back. If we are beyond this realm of sorrow, and you find this locket, your father and I beg your forgiveness for the terrible things we did to you. Shame is our constant companion now. Your father blames himself for everything. I honestly don't know what happened. This all seems so wrong, so very very wrong, like a perpetual, inescapable nightmare. I cannot explain why we did the things we did to you, and I feel as though I'm making excuses, but we beg your forgiveness. We love you so very much.

With all our love,  
Mom and Dad

She remembered the locket. She remembered more good times, which flooded into her memory like knives piercing her heart. She folded the paper carefully, replaced it, and shut the locket. Slowly, she pulled the chain over her head and rested the piece against her chest.

Pulling her hair through the chain, Raven's eyes began to fill with a golden light, though she did not perceive it. Looking up at him, she bared her teeth and snarled like a dragon. The insolence of Janith's face instantly fled. In great haste, he backed away from her and raised his hands up high. She could see he was leaving, retreating back to wherever he came from. That could not be allowed.

Lunging forward, she focused on him, bending her mind on blocking his escape. As the dreaded phoenix sheds its flame in all directions, a golden brilliance filled the entire cavern. The chains which held her bound shattered, hindering her no more than simple, rotted threads of webbing. Bathed in the power of Essence, Janith stopped, unable to move, frozen in a state of surprise and instant terror.

Stopping before him, she paused for only a moment as Raven's appearance melted away to reveal a beautiful Sardakk Elf Witch, eyes blazing with the fury of a mother dragon . . . a

dragon defending her hatchling child.

Katcha waited, watching the three on the bed. The only change he noticed was a lock of hair from both Chrysalis and Raven had switched color. Something was happening. He did not approve of her leaving like she did. She did it too much, and it was reckless. Still, it was her decision, and he could not change that. Still, he worried. She had gotten herself into trouble too many times before.

Raven opened her eyes, turned her head and stared at Artemis. Slowly, she moved off the bed and stood. Looking over at Katcha, she tried to give him a smile, but failed as a sudden weakness began to weigh heavily upon her.

“Are you alright?” Katcha’s deep voice came from behind, startling her. Turning to him, tears began to flood Raven’s face as she shook her head, her bottom lip and chin quivering. Katcha walked to her, embracing her gently.

“Mother, father,” she lamented as she leaned heavily against him.

“We will take care of you Raven. What of Mitcheio?” She looked up at Katcha, a look on her face that gave the signs of complete hopelessness and despair.

“I did not see her,” she replied with great effort. Katcha nodded.

“At the last moment, she entered also. She only does that when there are no other options.” Raven laid her head against Katcha's chest, feeling drained and terribly weak, her eyes fixing on Artemis and Chrysalis. Reaching up, she felt for the locket, but it was gone.

“Was it real, Katcha?” Mitcheio's Guardian sighed heavily.

“That which I feel with my heart,” he responded, confusing her.

“My heart cannot tell . . . it is stilled.” As she gazed up into his eyes, hope diminished into some far away place she could not go. Her eyesight began to fade as she felt her lungs burning for air. Katcha supported her, a look of concern etching into the features of his face.

“Your path is as her's was,” he said. “By the time she completed her many trials, she was like you . . . a mess. You need to talk to her about this, not me. You and I are opposites in this matter, but I am here for you. Raven, Raven?”

Laying her head back, all Raven could see was their corpses. She no longer wanted to see them. Closing her eyes, she embraced the weariness of an Age filled with pain and darkness, accepting the companionship of oblivion. She had lost more than everything.

Exhaling her last breath, she willingly fell into the blackness of death, embracing it as if reuniting with an old, trusted friend.

Katcha looked down on her in shock, sensing no spark of life in her. He remained in the room holding Raven until Mitcheio appeared where Raven had been laying. Opening her eyes, Mitcheio arose quickly and went around to the other side of the bed, motioning Katcha to her.

Quickly, he neared his Ward and laid Raven back on the bed. Pointing to Chrysalis, the Witch grabbed Raven's hair.

“Let their hair connect, quickly now,” she ordered, a fear washing into her countenance. Katcha knelt down by Chrysalis and gathered up her hair. After doing the same with Raven’s, he brought the two ends together. No sooner did their hair touch than it grafted together, as it had done before. As it did, a golden luminescence began to glow from every connected strand as if a golden fire had been lit within each. As this happened, Artemis stirred, opening his eyes. As he awoke, Mitcheio backed away, pulling Katcha with her. Sitting up, Artemis fixed his attention upon Raven and Chrysalis, both of which lay still and un-breathing.

“What's happening?” he asked, rising up from the bed. As he spoke, Chrysalis suddenly gasped, hyperventilated a few times, then began to breath as normal. Still, she did not awaken.

“What about Raven?” Artemis begged, throwing a glance at Mitcheio, who remained silent, watching with a desperate hope gleaming in her eyes. Katcha was still and silent, unmoving, looking at Raven in disbelief.

“She was awake . . . we talked. Then, she fell into . . .” Katcha stopped, lowering his head. With a dread washing through him, Artemis looked upon Raven.

“What? No, no, no.” In desperation Artemis ran a hand across her brow, then embraced her. Sliding his lips to her ear, he whispered to her.

“Please, please, come back to me. What am I without you?” Bursting into tears, he sobbed and pulled her tight, stoking her hair in disbelief. “You were going to do this anyways, even after we talked it out? Why? I thought you changed your mind!” He glanced at Chrysalis, then back to her, feeling a sudden weight within his heart. “Remember when you rode that big spider? And when you took all the Leprechauns's treasure? And how that Gargantuan Preying Mantis found you, and cleaned your wings. How you gave it a good scratching in return? We did so many things together, it's hard to say them all.” Laughing and weeping at the same time, he wiped his face with his sleeve. “I remember how you beat me within an inch of my life. I didn't have the heart to fight back. Then, after you saved me from that fate, you dove down that dragon's mouth to save me and got frozen solid. You are always trying to get me killed, then desperately trying to save me. Well, it would be a great blessing if you would stay with me now, just like before.” Artemis waited, but there was no response. It was obvious she was gone, though he rejected the truth.

At long last, Mitcheio and Katcha withdrew from the room. They tried once to get him to go with them, but he would not.

“Bring Raven when you are ready. I'm so sorry about -” Mitcheio broke down, weeping as she slowly exited the room and shut the door.

Shutting the door softly, Katcha took his wife lovingly into his arms as she collapsed against him.

“I tried, Katcha,” she broke down. “All this power, and I could not save her. What did I do wrong? I hate this. She is dead, and I played a part in it.” Caressing her hair, he pulled her tight as she began to bitterly sob.

“Mitcheio, you have a loving heart of pure gold. Your soul is undescribly good. But, you cannot save them all. Sometimes bad things happen. Hear me now. There are three others here who need your help, or they will also be lost. I am your rock. Set your back against me. Use me for shade when the sun scorches the earth about you. Hurl me at your foes. I am yours . . . you are mine.”

She looked up into his eyes, so stern and sure. Nodding, she laid her head against his chest, slowly regaining her composure.

“Katcha, I love you more and more every time I see you.” Katcha smiled shortly, then hardened.

“Let's get back to work. I will make all the funeral arrangements. You take care of your students. Wiping her eyes, Mitcheio felt determined more than ever to find and train those with the same gift she possessed.

“Let's do it.” she wept, fresh tears streaming her face.

Artemis desperately prayed for Vannar to spare her in his great mercy. He prayed far into the early morning of the next day.

Nothing changed.

Emotionally exhausted, he kissed her again, desperately hoping beyond hope Raven would somehow pull out of this, just like always.

She did not.

Looking down at her still form, he spoke to her one last time.

“I’m so sorry I left you in that tomb. It never should have happened. I will forever blame myself for the pains in your life. I have to go now, but before I do, I want you to know I love you with all my soul.” Carefully, he slipped the wedding ring on her finger and kissed her one last time, shedding bitter tears.

As he stepped back, the golden hue within the hair of both Chrysalis and Raven faded away. As it did, Chrysalis opened her eyes and sat up, her hair parting from her other self. In silence, Artemis walked over to her, picked her up, and carried her out of the room. As they departed, Chrysalis stared at Raven, a look of disbelief twisted into her beautiful face.

“Artemis, this was not supposed to be. I did not make the choice to do this. Please, please don't blame me. Don't make me go away. Please don't reject me.” Holding her tight, he sobbed on her neck.

“Never. I am yours, you are mine . . . forever. I will never leave you.”

That very evening, Artemis was joined in marriage to Chrysalis. He allowed nothing to stop the forlorn, quiet, solemn wedding.

Two days later, Raven was sealed in a stone vault, deep within the cemetery of Gaunten with a Guardians Sending. Mitcheio placed a spell of preservation on the tomb, forever sealing it against the elements of time.

Once the funeral was over, Artemis quietly departed with Chrysalis on their honeymoon. They spent the next fortnight in the city, going out, and trying desperately to enjoy their time together. She made him happy, but there was a part of him that ached and hurt. Chrysalis felt the same heaviness of heart, but, together they survived it. After two weeks they returned to the guild.

Shortly after their arrival, Chrysalis was summoned by Mitcheio for further training. During her training, Artemis stayed by her side as much as was permitted.

Chrysalis grew quickly in the power and understanding of the Essence of Eternity, and used it often to sooth and heal Artemis as best she could.

Time pressed on. Over the period of three moons, Artemis began to be himself, for the most part, but a lingering sadness manifested deep within his eyes, just as it did when he had said goodbye to all his other wives over the centuries. Still, he had Chrysalis, and though it was not Raven, it was, and this was a source of healing and strength for him.

Beyond the reaches of all the planes and dimensions of Utaemia, she slowly walked upon a familiar path of golden splendor, unblemished and untainted by time. What once filled her with wonder was now her endless path; endless burden; endless sorrow. Now, all she could see was the carnage of two people laying on a cavern floor who had loved her . . . not hated her. It didn't matter anymore. It was too late to alter the history of her life. It was irrevocably gone. It was a history that would fade away and eventually be forgotten.

She had lost.

For time out of mind, she wandered the golden path, forgetting many things.

Once she loved a man, whoever he was, but no longer recalled his name. Like peering through tainted water, she looked into her past only to see clouded visions of diminishing scenes and memories.

She screamed, but no one heard her.

She screamed again . . . no one cared.

She screamed into the immensity of blackness all about her, but there was only her, only the golden path. What was this path, she began to question. She once knew, but now it was a fading memory. Stepping to its edge she looked down to see no end. She looked up to witness the same. Finally, it dawned on her where she was. She was entered into her eternal state. She was forgotten, cursed to walk this path forever.

"My name. My name," she whispered, trying in all desperation to recall. Her memories were slipping into a void of nothingness, and it caused her to feel as though she was not. Looking down, she peered without emotion into the endless immensity of darkness before her, dotted by pinpoints of light. It was the same any way she gazed.

"I - I am," she faltered, feeling a sudden confusion she could not fathom. Slipping her toes over the edge of the golden path, she inched her way outward, until she felt no balance either way.

"I am a -" Fleeing from her mind and body, total emptiness filled her. Slowly, she lifted her hands to each side, closed her eyes and leaned forward, feeling herself fall into the void below. She did not look, or extend her wings. She merely accepted oblivion; to fall forever.

"I am, I was, what am I?" she whispered as she experienced the sensation not unlike floating in deep, still water.

Forever, it seemed, she slept, not caring or curious where she was headed. It no longer mattered . . . it never did.

One day, as Chrysalis shadowed Mitcheio in the teaching of her newest student, Chrysalis thought she might be of assistance to the guild. After they had finished for the day, Chrysalis requested a private conversation with Mitcheio.

“Mother, I had to find my way here. It was not easy, seeming I had no past that I could base my life as a reality on. But, Raven, she gave me memories. Mother, I want to be more useful. I thought you could give me something to do. I wish to be of assistance to the guild. Mitcheio smiled.

“What do you have in mind? Anything?” Chrysalis nodded solemnly.

“I had to find my way here. It was hard. The moment my goal was to seek you out, things began to happen, as if the very forces of nature fought against me finding this place. If not for Artemis, I would never have made it.” She paused, getting her thoughts organized as her mentor waited patiently for her to continue.

“What if I can find those, like me, who need help, and escort them to you safely? Do you think I could be of some assistance in that?” The Sardakk Witch thought for a moment.

“Why do we not assist a chick that struggles to break through its shell when it begins to hatch?”

“If we did, it would not survive. It needs to struggle to gain the strength it needs.”

Chrysalis stated, suddenly understanding . . . suddenly disappointed.

“Mother, I know I can be of some service to you.” Mitcheio brightened up.

“You should go to the palace and offer yourself to the king. I wager he has much work to do. He may have need of a pair of eyes and ears such as yours.”

“Is the king trustworthy?”

“He is the high king of this continent, a holy man, just and true to all, offering both justice and mercy in perfect balance. He is safe, that I promise.” Chrysalis grew interested.

“How do I gain audience with him?” Touching her wing, Mitcheio smiled, making her feel needed, loved, part of a permanent family.

“Katcha, will you do me a favor? Escort Chrysalis to the palace and see if she can speak with Nishane Asmond. Thank you sir.” Mitcheio lowered her eyes, suddenly smiling. “You have yourself a deal,” she quietly laughed. “Agreed.” Chrysalis, guessing a deal had been made, suddenly grinned.

“Did I just cause a bargain to be made?” Mitcheio nodded, grinning.

“Yes, and you were the bargaining chip he used to set up a dinner date with me this evening.” Chrysalis looked down at her hands for a moment, then looked up at her master.

“Mother, Artemis is not the same anymore. He smiles, but only for me, when I'm watching. When he thinks I'm not looking, sadness overshadows him. I see it. I don't know what to do. I'm still the same me, just not Karritch Gleighdor. I'm not sure if he truly believes it's me,

Raven. It's beginning to weigh on me.” Mitcheio reached out and took her hand.

“Give him some time. Be patient. He loves you deeply, that I see. I see him watch you when you are not looking. You please him, that I am sure of. A death in the family is never gotten over . . . it cannot be gotten over, ever. Time will diminish the pain and longing, the loneliness and sorrow, but it cannot erase the memory and physical loss. Please, be patient with him. Can you do that?” Chrysalis began to melt down inside, and soon ended up in her mother's arms.

“I'm still me. I'm still Raven. I love him with all my heart. I will be patient; there is no alternative. Even if there was, I would not take any other path through this. Mother, I'm afraid for him. In him, I see hope diminishing . . . extinguishing.” Mitcheio gripped Chrysalis tight, stroking the back of her hair and rocking her back and forth gently for quite some time in silence before speaking.

“Chrysalis, I am not wise in all things, and hardly in some. I am so sorry I failed you. I could've acted sooner. I fear that choice was a terrible mistake. Forgive me, Chrysalis, please.” Chrysalis gripped her mother tight, as if she were about to lose her.

“I will never forgive you for something that was never your fault or doing. It was him - he did this. Mother, what did you do with that monster?” Mitcheio flinched at the question.

“Oh my dear Chrysalis, do you really want to know something that will forever be etched into your mind? You should allow me to bear this burden alone. Spare yourself such knowledge. It is something I wish I could erase from mine.”

“I want to know,” Chrysalis replied. A look of regret twisted into the black Witch's face, mingled with a haunted look.

“From the day I sealed his fate, that monster will relive what he put Raven through, as if he were Raven. This curse will continue and end, forcing him to endure a full Age in the throes of what Raven was forced to endure at his hand. Once that Age is ended, it will begin again, and then again, never to end until the curse is removed. Chrysalis, each day that passes in your life will be an Age to him, and he will recall every moment of every day for that thousand years, powerless to change the outcome.” Mitcheio took in a shaking breath, then exhaled. “Chrysalis, I have never felt such diabolic evil in all my days, and I've seen my share of such horror. That man dwarfed anything I have ever witnessed. One day, I will die, passing on into the confines of a world that awaits me. On my deathbed, I will then choose whether that horrid creature will continue that one-thousand year cycle forever, or be released. As it now stands, my mind is set on his eternally reliving the horror of Raven's life forever. I'm sorry I had to tell you that, but you asked, and you alone have the right to know.” Chrysalis shuddered and cried out, as if in sudden pain.

“So be it! He has reaped what he has sown. Thank you for defending me. I will always be in your debt for that. I will always be your daughter and faithful ally. I have spoken.” Mitcheio

managed a smile, hearing Chrysalis giving her an unbreakable Sardakk oath. She suddenly loved Chrysalis, as if she had born her as a baby herself. Mitcheio held Chrysalis for a long while as she witnessed her daughter pour out all her emotions . . . until there was nothing left.

“It's about time we had this talk, Chrysalis. You and I both needed to begin a closure I did not think would ever happen. You heal me, daughter. You heal me.”

“You heal me as well, mother. Thank you. Now, I need to heal my husband. I'm ready to go see the king. I want to serve the rest of my days with you.” Mitcheio wiped her eyes as Chrysalis parted from her and stood. Chrysalis placed a hand over her heart, then placed the same hand over Mitcheio's briefly, then headed for the door.

When she opened it, Katcha was standing there, facing her, moisture plaguing his eyes. It took Chrysalis by surprise to see such emotion in him. All she could do was embrace Mitcheio's husband.

“I love you father. Thank you for who you are. I will forever be at your service milord. Ask, and I will do whatever you need.” Katcha gently wrapped his arms about her and kissed the side of her head. He then parted from her.

“I give you the same oath you gifted my wife with, daughter. As long as you hold to honor, ask, and I will be there for you. I have spoken.”

Composing herself, Mitcheio stood, pondering the day Raven was brought to the guild. Raven had recited her entire story. What intrigued and confused Mitcheio, was the visitation of the Herald to her on Black`Rock Island. Thinking on that fact, Mitcheio's eyes widened, as if she had just been doused with cold water. Instantly, she waved her hands and vanished into thin air.

Mitcheio appeared upon the golden path to El'Anara. Stepping to the edge of the path, she gazed in every direction, her eyes shimmering over with fine runes of glowing energy. Sighing, she turned away to the other side, searching again. Nothing. Raven was nowhere to be seen.

“Another lost,” she whispered, closing her eyes in silent mourning.

“Lost?” Came the deep voice of a female, not human. As she opened her eyes, Mitcheio found herself before two massive, oval double-doors. On the left side of the great portcullis, upon a mountain of gold, lay an Ancient Golden Dragon that eyed her intensely. At the right of the great doors, also upon a mountain of gold, lay an Ancient Black Dragon who gazed down upon her, unmoving and without expression. Instantly, Mitcheio lowered down upon the bed of gold beneath her, placing her forehead upon the coins upon which she knelt.

“Masters, I am your humble servant.” Both dragons slowly turned their attention to each other, then back to Mitcheio.

“We know you. You came before us in the past, Seeking,” the Golden Dragon spoke without moving.

“Why have you returned?” The great Black Dragon spoke, also unmoving. Mitcheio stood and held out her hands.

“I have lost an apprentice. I came in hopes of retrieving her, but I cannot detect her soul. I fear she is lost forever.” The massive Black Dragon gazed sternly at Mitcheio.

“And still, even as an advocate, you are yet a fledgling. Why do you look for Raven? Why seek that which is lost, when the Essence encompasses and is all? You yet have much to learn in your ignorance.” Mitcheio looked about her, as if suddenly noticing she had lost something.

“What is the Essence of Eternity?” the Golden Dragon whispered, echoing her question into the Witch’s mind.

“It is you, I, the gold, the path, the space beyond the path, the simple farmer, the sky within the earthen plane, the lightning, the door, the window, the . . . “ Mitcheio fell to her knees. “Emotion, love, hate, war, peace . . . it is all and it is nothing. The Essence of Eternity is everything.” The Golden Dragon neared Mitcheio, sniffing her. Without fear, or hesitation, the Sardakk Elf Witch embraced and wrapped her arms lovingly about the front of the mouth of the dragon.

“I love you,” she wept. The dragon held perfectly still as the Black Dragon neared Mitcheio as well.

“Mitcheio, nothing is lost, for nothing is . . . and all is found, for everything is. You have so much to learn.” Mitcheio began to weep, and reached out a hand, placing it on the mouth of the Black Dragon.

“Do you know what I wish?” Both dragons inhaled, as if smelling the Witch that embraced them, but did not answer. “I wish I could stay here and learn more from you both. Sometimes I feel like I'm at the beginning, lost, afraid, alone, desperate, hungry for knowledge. Much of the time I struggle just to waste motion and energy. But that is part of the Essence of Eternity as well, I know that. Oh how I've missed you both. And yet, we never parted. I am forever in your debt, and your faithful servant.” Both dragons ever so gently withdrew from Mitcheio, becoming still once again. Then, both spoke the same words simultaneously.

“We are not the embodiment of the Essence of Eternity. We are only the Keepers. Few venture beyond the gate we are the Forever Guardians of.” Both Dragons every so carefully moved aside and waved a massive claw at the gate.

“Would you venture in . . . again?” Mitcheio's eyes widened. All she could do was nod, being stricken speechless.

“So be it, both dragons whispered in unison. We allow you passage through this gate, through which none other from your realm has ventured twice. You are worthy.” With a great crack of dull thunder, the gates split as the Ancient Dragons retreated to each side, watching the crack between the legendary doors split and widen, steadily opening and sweeping the massive piles of treasure back.

Beyond the doors, she could see nothing; neither darkness or light, riches of treasure, or barren emptiness. Beyond these great doors she only perceived she could go.

“What will -” She stopped talking, looked the Great Golden Dragon, and then the Great Black Dragon. “Thank you,” she whispered. As she walked through the gates, they began to slowly close. Soon they shut with a great noise, as if the largest tree upon the earthen plane had fallen, crashing to the ground. As the great doors sealed, Mitcheio's eyes beheld wonders she knew she would never speak of.

Amidst a scene of countless memories, sites and thought, Mitcheio looked around, searching for only a single manifestation of the Essence of Eternity; just one was all she needed. Being among so many occurrences, she took in everything she could, learning more in the time it took to locate what she was searching for, than in all the time she had studied in Gaunten.

Her mind broadened and her thoughts eased as if she had no cares and never had. In the back of her mind, she kept an anchor of thought that rooted her down to the final destination where she needed to be.

Through the endless treasures of eternity lying about her, through a maelstrom of thoughts and actions of countless others, she focused on nothing, letting all of its overwhelming splendor go.

Piercing through the obvious, and through endless mysteries, most of which had never yet been conceived of, she perceived what she sought and focused her entire soul upon it.

“Come back to me,” she whispered lovingly. “See me, perceive me, take hold of my

anchor. You are not lost, nor will you be, if you will but grasp onto my will, my yearning, my tie to that which you were take from.” Mitcheio waited in silence, watching, waiting, hoping.

Lovingly, Mitcheio whispered . . . “Raven”.

Katcha wiped his eyes, took a deep breath, placed his arm about Chrysalis and guided her to the room where Artemis was waiting. Upon entering the room, her Vampire stood.

“I see you have a Guardian with you. What are you up to now?” he asked, fear laced into his voice. Chrysalis walked up to her husband and threw her arms about his neck.

“I am going to seek audience with Nishane Asmond. Would you like to come with me?” Somewhat relieved, Artemis nodded.

“Leave you alone? Even with the most powerful Guardian in Utaemia? Never. I would love to come with you. I would like to go and set some flowers -” he stopped, emotion cracking his voice. Chrysalis's face filled with sympathy.

“Of course. I will go with you. Leaving you alone is like losing my mind, just so you know. I am yours. Are you still mine?” He gripped her tight.

“Always and forever. Chrysalis, did you still want to be changed? I would counsel against it, but you did ask for it. I will let you decide. Please, please make the right choice.” She knew full well he meant, and the implications of it all, should she decided to change.

“We have time to think about such things later. For now, let's just spend the time we have together, shall we?” Openly relieved, he nodded.

“I would like that more than you will ever know.” Katcha turned and walked out into the hallway, silently beckoning them with a hand, his stern, stone-like demeanor once again intact.

“We better get going,” she whispered, looking deep into his eyes as if searching for something. She kissed him gently, took her Vampire's hand and led him after Katcha, who silently escorted the two to Raven's tomb. On the way, Artemis picked some roses which grew along a well tended road that led out to Gaunten's cemetery. Feeling as if she would desecrate the moment, Chrysalis picked a single white rose to give to . . . herself.

At the tomb, Artemis placed the roses at the door of Raven's tomb and knelt.

“Well, Raven, I hope you are happy where you are. I'm sure you are soaring with dragons in the Seven Havens, and giving as much mischief as you can deal out. I miss you.” It was short, but heart felt. As Chrysalis listened, she secretly smirked.

As Artemis arose and stepped aside, Chrysalis awkwardly stepped forward and placed a single white rose along side her Vampire's offering. Smiling, she shrugged.

“It's odd being at my own tomb. I guess it's not a new experience for me. Raven, I have to say, I do miss you. I don't feel complete without . . . you. If you can convince Vannar to let you come back, tell him I would appreciate it. It has been nearly four moons though, so I'm sure the answer is still no.” Chrysalis looked at the door of the tomb, deep in thought for a while.

“I'm going to offer my services to the high king. I hope he has a use for me. I'm sure he would for you. You were always the fighter. I am the nurturer. Well, I'll come again when Artemis wishes. See you later, mischief maker.” She got up, turned and took Artemis's hand and

Katcha gave her an odd look.

“Sorry I took so long. It's hard to say different things each time, especially when I'm talking to myself. Oh, Artemis, I'm sorry if that came out badly.” Gripping her, he pulled Chrysalis close.

“No, you did not do badly. I know who you are, or half of you, and I am happy with you. Come on, let's get you to the king.” They began following Katcha, who led them toward the castle.

She heard her name spoken . . . felt a sudden change about her. Slowly lifting her head, she beheld a golden anchor floating before her, just within her grasp. Without hesitation, Raven reached out and gripped it tight.

“Oh, you know what I learned?” Artemis broke the silence during the long walk to the castle. Looking up at him, Chrysalis shook her head.

“No, what?”

“Nishane Asmond is not Human. He is of an ancient race, dedicated to the protection of all who live on this continent . . . well, to those who desire freedom and peace and protection.” Katcha glanced back at Artemis.

“He is Sandarin.”

“I can't wait to meet him,” Chrysalis stated eagerly. What does he look like?” Katcha lead them on in silence, not answering her question. A while later, they found themselves standing before a large iron gate manned by a dozen guards. Katcha was about to hail the guards when Chrysalis's eyes opened wide. Quickly, she launched into the sky.

“I have to go back! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!”

Katcha turned and watched Chrysalis launch into the sky. Closing his eyes for a moment, he sighed heavily, shaking his head.

“Mitcheio, I am not sure, but I believe Chrysalis is headed back to the guild.” He waited a moment, then nodded.

“We are returning now.” Katcha waved Artemis to follow, then broke into a sprint back the way they had come. Without question, Artemis followed after Katcha, barely able to keep up with him.

Once they reached the entrance, Katcha looked around, making sure he and the Ardenoth Vampire were not being observed, then entered in. Artemis quickly followed after.

Gasping for breath, she opened her eyes to see stone about her on all sides. Confused, she sat up and looked around as a horrible pain gripped her entire body and mind, causing her to thrust back onto the surface she lay upon. The violence of the impact instantly fragmented her skull and snapped multiple bones in her arms and upper body. It felt as though she had been struck by a massive war hammer.

As she felt her skull splinter and crush, she screamed and writhed and twisted, falling over the edge of the stone box she lay upon. Pain, agony, torture and terror engulfed her, reminding her of things she had forgotten . . . things she wished to never experience again.

As she began to mend, and as the pain of her wounds began to fade away, a light slowly appeared within the darkened chamber, chasing away the darkness. Eyes widening in utter astonishment, she knelt . . . as a blade flashed forth.

After searching for far too long, Chrysalis finally found the door to the Essence Portal Room. Catching her breath she called out.

“Open the door! Open the door! I need to speak with Mitcheio. Please open the door!” She thought of beating on it with her fist, but shrank at the thought. Katcha had warned them not to touch it.

“What are you doing here?” she hear a familiar voice question her. Turning, Chrysalis beheld the Sylph, Gameedee.

“I have to speak to mother, Gameedee. Can you get in?” Gameedee laughed and pointed at Chrysalis.

“She is not your mother, and the Guardians already know you are here. Just imagine, you think you were born of a Sardakk Elf. You are Sagen Gleighdor. Mitcheio cannot possibly be your mother.” Chrysalis sighed, feeling no patience for this rhetoric.

“Gameedee, please, I -” the doors behind her, suddenly opened, instantly putting Gameedee out of spirits.

“How rude,” she whispered and zipped away down the hall. Turning, Chrysalis found herself facing a number of Guardians with drawn blades. Freezing, she raised her hands.

“Let her enter, came the familiar voice of the guild master. Stepping aside, they all sheathed their blades and waited for her to enter. Slowly, Chrysalis slipped through them, catching sight of Mitcheio. Running to her, she could not help but burst with excitement.

“Mother -” Chrysalis suddenly fell back to the floor and screamed, writhing in terrible agony. She felt something strike the back of her head as a number of bones snapped in her back and arms.

Shocked, Mitcheio ran to her daughter, her eyes suddenly blazing with a golden light. Kneeling down, she gripped Chrysalis by the wrists, locking onto her with a strength beyond her own, forcing her down. As Chrysalis writhed in shock, her shoulders and forearms twisted unnaturally.

Quickly, before she lost control of her, Mitcheio leapt upon her, straddling Chrysalis, subduing her to the floor. Blood pooled beneath the back of her head in a steady, expanding circle as Chrysalis shrieked and struggled, crying out, begging for Mitcheio to kill her.

Four Guardians came to assist Mitcheio in holding Chrysalis down. Shortly into the struggled, the doors of the chamber opened again. Katcha sprinted to Mitcheio's aid as Artemis assisted him. After they had her under control, Mitcheio rolled off Chrysalis and turned. Quickly, she placed a hand upon her chest and closed her eyes. Instantly, Chrysalis stilled, as if suddenly asleep.

“Artemis, go to Raven's tomb, now!” Before Artemis stood, Mitcheio struck him in the chest with an open palm sending him flying back, as if he weighed no more than a child's doll.

Before he hit the floor, Artemis vanished.

“Katcha, take Chrysalis to the Healers. Tend her. Do not let her leave. I will come.”  
Instantly, Mitcheio vanished into thin air.

Without question, Katcha took Chrysalis’s broken body up and headed out of the chamber in great haste.

Artemis landed against the door of Raven's tomb, striking hard, then fell forward upon his face. Shaking his head, he slowly stood, trying to shake a strange confusion out of his mind. His head pained him unmercifully as he stumbled, landing once again on his hands and knees.

Snarling, he felt the pain in back of his head subside. Unsteadily, he arose, staggering, then turned his attention to the door of Raven's tomb, his eyes taking in the roses he and Chrysalis had placed there earlier.

“What am I doing here?” he growled, the emptiness in his chest threatening to consume him. Watching the door, he waited, not knowing what to expect. A few moments passed as he stood there, listening, wondering. Then, beyond the stone of the sealed door, he thought he heard the faint sound of screaming, or calling out. Instantly, he leapt to the door and placed his hands upon its surface, his heart quickening. Again, he heard a voice. Placing his ear to the cold stone, he held his breath. Yes, he could hear screaming within, as if someone was being tortured.

“Raven? Raven! Raven!” He called out, sudden desperation filling him with a strength that sent him into a fury of pounding on the stone door of her tomb. His eyes flashed to darkness as he brandished his daggers. Maddened, he began stabbing at the stone, chipping pieces of the tomb's door away in a frenzy of strikes.

“Raven!” he screamed. “I'm coming! I'm here!” Suddenly the entire structure of the tomb shuddered. The door cracked as a terrible force rocked the area, causing him to stagger back. As another force of energy struck the walls and door of the structure, the cracks widened. In wonder, Artemis backed away from the entrance of his dead fiance's resting place, quickly retreating as a golden light burst forth from every opening created by the impacts within.

Artemis crouched, his daggers vanishing as he raised his arms up to shield himself from fragments of stone breaking loose and shooting out from the crumbling structure in all directions. Soon, the entire tomb erupted in all directions as an incredible force burst from within. Massive chunks and debris exploded, throwing Artemis backward across the graveyard. A large gravestone abruptly stopped him as he slammed into it, cracking its base and throwing him into pain and misery. Slowly, the grave marker toppled backwards to the green grass with a loud thud.

At first, Artemis could hear nothing but silence as he struggled to his feet and staggered, his attention returning to a now decimated tomb, obscured by a thick cloud of dust through which he could not see. Sharp pain drew his attention to his right arm, through which a long shard of stone had pierced. Annoyed, he grabbed it firmly, yanked it free and cast it aside as he staggered a few wary steps toward the ruins a what once was an intact structure – now thrown down into ruin. As he made his way through the rubble, and the thick cloud of dust, the silence steadily gave way to a shrieking ring. Stopping, he shook his head, balancing himself with great

effort. Once his senses were under control, he pressed foreword through the wreckage.

He had not gone ten paces back when a sigh came from within the blinding cloud of dust, through which he beheld a golden light, like the flame of a fire visible through a thick haze of smoke.

“Raven!” he called out as the dust began to slowly drift away with the slight breeze flowing gently through the massive graveyard. “Raven?” Peering through the obscurity, Artemis perceived the silhouette of a woman with wings emerging from the decimated tomb, slowly walking toward him. As the figure exited the cloud of devastation, he saw her, eyes burning with power . . . power that instantly beset him with agony.

“Raven, are you still mine?” he called out as he retreated back a few steps to avoid the searing pain she caused him. Stopping, she looked at one of her hands. Turning it over, she curiously looked at a ring set upon her finger.

“Who am I?” she said, confused. Artemis stopped retreating, filthy tears beginning to stream his face.

“You are Raven.” Raven raised a hand, staring at the ring upon her finger. Shuddering, she returned her attention to him as the golden hue of her eyes slowly began to diminish.

“Artemis?” she whispered, her voice sounding as though it could shatter stone. Shuddering, he began walking toward her, ignoring the pain.

“Yes, I am Artemis.” She also advanced on him, and even though his body was far more durable than that of a Human, the anguish was terrible. He could feel his skin beginning to burn and split. Ignoring the inevitable destruction he knew would consume him, he could not help but go to her, hope carrying him through sheer torture.

“I am no enemy, Raven.” Gritting his teeth, he continued foreword. “Will you end me now?” Continuing toward him, the golden aura about her, and in her eyes, began to fade quickly as a spark of recognition dawned in her lightless eyes.

“I am a monster!” she called out to him, then stopped before him. His skin and flesh began flowing from him in the breeze, disintegrating as ash in the wind. Shuddering, Artemis refused to retreat, so great was his joy in seeing her alive. Holding out a decaying hand, he trembled, nearly falling to his knees, a desperate pleading in his eyes.

“I need you, Raven,” he managed to say. Slowly, coming to her senses, Raven reached out and took hold of his hand, realizing what was happening. What she was doing.

“It's you,” she said, a sudden smile changing her countenance to something he recognized through his diminishing eyesight. Instantly, the damage she was causing him stopped. Focusing on healing her love, she willed to reverse the damage she was causing him. Coupled with his natural regeneration, Artemis slowly recovered. Within a short time, he stood before her, restored to full health. Slowly, Raven embraced him, that golden light in her eyes gone.

“Forever I drifted,” she whispered, her voice heavy. Gripping her tight, he held her.

“Beyond hope, you return. You were dead. How is it that you are here?” As he held her, instant memories assailed her until she recalled everything!

“Mother pulled me from the void. She brought me back.” Artemis released Raven and looked around.

“We should leave this place.” Looking about at the ruin within the graveyard, she bit her lip.

Within the Healers Guild of Essence Guildhouse, Katcha observed two aged women work upon Chrysalis. They both held out their hands, palms down, not quite touching the rigid body of Raven's other self as she lay upon a rune-etched table of white stone. Slowly, each ran their hands over the full length of her body and wings, a blue light flowing down like a cold mist upon her. As they chanted, the pooling of blood beneath the back of her head reversed in its course, then flowed back into her skull as a number of bones snapped back into their natural positions throughout her body. Three times they repeated this process. Each time, Chrysalis's breathing stabilized, until she relaxed, resting in peace.

"It is done, one of the Healers whispered. She is safe now." The other nodded, fatigue weighing heavily upon her.

"I believe, sister, I am close to the end, and then the beginning." She smiled and leaned heavily against the white stone, giving the other Healer a weary smile.

"I won't be long in following you myself. But, oh, the times we've shared. I would do it again and again." The other Healer sighed.

"When we part from the Earthen Plane, let us rest. Others will take our place, following after." Katcha stood in stone silence, listening, utter respect filling his soul for these women who came to this guild when they were in their youth, sent to the guild at the hand of one of his brothers from the Wastelands. Upon their arrival, Katcha recalled how eager they were to help anyone who needed comfort. They remained selfless and constant throughout the duration of their lives as servants of the guild. Through the years, he watched them age to maturity. Now, they were nearly spent. It was interesting how happy and content with their lives they were.

Slowly, the two walked to the head of the alter whereon Chrysalis lay, looking down upon her. Both touched her forehead for a brief moment, then withdrew. Hand in hand, the venerable Healers walked slowly away, both smiling brightly at him and bowing.

"She will live, Master Guardian." Knowing them all too well, Katcha instantly held up a hand.

"Do not bow to me, miladies. It is I who must give thanks to you." Formally he bowed in the Human custom. Both sisters bowed their heads ever-so-slightly in return, ignoring his command, then slowly departed, leaving Chrysalis and Katcha alone.

After a time, Chrysalis opened her eyes, feeling at peace. She remembered everything. At that very moment, she was also being led by Artemis toward the guild. Turning to Katcha, a smile spread across her face, as if she were a child opening a gift at her own surprise birthday party.

"About time you got back. I was beginning to wonder if you had decided to go through with that insane plan of yours." Katcha narrowed his eyes at her.

“Do I need to call the Healers back in?” he stated, stern as granite. Chrysalis slipped off the rune-etched alter, landing light on her feet and extended her wings, stretching. Folding her wings back, she walked up before Mitcheio's Guardian.

“I wasn't talking to you.” Katcha looked down at the Sagen Gleighdor, but said nothing.

As they stopped at the door to her room, Chrysalis turned and smiled.

“Thank you, Katcha,” she said, placing a hand over her heart and bowing her head slightly. Katcha returned the formality.

“Should you need anything, you know where my room is. Do you need anything now?” Chrysalis nodded, stepped up and threw her arms about Katcha's mid-section. Gently, he placed his arms about her in return, closed his eyes and whispered, “Peace.” It was incredible that with a single word Chrysalis could feel serenity flow through her. Such was the power of a Guardian.

“That's what I like about you,” she said, letting go and stepping back. “You are always looking out for everyone else.” Katcha looked at Chrysalis with a gleam in his eye.

“Always.” Turning, he walked away. As she watched him go, Chrysalis shivered.

“I'm glad I'm not a foe,” she whispered. When he was out of sight, she slipped inside, and instantly headed for the bathing room. Quickly she bathed and dressed in fresh clothing.

She had to hurry . . . Raven was coming.

When Artemis and Raven came into the room, Chrysalis was waiting for them. She had been adjusting her hair into various styles without the use of her hands - one of the more pleasant aspects of her evolution. The first thing she said as she caught Artemis's attention was, "I better just let it flow naturally." Artemis smiled at her as Raven headed for the bathroom.

After Raven was ready, she informed them she would be going to see the king. Grabbing the door handle, she said, "Chrysalis will stay, if that is okay with you, Artemis." Her vampire nodded, suddenly feeling at a loss.

"So, off you go again. Is there something you need before you go?" Raven let go of the door handle and turned.

"Half my soul is betrothed to you." Artemis smiled.

"Do you wish to wait for Mitcheio's return? She has connections." Smiling, Raven looked at her ring.

"I can wait to see the king."

As Artemis read a book to the girls, there came a knock at the door. Raven jumped up and answered it. In the doorway, was Mitcheio, Katcha and the two ages Healers standing behind her.

“Hello mother,” she said with some enthusiasm. “Please, come in.” As soon as Katcha stepped through the door, Raven saw the Healers. She knew what they were for, and it caused her instant anxiety. As they came through the door, each one patted her arm and smiled. Mitcheio turned, motioning Artemis toward the door.

“Would you both like to be married now, or shall you wait even longer?” Raven saw the corner of Katcha’s mouth raise, then caught Artemis’s eye as he walked over to her, holding out a hand. Without hesitation, both stated, “Now,” then laughed.

Chrysalis stayed at the Guild at Mitcheio’s request. She needed “training”. Artemis was not happy about their honeymoon being spent in Gaunten. Raven was the one who had to make him forget about the tropical paradise they had planned. It could not be helped, due to security reasons. Simply put, she had to appease him, and succeeded - especially with the endless supply of Sovala Keenya, which Raven begged for.

Still, the next two weeks went by in growing happiness. She could feel his heart mending, and vowed never to let anything damage it again.

Not long after her arrival back in the guild, as Artemis read the girls a story, there came a knock at the door. Raven jumped up and opened it to find Katcha filling the doorway. Without formalities, he pointed at her.

“You should go see the king now,” Mitcheio’s Guardian stated. Raven looked back at Chrysalis and Artemis.

“Keep reading,” she said with a wink, then departed, led by Katcha. Before shutting the door, Raven looked back at Artemis and waved, then was gone. Artemis shrugged and gave Chrysalis a knowing look.

“We have not been back for four hours, and off you go again.” He winked at her, then happily continued reading.

On the way to the castle, Katcha spoke very little, making her feel uncomfortable. She had been offered a horse, but declined. She had never ridden a horse before, and was intimidated by their size. So, Katcha pulled her up behind him, taking her through a maze of busy streets and up to the outer gates of the castle. When they arrived, he dismounted. Assisting her from the large war horse, he set her on the ground and walked toward the Gate Guards. In silence, and rather nervous, Raven followed. Both guards saluted Katcha, and were saluted in return.

“Long live the Guardians of Utaemia. Katcha, what can we do for you, sir?” Mitcheio's Guardian motioned to Raven.

“I have brought Raven, one of Mitcheio's students, here to request an audience with the king.” The guards looked at her, making her feel like she was being weighed in the balance. One guard looked at Katcha.

“I will go and see if his majesty's agenda will allow a visitor. Quickly, he fetched a stallion from a hitching post along the side of the guards station and mounted up. Before riding off, he reigned his warhorse in.

“What shall I say the nature of this visit is?” he inquired in earnest. Katcha looked at Raven, raising an eyebrow. Taken back, Raven looked at the guard for a moment. It seemed impossible to avoid telling him the truth. This was going to get awkward. Quietly, she cleared her throat.

“Please tell the high king a Knight of Vannar wishes to speak with him.” Even Katcha looked a bit surprised at her response. Both guards looked at Raven as though they had lost control of their jaws. The mounted guard smiled nervously.

“No offense intended milady, but did you say Knight of Vannar?”

“Yes sir, Knight of Vannar.” Saluting her crisply, he turned his mount and spurred it forward in haste toward the castle. After the guardsman departed, she looked at Katcha.

“Truth will give me the best chance to gain audience with his majesty.” Mitcheio's

Guardian motioned her close.

“We should have spoken before we arrived. My apologies. I'm sure you will see the king now. If you spoke the truth, you have nothing to fear.” Holding out an arm, he waited. Raven took Katcha's arm, suddenly very nervous. She did not fear the king. However, Raven was worried, due to being uneducated and ignorant in the social etiquette and protocol of the day. It had never occurred to her that she should have studied more before coming before a king.

“Katcha, tell me what to do, how to act, what to say. I'm new to this, and I am afraid of offending.” Looking at her, Katcha sighed.

“The king does not think himself above others. When you think of an ordinary king, exclude him from them. He is very different than the high minded and self important kings of the earth.” Katcha was silent for a few moments. She wanted more information, but kept quiet. If the king was a good man, as Mitcheio had informed her, that would be enough.

“Do not worship, but respect him. Keep your speech simple, straight foreword and to the point. Do not kneel to him, and do not act proud. Raven, be yourself.” He gave her a stern glance. Instantly, she knew what that meant.

“I understand. Thank you. He does sound like a wonderful man.” Katcha looked to the castle in silence, a pride burning in his dark eyes that Raven had only noticed when he looked at Mitcheio.

Within a very short period of time, she could see the guard returning. She watched him gallop toward the gate. When he arrived, he reigned in his mount and looked down on them.

“The king will see you immediately!” the guard motioned a quick hand. “Open the gate!” Quickly, the two were allowed access past the first line of defense to Wardenoth Citadel. Katcha's warhorse waited, its attention fixed on his master. Making a quick hand gesture, he motioned to his war horse, which instantly walked in through the gate after him.

It was not long before Raven stood before two large doors which, when opened, would lead her into the throne room. The stonework of the castle was exquisite, but not trimmed and set with gold, silver, or gems. She had always thought all kingdoms to be crowned with jewels and priceless artifacts. Here, this was not the case. Although she could not imagine more intricate workmanship, it was all stone and woodwork; mostly stone.

The guards at the door were larger than Katcha, which intimidated Raven. They stood at their posts, unmoving, staring straight ahead, as if failing to notice her and Katcha's presence. Katcha was a large and physically well defined man, yet these guards were easily two heads taller and decked out in intricate, rune-etched plated armor, the color of the deepest blue. Each held a rune-etched glaive, a katana strapped to their back, and two short blades. Every piece of their gear held runes and glyphs, catching Raven's curiosity.

Katcha saluted the guards formally, keeping close to Raven. She noted the two guards seemed oblivious to their presence. As she waited, she stared at the runes on one of the guard's blade. To her delight, she read and understood one of the patterns. Focusing on the rune, she mentally reached out, feeling an instant connection to it. This particular rune held the power of banishment, and her thoughts locked onto it in total, utter fascination. Slowly the rune on the flat of the glaive began to twist and writhe, slowly pulling outward, hovering above the surface of the steel, yet still connected. It was as if it was trying to free itself from the glaive. Narrowing her eyes slightly, she watched it, intrigued by its response to her will. Katcha slowly looked down at her, watching her eyes, instantly aware of her interest in the glaive. Noticing his attention upon her, Raven looked up at him, throwing him a slight smile.

"What," she whispered. He frowned and said nothing. Instead of pursuing his interest in her, Raven turned her attention to the great double doors set between the guards. After a long moment, she could not help but slowly turn her attention back to the Glaive. Within a moment the rune rose up off the blade once again, still connected to the steel surface by a dull gray light, just as before. Again, she focused on it, willing it . . . no, inviting it to come and join with her. The rune shimmered, slightly wriggled, as if trying to be free, then leapt off the surface of the steel, arced high into the air, then fell. Looking up, Raven inwardly smiled as it fell, landing soft as rain upon her forehead. The moment it made contact with her skin, it stuck, quickly forming the design it was meant to be, then melted into her skin, leaving no trace of its passing. Rolling her eyes to the left, she looked at Katcha, suddenly apprehensive at what he would say, what he would do, had he noticed. Watching her, Katcha exhaled impatiently, but said nothing. He hadn't noticed!

"At least I'm not Gameedee," she whispered. Katcha rolled his eyes.

"If you were Gameedee, you would not be here. Raven, is there something I should know? You are acting strange." He glared at her, making her feel suddenly very small. She

looked away, throwing a glance at the glaive to see if the rune was still gone. All she saw was smooth steel where once the rune had been. It made her wonder what it meant. Reaching up, she placed her fingers to her forehead to see if her skin was normal. Nothing felt any different than before. She was normal. The thought of her being normal nearly caused Raven to burst out laughing. Katcha watched her, scrutinizing her every move.

“Are you always this restless?” Startled by his sudden question, Raven looked at Katcha, flinching.

“It's my nature, I hate to say . . . my curse. Maybe someday I will calm down a little. I apologize if my behavior is off.” She looked around. “This is my first time here in a strange place with people I don't know. I don't do well with-” “It's alright,” he interjected. “If you knew the man you are about to meet, you would be more relaxed. You will see what I'm talking about soon enough.”

Worried about the missing rune on the glaive, Raven waited, staring straight ahead, trying to focus on not moving, but it was no use. She began to think about the runes on each of the guard's armor. Drawn to them, she discreetly looked each rune over, feeling one of them quietly reaching out, calling to her. She did not know which rune it was that caught her attention. She guessed it was most likely on a part of his armor not visible to her. Like a flawless diamond, she suddenly craved it. Slipping a finger in-between her collar and her neck, she pulled, feeling suddenly warm.

“Are you alright?” Katcha whispered.

“I think,” she grunted, a pain suddenly biting at her from within the center of her stomach. “Katcha, I need fresh air.” Her stomach twisted painfully, gripping her from within. “Oh no, not here, not now,” she whispered fearfully, glancing up at the two guards who were now looking at her. Turning away, Raven gripped Katcha's arm.

“I need privacy, Katcha. I must get away from others, please,” she desperately petitioned. Katcha looked at the guards.

“Do you have a Safe Room?” He inquired, a great calm and focus setting into his demeanor. One of the guard's broke away from his post.

“Follow me,” he commanded, and led them out of the waiting area and into the hall. As pain began to torture her, she fell. Before she hit the floor, Katcha scooped Raven up and followed the guard until they came to an alcove that took them into what appeared to be a comfortable chamber, arranged for social gatherings. Directly through the entrance, on the opposite wall, set a large fireplace, in front of which lay a large fur rug. Katcha walked over and set her down. Still gripping his arm, she knelt upon the fur, pain doubling her over. He knelt, supporting her, concerned and attentive. Katcha looked to the guard.

“Thank you sir. Artemis, her husband, is coming now. Will you please allow him in?” The Royal Guard nodded and left the room, glancing back at the two one last time before

vanishing down the hallway. After the guard was gone, Katcha turned his attention back to Raven.

“Can you speak?” he inquired.

“Yes,” she growled. Katcha, I’m evolving. Why now? Why? The king will be angry with me . . . reject me.” Desperately, she looked up at him, feeling sweat beginning to trickle down the center of her back.

“What can I do?” He asked. Raven’s eyes began to weep blood-red tears, as a terrible pain struck her, like a knife being thrust into her gut. Gripping her stomach, she growled in defiance. Another wave of torture struck her, causing her to cry out as she curled into a fetal position on the rug. Katcha quickly untied his Guardian Robes, grabbed Raven up against him, and wrapped them about her. Closing his eyes, he then began to chant.

“In pain I share corporeal woe,  
I share in torments sore.  
Gift me now that I may know,  
The suffering that is yours.

“Strength of mine flow as the sea,  
Bolster weakness be my goal.  
Weakness, pain, share with me,  
Fortify your stricken soul.”

As Katcha finished, terrible pain sliced into his gut like a sword. He began to tremble as crimson tears formed and dripped from his eyes. Never had he experienced anything like this! Tightening his hold on Raven, he grit his teeth and focused on the pain, embracing it. Never had he failed to lessen another's pain when taking it upon himself. Her torment was beyond excruciating, and he was only taking a portion of it from her! Katcha's frame began to quake as Raven struggled to be away from him. Not being able to break his hold without injuring him, she desperately looked up, lifted a trembling hand and touched the side of his face with her fingertips.

“Stop. Katcha stop. I can't finish with you . . .” she moaned, weakly struggling against him. Katcha opened his arms and let her go, then fell back from Raven gasping for air, amazed and in total disbelief. Moving away from her, he wiped his face and stared at the blood on his hands. Gazing at her, he shook his head.

“I do not believe this,” he groaned, astonished. “How can one bear so much? Mitcheio, we need you here, now.” Katcha staggered to his feet and secured his robes. “Chrysalis? I understand. Tend her as best you can, but I need you here as soon as you can come.” All he

could do was watch as Raven suffered through what he had but tasted a small portion of.

Raven slowly arose to her hands and knees and crawled close to the fire, her wings trembling heavily. On the third attempt, she managed to kneel, facing the dancing flames within the hearth. Bathed in shadow, mingled with firelight, she snarled, clenching her jaw tight, waiting, enduring the suffering brought on by this change. This was the most terrible, painful occurrence she had yet lived through, and it mercilessly ripped through every part of her mortal frame, tearing at her muscles, tendons, flesh and bones. Raising her hands up before her eyes, she watched as her fingers snapped and diminished, shaping into paws. Horrified, she extended her nails, trembling and weeping streams of crimson tears.

“What am I?” she whispered as talons extended from her fingertips, each with the appearance of a dragon's claw, yet much smaller, each serrated far more sharp than a sword's keen edge.

Like a piercing sting of an arrow, a splitting pain shot down through her spine. Falling to her side, Raven struck out at the attack from behind, raking the stone of the fireplace, wounding only stone, marring it with deep serrations as the bones in her legs snapped above her ankles. A pressure against the base of her back grew and grew as the realization of what she was becoming came to her. With trembling, weakened hands, Raven kicked at her boots, managing to get them off. Frantically, she clawed at her breeches. If she continued with them on, she feared the first gift she ever received would be ruined. Looking to Katcha, she saw him watching in terrible fascination, eyes locked on her. His eyes were filled with blood, his face streaked and smeared as well. Cast in relentless agony, Raven's heart was pierced with pity for his anguish. For a brief moment both their eyes locked together.

“Look away,” she growled, then desperately struggled against the waistline of her pants with paws which began growing black fur. Finally, she worked them off and kicked them away from her as her jaw slowly lengthened, cracking in multiple areas. As if Raven had been slammed on her face, she felt a deep splitting within her skull, deep behind her nose. Blood streamed from her nostrils as her face lengthened. She tried to speak, yet only moaned, sounding like the warning cry of a mountain cat. Black fur grew and thickened over the surface of her entire body as she continued to shift. Her eyes altered, narrowing as she pulled her cape free. The pain subsided quickly, but the exhausting effects of the transformation plagued her immensely.

The running of multiple feet in the distance came from down the hall. She struggled to all four feet, trembling, steadily growing in size. Try as she might, Raven could not undo the buttons of her tunic as the base of her wings. Panicked, she looked at Katcha and tried to speak, but to her horror, she could only growl. Frustrated, she made her way around Katcha, stopping directly in front of him and catching his attention. Pawing at the buttons, she desperately looked up at him. Quickly, he unbuttoned her tunic, then helped her take it off.

A Royal Guard slid to a stop at the archway entrance to the chamber, lowering his glaive defensively. A red haired woman in dark-green robes skidded to a stop by him, catching her breath. Katcha held up a hand, resting his other on the top of Raven's head, between lengthening ears.

“Stay your wrath Royal Knight. This is Raven, Knight of Vannar.” The royal protector froze in place as the woman slipped past him, nearing Raven, who had now transformed into a great winged cat. Slowly, she held out a hand.

“Raven,” she whispered in awe. “I am Cynn, palace Healer.” She looked around, taking in the scene. “You understand me, yes?” Raven looked up at Katcha and briskly shook her head, giving him a look that obviously meant she already disliked this woman. That is when she noticed her wings were no longer feathered, but membrane, like that of a dragon. Panicking, she backed away, forgetting something, but what was it?

Katcha turned to her and said something that felt like a threat. Bearing her teeth, she crouched and growled at him, her ears laying. No, she knew him! He was not the enemy. What was happening? Again, she heard running from down the hall, causing her to move up against Katcha. She trusted him. Placing a hand on the top of her neck, Katcha waved the healer back.

“She is disoriented. Move away.” Cynn slowly backed away, throwing Raven a loving smile.

“Sorry Raven,” she whispered. Raven saw Cynn bear her teeth and hissed at her dreadfully, her hackles rising, standing on end as she watched the red headed Human move back. Challenging Cynn with a fake lunge and a swipe of a claw sent the woman in full retreat from the room. Raven hissed again, satisfied. She then began to groom a paw, pretending not to notice her or the guard.

As they waited, Raven ignored everyone around her, with the exception of Katcha. Actually, she was watching each one of them, waiting, just waiting for anyone to betray her. Time passed, and for a while neither party moved, or spoke. At length, the sound of running feet sounded in the hall outside. The Royal Guard signaled them to him. Within a few moments, Mitcheio, Artemis and Chrysalis appeared. Chrysalis looked as though she'd seen better days, and was being helped by Artemis. Surveying the situation, Mitcheio scrutinized the situation, especially Katcha, who had his hand on the back of a creature she had never seen before. Artemis looked at Katcha, then the winged cat who sat cleaning its paws next to Raven's blood-soaked tunic.

“Where is Raven?” he asked. Chrysalis gripped his arm and pointed.

“There, by Katcha,” she said, a slight grin playing across her bloodstained lips. Artemis looked at Chrysalis, then removed her hand from his arm.

“Easy,” he said, and helped her sit at the bottom of the stairs leading into the chamber. “I will be the judge of that.” Chrysalis whispered something to Artemis as he helped her rest.

Mitcheio turned to the three observers.

“Your services are no longer needed here, thank you. You may return to your duties.” Nodding in silence, the guards and Cynn turned and walked away, leaving them without question. Once they were gone, Artemis took two steps into the room, then looked back at Chrysalis, who nodded.

“She cannot speak her native tongue, or Human, in the form she is in now. However, I can. Artemis,” she whispered in a voice tinged with regret, “I lost my feathers.” He turned and approached Raven. Looking deep into the cat's eyes, he stroked her ears and head.

“Can you change back?” Chrysalis stepped up beside Artemis, looking as though she would faint. Grabbing his arm, she leaned heavily into him.

“I will try, but only when I have privacy,” Chrysalis whispered.

“Of course, how negligent of me.” her husband said, and began caressing Raven's ears. The cat made a puffing sound, to which Chrysalis grinned.

“This is new to me as well.” A deep thrumming began to come from the great cat as it pushed its head up into Artemis's hand. Chrysalis smiled brightly.

“Keep doing that, please,” she interpreted, causing Mitcheio to softly laugh. The Witch neared Raven, placing a hand on Raven's right wing, then looked to Katcha.

“You look like you just returned from a dragon hunt, in which you got the worst of it.” Without any hint of humor, Katcha replied, “It feels like it, but worse.” Breaking away, Chrysalis slowly made her way over to the hearth and picked up Raven's blood-stained clothes. She then folded each piece and placed them on the floor. She also found the storing sack on the fur rug. Mitcheio waved a hand over the clothing, instantly ridding them of blood. Chrysalis then put Raven's belongings within the sack, then began looking around, as if she had lost something. Mitcheio noticed and walked over to her.

“What's the matter?”

“I've lost my ring, mother! When I changed, it must have fallen from my finger.” She continued looking for her ring, though it taxed her strength. Mitcheio began scanning the lush fur rug, then made a sour face at the blood. Putting her hands together, she closed her eyes, concentrating. Slowly, her hands separated outward, palms facing down, even with the floor. As her hands passed over the rug, the blood vanished, along with any that stained the marble floor in the room. She then turned to Chrysalis and did the same, then touched her on the forehead.

“Energy,” she whispered. Within a few moments, Chrysalis sighed.

“Thank you master,” Chrysalis said, then continued the search. Katcha joined in the hunt while Artemis stayed at Raven's side, gently scratching her ears. The large, black, cat was enjoying herself immensely, purring and stretching out on the floor before him. Raven wrapped

her large paws about Artemis as he worked her neck with vigor. Chrysalis laughed, her eyes rolling a bit, and lost focus on the search for the ring.

“If I scratch any harder, I'm going to catch this kitten's neck on fire,” Artemis laughed. Chrysalis looked at him, closing her eyes.

“Too late, fangs.”

“Chrysalis!” Mitcheio said sternly. The Sagen Gleighdor snapped out of it and held up a hand toward Artemis.

“Stop Artemis.” The Ardenoth ceased working Raven's neck and took up one of her paws, playing with her toes. Chrysalis blushed.

“I'm sorry mother. I didn't mean anything by what I said. I was just teasing him. Forgive me for my lack of propriety, please.” Katcha shook his head and continued searching for the ring. Mitcheio looked at Chrysalis and sighed.

“It is forgiven and forgotten. Please, remember where you are. When we return to the guild, I have a small library of books. I would like you to pick one and begin reading. I want you to start with a book titled, Cultures of Utaemia.” Lifting its head, the overly large black cat made a deep chittering sound. Chrysalis nodded submissively.

“Yes mother, I will.” Artemis placed his hand on the side of Raven's head and shoved her down.

“That's what happens when you forget to mind your manners, you soul reaping vamp' kitten,” he whispered, then poked her in the ribs. Faster than he could dodge, Raven wrapped her paws about him and pulled Artemis down to the floor, then nuzzled him playfully. While pinned to the floor, Artemis spotted the ring on the floor, not far from the fireplace.

“There's the ring,” he said, pointing at it. Raven let go of him and sat up, looking in the direction he pointed. She kept a foot on him just the same. Chrysalis walked over and snatch up the ring.

“Thank you for helping me find it.” Relieved, she slipped the ring on her finger. Raven stood, licked Artemis's face and walked over to Chrysalis, who climbed on her back and laid down, resting her head between her wings. Mitcheio and Katcha moved off to the side of the room and spoke privately for a few moments. When they were done, they departed, but not before giving Raven and Chrysalis instructions to go back to the throne room doors and wait to be seen by the King.

“Watch your manner's,” Mitcheio instructed before leaving, giving them each a warning look. After they were alone, Artemis walked before Raven and knelt, scratching her under the chin. Chrysalis laughed, instantly becoming playful.

“Kneel to me, Vampire,” she spoke for Raven. The great cat squinted her large, slanted eyes at him as he shook his head.

“Your eyes are still the same; one of your predominant traits.” Gently, he ran his thumb

over her brow. "I need to go back to the guild. After you see the King, we should go shopping, then . . ." his voice trailed off.

"Then what?" Chrysalis asked, slipping down from Raven's back.

"I'm glad the Dream Weaver is no more." Raven flinched at the mentioning of that monster. Chrysalis neared Artemis, placing two fingers over her heart. Slowly, she grinned and touched his chest as well. Returning the same, he scratched the top of Raven's head. Chrysalis set the Storing Sack down on the thick fur skin in front of the fire, then walked out into the hall, looking both ways.

"The hall is clear, Artemis. I need to shift back to my true form." Artemis looked at Chrysalis, confused for a moment. Raising her eyebrows at him, she gave him a look. Suddenly he understood and glanced at Raven. Quickly, he walked over to the chair, picked up the Storing Sack and opening it. Reaching in, he pulled out Raven's traveling cloths and placed them on the arm of the chair closest to the fire.

"That should do it," he said, then joined Chrysalis in the hall. As Raven readied herself, Chrysalis began to think.

"Artemis, if we can bring others, who are lost and alone, to feel like I do now, we will do much good in this world. If I bind myself to the service of this one King, I fear I may limit myself in the work of bringing others to Sanctuary." Removing the ring from her finger, Chrysalis handed it to Artemis and then moved away as Raven silently approached. As she neared, Raven held out her hand, fingers extended wide. Artemis took her hand and slipped the ring back into its rightful place. Raven smiled, a sense of gratitude filling her heart.

"Chrysalis will stay with me. I'm not sure if he will accept me, but I will speak to him nonetheless. Will you wait for me?" Running his fingers through her hair, Artemis nodded.

"My business can wait. I'll be here when you are done. Take your time."

Standing before the huge double-doors, she fidgeted nervously, unable to keep her attention off the bare spot on the Royal Guard's glaive. For the longest while, she remained standing, trying with all her might to swallow that tiny tinge of almost guilt she felt . . . well, truth be told, she wanted desperately to know what the other rune was that kept calling out to her. Yes, she worried about what the king would say, what he would do, when she told him what she did. Of course she would tell him. She was not about to hide anything from a holy king. Raven felt suddenly hot. Curling a finger through her collar, she pulled.

"Is it hot in here?" she asked the guards, who threw her a concerned look.

"Do you need to go back to the room, milady?" For a bit, Raven froze, waiting for the pains of evolution to begin its torturous process. Nothing happened. Sighing in relief, she shook her head.

"No sir, thank Vannar." Drawn to the glaive's blade, she sighed heavily, giving up the pretense that nothing had happened.

"I need to tell you something, sir." He turned and bent down to one knee so he was eye to eye with her.

"I'm listening." Intimidated, by his size and presence, Raven swallowed and pointed at the blank area where the banishment rune should have been, drawing his attention to it. He looked up at the blade, then back down at her, his expression stone-like.

"Did you do this?" He asked in a deep voice. Instantly, Raven lowered her head, nodding.

"Yes sir. If you allow me, I can try to," Raven's voice quivered with emotion and fear, "to put it back." The Royal Guard turned his weapon sideways, causing her to flinch.

"Do not fear me, Raven." Sliding the staff of the weapon through his hand, he positioned the flat of the blade upon his knee.

"See if you can place it back into the steel." She looked at it, then the guard. Glancing at him, Raven saw the look on the Guard's face and let out a heavy sigh.

"I'll do my best, sir." Watching her, he waited. Raven took Chrysalis's hand as she set her mind upon the Rune of Banishment, desiring the rune to return back into the steel. Nothing happened. The thought came to her to join her black and white hair together. Slowly, she gathered her long dark hair over her right shoulder as Chrysalis gathered her hair over her left. Together, Raven and Chrysalis brought the ends together. Instantly they fused, and a hue of golden luminescence, soft as starlight, began to illuminate where the connection was made. Raven felt her mind expand.

Raven became aware of the rune swimming in a sea of the power she harbored within. Narrowing her focus on the rune, she reached out to it, seizing it with her will. Slowly she felt the bond with the rune solidify and then connect. Tilting her head back, she willed it to the

surface of her flesh and waited. As she waited, a slight itching sensation grew as she felt the Banishment Rune appear upon her forehead. As it did, Chrysalis reached over, plucked it from her and dropped the twisting, writhing enchantment back onto the space on the blade. Quickly, the rune stilled, settling into its proper place. Raven opened her dark eyes and looked down at the glaive to see the rune had returned to the blade's surface. The Royal Guard ran his fingers over the rune, then stood, looking at Chrysalis and Raven, openly amazed.

“That type of enchanting is extremely rare and among one of the most difficult spells to perform. You both have a great gift. I am grateful you restored the power to my weapon.” The man bent his attention firmly upon Raven. “Do not steal from me again.” Both Raven and Chrysalis lowered her heads.

“Sorry,” they both whispered at the same time. The guard smiled a little.

“I forgive you. It was a pleasure to see you in action.” He then took his position and became silent and still as before. Raven and Chrysalis separated their hair, then waited to be admitted to see the High King of the land, this time ignoring three runes which silently, desperately called out to her.

In her mind, Raven thought of how she would introduce herself to Nishane Asmond. She had never met a real King before, and it made her feel awkward and insecure. She wondered if he knew what had happened. She also wondered why it was taking so long for him to let her in. Adjusting her wings, Raven looked at the doors, doing her best to mask her expression with patience.

After too much time had passed, Raven turned to the guard to ask a question. At that moment, the doors cracked open with a loud noise, as if a great locking mechanism had been triggered within, scaring her badly. The guard who Raven had conversed with stepped to the side, motioning Raven to enter.

“The King will see you now. You,” he pointed at Chrysalis, “must wait here.” Chrysalis nodded and back away. Raven watched the thick doors steadily swing outward until they were fully open. The Royal Guard motioned her through the doors.

“Go in, the King is waiting.” She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then walked through.

The throne room was impressively large, making her seem even smaller than she already felt. Beyond the great doors, stood two great rows of columns, sculpted in the appearance of great sentinels, heralds which held up the lofty ceiling of the throne room. A lengthy carpet of deep red spanned the entire length of the floor between the pillars, in-between which hung long purple tapestries. A wide blue carpet spanned the entire length of the throne room on either side of the two lines of pillars, giving the massive chamber a regal heir.

At the far end of the chamber sat a well dressed man, who stood and beckoned to her. As Raven awkwardly approached, she noticed a most unusual thing about the throne room. Never before had she known such a place to be void of a throne. Also, this man had no visible body guards.

“Please, come in Raven,” the king invited, motioning her to a chair before him as she stopped and respectfully bowed.

“Thank you for seeing me, sir.” The King bowed to her in return, which was rather odd. In all her days, in all her learning, Raven had always learned that kings never bowed to their subjects – and yet, this king did. Another thing that instantly came to her senses, was that she could not detect the beating of his heart. She could feel the warmth of his body, as any living creature, but not his.

“It is a pleasure to meet a Knight of Vannar. I trust your stay in Gaunten has been comfortable?” Disturbed, Raven grimaced, suddenly concerned at the title she was now being called by. This was new to her, and it felt awkward.

“Sir, I have only just been knighted. Truthfully, I don't know what my place is yet. I feel rather lost at this point. This is why I wished to offer my services to you.” She paused, looking into his sky-blue eyes - hardened eyes harboring profound kindness.

“Please, sit down,” he invited with a wave of his hand. She did as he bade, choosing a chair close to him just at the corner of a long, wide table. Pulling the chair out for her, he waited until she sat, then seated himself.

“Mitcheio counseled me to come see you.” Smiling, he slid his hand across the table, palm up, taking her hand in his. Wrapping his fingers about her hand, he placed his other hand over it, instantly terrifying her. His eyes softened as he smiled.

“Tell me about you,” he gently coaxed. Taken back, she swallowed, frightened beyond words. But seeing the expression of admiration and love in his face, she cleared her throat softly, feeling suddenly emotional. Tears welled up in her eyes, then began to cascade down her cheeks. Wiping her face with her free hand, she looked to see black tears. Sniffing, she looked at him, expecting to see an expression of shock and disgust written across his face. The only thing she could perceive was kindness and love.

“I don't know what to say.” Smiling, the King gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Okay, If you like, I will ask you a question, and you answer. How does that sound?” Relieved, she timidly nodded and waited, terrified that he might learn about what she truly was. She suspected, once he knew, she would be rejected and asked to leave, or worse. It didn't matter. She had to speak the truth. She would never know if she didn't tell him everything. It would be impossible to serve him if she did not try.

“Where are you from?”

“Feryl Keep on the Tchurjen Westlands.” Gently patting the back of her hand, he smiled.

“Beautiful forests there. What is your favorite food and drink?” She looked down at his hands holding hers. His touch was comforting, soothing, and helped her to relax. Truly this man was holy; she could feel it by his presence alone. She looked up at him, smiling slightly.

“You must be Herald . . . oh, my apologies sir. My favorite food.” He grinned.

“Yes, favorite, and thank you for the compliment. I will tell you about myself after you tell me about you, deal?” She nodded happily, then suddenly realized she was exposing her fangs, and to the highest King on the Zurkel Mainland. Still, she could not get her lips to stop smiling.

“Well, I don't remember what food tastes like, except for a carrot and a grape, which I did not like.” She leaned forward slightly. “However, Sovala Keenya is very delicious.” The King looked at Raven in earnest.

“When was the last time you ate?” The truth had to come out – there was no going back now. She remembered all too well the answer.

“I tried a slice of carrot a while back, when I had dinner with the Black'Rock Pirate Queen, and a grape a good while before that.” Raven Grimaced. “Before that, over nine centuries.” Raven froze, her eyes lowering to the table, as if in shame. She didn't want to see the look on his face.

“Well, I have a friend who can cook for the most picky eaters in all of Utaemia. I wager a brick of gold you would fall in love with his food. I will give you some information on how to find him later. I'm sure you will be surprised.” Raven was shocked. She looked up at the King, confused.

“Sir, you are not at all curious why?”

“I am, of course, but , for now, I want to know who you are, not what you are. Do you have a skill, a trade you can brag about?” She thought about his question, her brows knitting together in thought.

“You mean, like a power or a spell?”

“No. My friend is a cook. I know another who is a survivalist; one who can live off the land.” Understanding, Raven shook her head.

“No.”

“What is your favorite color?”

“I love red,” she stated without hesitation. Artemis had chosen the perfect color when he had given her five presents at the inn long, long ago, and she still wore them to this day.

“Do you like to read?” He asked, looking down at her hand.

“I’ve never been a reader, but I think I might if I could find something interesting.”

“Well, this castle holds one of the most extensive libraries on this continent. Feel free to spend as much time as you like in it. I'm sure you would find something interesting enough to sink your teeth into.” She snickered.

“A fine choice of words.” Shaking his head, he laughed with her. He didn't ask what she meant. Wasn't he even a little curious?

“What is your favorite season?” No, he wasn't even a little curious.

“I love the fall, when the countless leaves of the forests are so colorful, as if they are being painted daily. I love that. At least I used to. I think I still do.” Touching the diamond on her wedding ring, the King smiled.

“Do you like being married? Is it all you thought it would be?” She looked at the band of raven wings holding the diamond in place.

“I do. Artemis is good to me. He is good.” The King sighed.

“I'm happy for you. You deserve no less. Raven, I am impressed and amazed. I perceive you have traveled a road that I have known to always end in not only failure, but disaster and death. Where many have failed, you succeeded.” Raven looked into his eyes, holding them as, once again, tears began to fall. How did he know this? This man was more than met the eye, or she was a fool.

“But how do I forget the bad memories. They torture me. This last blow cripples me, and I try to block it out, but can't. It won't go away.” She tightened her grip on the king's hand, unable to speak as the guilt and horror of the truth about her parents stabbed her in the chest, slashed at her mind like a poisoned-laced razor.

“Raven, can you tell me what happened to you?” Feeling suddenly dizzy, she looked at him, her eyes widening.

“I will tell you everything if you have the time. You need to know that I came here to offer you my services. I hope, in telling you my history, this will help in your decision as to how I can serve you.” Placing her free hand on his, she lowered her head, trying to control her emotions. “You are more wonderful than they told me you would be.” The King stood, walked around the table and guided her to stand. He then wrapped his arms about her. Caressing her hair, he rocked gently from side to side in silence for a time as Raven tried to bring her emotions under control. His next words gave her hope.

“I did not become what I am today without a struggle. You just labeled me as wonderful. That means more to me than a mountain of gold, you know not why. Raven, like you, I once felt spent, out of touch, out of control, and wondered if I had a future.” The king sighed, pausing for

a few moments as he enveloped her in the shelter of his loving arms. Raven wanted to ask him questions, but kept silent and waited for him to continue, if he would. She hope he would, and he did.

“Raven, it is not possible to become holy in ignorance. It cannot happen unless the opposite is understood. Only when I touched upon darkness - only when it touched upon me - did I comprehend the difference between good and evil, holy and unholy. It was only then, when I perceived what those paths were, what they meant. With that knowledge, I was able to choose my way correctly, and without err. Raven, my entire soul was in the throes of pain when I made my choice. I set my mind to what I desired, truly searching myself. Getting to here, now, to this day, to be with you in this room, was the greatest trial of my life. I do understand the path you are on, even if it be different. You have tasted of much darkness. Now, you will taste of the light. Only then can you choose without ignorance.” Raven listened to his words. With great impact, they penetrated her heart and mind.

“I have seen the light and goodness in Artemis. That tomb, that horrid Dream Weaver, was the dark and evil side,” she managed to say. The walls and pillars about her began to bend and twist unnaturally. The floor began to dissolve beneath her feet as her eyes shaded to a darkness deeper than ever before. Steadily, the throne room dimmed, then slowly faded. What was happening? “I choose the light,” she forced between clenched fangs. “Light.”

“Raven, Raven,” she heard her name called as she slipped into a blackness so deep and intense, she thought she had been cast back into her tomb.

She found herself upon a couch within a small chamber. Looking over, she beheld the King, by her side, holding her hand. As she focused on him, he leaned forward, giving her a warm smile.

“Lay still and rest, young lady. There is no hurry. You are safe in a nearby side-room. Rest for as long as you need, then we will continue.” She relaxed and gripped the king's hand, trusting him as if she had known him all her long years.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Not long.” She cringed.

“I didn't come here to waste your time, sir,” she said and began to rise. He helped her sit up.

“Knight of Vannar, you are not wasting my time. In fact, I would have been sorry to learn you had departed Gaunten without coming to see me. How are you feeling?” As he spoke to her, Raven's heart was lifted. This incredible man filled her heart and mind, her entire soul, with love and joy.

“Exhausted, but good. You?” The King laughed softly.

“I'm good, thank you. I have your favorite drink here, but, as you know, it loosens the

tongue and lightens the mind. If you drink it now, our conversation may change.” Raven shook her head.

“Only because my mind will lighten, but not because of what I have to say, or what I know . . . what secrets you may think I keep.” She took a deep breath and sighed. “Secrets and covertness are burdens which weigh me down, sir. I would never have come to Mitcheio, or you, if I had a single secret either of you would frown upon. Maybe we can have some Sovala Keenya after?” The King nodded.

“That sounds good. Since you are comfortable, would you now tell me your story, if you have the mind to. I would like to know it.” A cold feeling struck her in the chest the moment he asked. Reluctantly, she began at the first recollection of her life, quickly telling him everything. During her story, he listened and asked questions. For the next long while they spoke, taking breaks now and then to walk in the palace garden, or to eat. Raven drank water, but would not eat any of the food offered.

After a while, Raven told the King of Chrysalis. Upon learning about her, he made haste and retrieved her. After she was sitting on the couch with Raven, he departed, returning in quickly with food and water. After Chrysalis was tended to, and when Raven's story was finished, the King stood and bowed to her.

“Would you two pretty ladies care to take a walk in my private garden?” Curious, and excited, Raven and Chrysalis stood, both taking offered arms. With Raven on his right, and Chrysalis on his left, they went out, making their way through a more private area, and found themselves within a side garden, just without the main tower of the castle. Walking into the furthest area of a secluded, well-kept patch of ground, they came into a crop of fruit trees, concealed into the furthest hidden corner of the grounds. The King stopped.

“I come here when I do not wish to be disturbed. This is my private sanctuary, and an area only I venture into,” he grinned at both Raven and Chrysalis, “unless I bring others with me.” Raven loved secrets, and this walk was intriguing her to no end. It was as if she had been taken into an entirely different world. Thin vines crept over every living thing, yet did not choke them out. Within the king’s little paradise, there was a small spring of pure water that bubbled its way up from beneath the earth, forming a small pond. The stream then broke loose from the west edge of the pond and zig zagged into the crop of fruit trees, vanishing into some distant part of the garden. The birds were plentiful, and the insects even more so. Looking around, Raven took it all in; a paradise within a sanctuary. All this splendor and beauty lay planted in the corner of his majesty’s inner walls. She could see two great walls that came together, forming a solid barrier to the outside gardens. Still, this was not their destination, and Raven was about to find that out, much to her great astonishment.

The king turned and reached his arm through a thick layer of vines. Shortly after, Raven heard a soft click, then the dull grinding of stone on stone.

“Ah, there it is,” the King stated in triumph. Carefully, he parted the vines, so as not to damage them, then turned back to the girls. “Be careful not to harm the hanging foliage as you pass through.” Raven helped Chrysalis through, then followed after. Passing through to the other side revealed the most beautifully landscaped and tended garden she could ever have imagined. It was set in the center of the palace, shielded from everything by high walls, fully blanketed by the same vines which secreted the passage on the other side. A forest of fruit-bearing trees, mingled with strange trees she had never encountered, stood like an army before her. Like massive, thick webs, vines snaked their way over and through the branches of every tree. Some even grew in patches on the forest floor.

“Welcome to my private sanctuary,” the King proudly announced. Raven looked about the area in awe. Within the garden were hundreds of various fruit trees and smaller plants and gardens, each bearing a single fruit or vegetable. Raven's mind reeled at the immensity of it all.

“This place looks as though it can sustain itself forever.” The King looked at Raven.

“Forever, and for everyone in the city. Long ago, this citadel was forged for the purpose of protecting the king's people. In my lifetime it has been used twice for such dark hours. Your guild master was a critical aid during the last threat.” Raven looked around.

“Maybe I could be of service to you.” The King stopped, taking in both women and weighing her offer.

“I like what Artemis does for others. He is a true guardian of the less fortunate, and the lost. Raven, I would be honored if I could be a part of such an undertaking. I might have other work for you as well, but I would be sure to keep the work of Sanctuary a priority. What say you?” She and Chrysalis grew excited. Raven began to cry, relieved to know she had been accepted, needed.

“Please, I would love to!” she said, closing the distance between she and the king. Laughing happily, the king pulled Raven close and wrapped his arms about her.

“Then, let's work on that.” Letting go, Raven felt so much excitement, it began to go to her head. She felt exhaustion creeping over her, and so quickly returned to his arm, leaning heavily up her king.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I just got excited, sir. I feel dizzy and weak.” He laughed merrily, a twinkle of light in his eyes.

“Don't be sorry. You have traveled through much darkness and through many trials to become a Knight of Vannar. When were you were knighted, and at whose hand?” Raven felt at a loss.

“In all my tale, that is one thing I have not told you, or anyone. Of course I will.” Tended closely by the king, they returned to the small side-chamber where both Raven and Chrysalis made herself comfortable once again. As of yet, Chrysalis had remained silent.

“Two times have I been entombed. Unlike the first time, I passed on into the next world wherein I found myself alone in a beautiful flowing grasslands filled with the songs of many insects. I will make this story short, for many things happened to me while I was within the Seven Havens. I was buried with all my personal belongings, which was odd . . . what can a person do with the physical treasures they have collects after departing the Earthen Plane? It seems like such a waste.” Raven looked at the Sovala Keenya. The King instantly opened the bottle and set out three plain glass cups. Raven shook her head.

“I don't need one of those. My other self will not be drinking . . . but she needs water, if you would be so kind.” The King immediately got up, and as he did, so to did Chrysalis, who spoke to him for the first time.

“Thank you, sir. I am thirsty.” The King bowed shortly and left the room. Chrysalis sat back down, adjusting her wings carefully. Nishane Asmond was not only a gentleman, but thoughtful. He had brought in two taller stools fashioned for her race to sit upon in comfort.

“He is a wonderful sovereign,” Raven whispered. Chrysalis made herself comfortable and waited with perfect patience, unlike Raven who constantly fidgeted. Raven studied Chrysalis for a minute, a tinge of jealousy written across her face.

“I do wish I could be at ease like you. When I created you, all my wonderful traits - or the traits I wished I possessed - went into you. I'm impatient, irresponsible, unwise, do things without first weighing the consequences . . . well, most of the time. I am getting better at it. It had been my plan to die and continue on as you. I did die, but my wisdom was turned upon me in the form of foolishness.” Raven stood and walked around Chrysalis, who sat without any expression.

“Oh Chrysalis, where was I during that time I spent in my first tomb? Although I remember more and more as the days press on, I only catch snatches, fleeting glimpses that fade away, like a dream I can't quite recall, only to be lost in the next breath. At times my memory is clear on a few things. Then it is gone. What now, will I do, you and I? I learned so much while was in the Seven Havens. We are duo-existence, which stands as a blessing, and a cursing. I did not choose this; it was bestowed.” Chrysalis looked up at Raven.

“I simply took it too far,” The beautiful Sagen Gleighdor whispered. Raven did not see the King standing behind her, frozen in utter silence, listening.

“Oh holy Vannar, help me. I have tasted the bitter; a bitterness which I know runs deeper than I recall. What am I? Who am I? I don't know, but upon tasting a millennia of bitterness and blackened darkness, I reject it.” She began tending to Chrysalis's feathers. “I've tasted so little light, compared to the dark, and there is no way I can follow the shadowed path. Rynox, I remember a name, Rynox. Who is this person? I feel a pit in my chest remembering the name of a being whose face I cannot anchor a memory to. Oh, holy Vannar, please help me, even as you have already done so many times before. I want to serve. I don't care that I am a Soul`Reaver. I

freed a multitude of the forgotten; those who others would see as lost, and I am glad for it. I keep the dark one locked away within me; a prison he has well earned. Am I in trouble for doing such a thing? He should be devoured, but I cannot follow such a path, even to the destruction of an unholy. Still, he deserves no less.” Raven moved closer to her other self and wrapped her arms about her, hugging her tight as the King continued to listen in silence.

“We can do so much good, can we not Chrysalis?” Of course Chrysalis did not answer, for she was Raven, and Raven was her. As she asked the last question, the King ever so slowly back away without being noticed. He then returned, entering into the side chamber with a smile.

“How are you feeling, Raven?” he asked, stopping to the side of Chrysalis and handing her a glass of water. She took the cup and slowly begin sipping its contents. Raven walked over to the other stool and hopped up on it, trying to show she was fine, though she felt as though she could sleep for a full moon’s time.

“I’m tired, sir, but I feel much better than when I first came to. Thank you.” Pouring two glasses of Sovala Keenya, he handed one to Raven, who took it and immediately drank half the contents, then looked into the cup.

“This is not alcoholic, yet it lightens the mood . . . and the tongue,” she said, chuckling.

“It is made by the Aldarian Elves. The secret of its making is only know to them, and then only to a select few.” Raven began sipping the last half of her drink.

“I really like it.” The king smiled and finished his in one breath. Watching him, she did the same. He then filled their cups again.

“I wandered in the glorious fields of the Seven Havens for three days until I was discovered by a creature known as a Sheba`Whitemane. His name was Gazriel. When he first discovered me, he drew two crystal katanas and advanced upon me, indignation in his eyes. I thought I was going to die. I fell to my knees before him and bowed, begging him to spare me.” Raven shook her head and emptied her glass. Smirking, the King filled it again as she held it out.

“When Gazriel saw I would not fight, he stopped and commanded me to get to my feet. I did so and waited to see what would happen next. To make a long story short, he became my personal escort to a cliff of crystal, upon the face of which were,” Raven shuddered, as if reliving the experience, “safeguards placed to keep the unwanted down from the top most precipice. It took nine days to complete the hike, in which time he and I grew better acquainted.” Raven smiled at nothing, a love kindling in her void-like eyes.

“I truly love Gazriel. He is honor, like Katcha, Mitcheio's Guardian. Before him truth flows, and lies are shattered and set to naught. I hope I can see him again . . . someday.” She emptied her glass completely and found it filled once again. The King filled his as well and patiently waited for her to continue.

“Raven, the only way you can traverse those cliffs is if you possess something Vannar

highly desires. How did you come by it?" Raven smiled.

"When I was young, I would sneak out and fly up to the top-most peak of Feryl Mountain. Upon the surface of the peak there are the most wonderful crystals!" Raven became overly enthusiastic as she mentioned the crystals. "I kept them a secret as I collected only the finest ones. It just so happened, I discovered a fragment of Ironese Crystal - a piece of Old Haven - now being rebuilt - though I knew it not." Raven took a long drink, emptying her cup. She stared down into the bottom of her now empty cup. "I carried with me a piece of history that dated back to the Age of Conflict, and I never knew it." Raven smiled. "I had it with the other crystals in my Storing Sack. Its worth was equal to the value of Guildhouse." The king's eyes widened in amazement.

"Any, no matter their align, whether they are good, evil, holy, or unholy, are welcomed into Vannar's personal treasure vault should they carry a piece of the old world with them. Vannar seeks the shattered fragments of the lost city, and makes exceptions to recover each and every piece discovered. Tell me Raven, what did you do with it?"

"I gave it to Gazriel, who then gave it to a man who collects them." The King leaned forward.

"Yes, but what did you trade it for? If you find Ironese Crystal, you can trade it for anything of equal or lesser value in the Seven Havens. What did you choose, if you don't mind me asking." Raven held out her empty glass.

"Can I have some more please?" Once again, the King filled her glass. After drinking half of it, Raven sighed, staring down into her cup.

"I absolutely love this drink. Sir, it really wasn't mine to barter with. It belongs to Vannar, the Jahtha of Justice. I only asked that I could become a Knight of Vannar. That is what I asked, yet only after I had already surrendered the piece over to the proper owner. My life's ambition is to be his servant and gain his blessing. I never saw him, but I heard his voice. He told me if I truly desired this thing, I would be granted the station of Knight of Vannar. I could not speak, so overwhelming was his presence. Really that's the condensed version of what I was doing while dead in my tomb." Raven snickered, as if she had just made the funniest joke in the world. Seeing the humor in her words, the King shook his head, smiling slightly.

"Well, Raven, now you are enlisted in my service. Now you must confront every darkness in your heart and mind . . . some of which are physical and in your past. Are you willing to purge yourself in a most serious trial?" Without any hesitation, Raven nodded.

"I am." The king looked at her for some time before speaking.

"With training and commitment to serve our master, Vannar The Just, you will be empowered to not only lock away all the negativity, hate, sorrow, regret and the fears you harbor, but earn the ability to destroy the key to that lock. That is the hardest road of all, but it is possible." Raven sighed, and looked to him as if he had all the answers.

“I care not for the hardness of the road. I know what I want, and I will either obtain it, or die.”

Setting his glass down, the king stood and drew his long blade. As his blade was drawn, a beautiful light shone from its surface as he held it to the side. His eyes suddenly burned like the two bright stars in the pitch-black of night. A strange sensation began to burn within her chest as she felt her heart slowly lose its chill. Placing a hand to her chest, Raven gasped in astonishment as warmth replaced the long since curse of frigid cold it was bound by. Nearly one-thousand years ago it had stopped beating. Now it felt warm, like the sun upon her face at noon. Even though it was yet stilled, Raven could feel her heart, and this gave her hope.

Both Raven and Chrysalis got down off their stools and bent a knee to the ground, Chrysalis grinning happily and laughing for joy, Raven weeping tears of pure sunlight, astonished at the warmth her changed heart.

“Raven Chrysalis, he stated, you have given your all to mend the life of Artemis. You strive to aid others, and your soul is pure before Vannar. I know your heart is true, for you have retained a childlike innocence, even through a darkness forced upon you. I hereby honor you as a fellow Knight of Vannar, and bestow upon you the rank and office of Custodian.” With his blade, the King then touched the right and left shoulder of Raven and then Chrysalis.

“Arise and stand strong in the course of justice.” Both Raven and Chrysalis arose.

“Are you a Knight of Vannar, sir?” Raven whispered, feeling unsteady. The King sheathed his blade and quickly took her up into his arms. As he took her to the couch, before he laid her down, she rested against his chest, hearing the steady rhythm of his heart. Exhausted beyond measure, she looked up at him and smiled. Catching her eye, the King smiled down upon her.

“I am, sister.”

“I’m so glad,” she whispered and laid her head back against his chest, once again listening to the beating of his heart. To her, it sounded like music.

“It is done! She has taken on with the holy!”

“What is to be reconciled now? Hope is lost!”

“She was placed with the mortals. They have clouded her mind!”

“Agreed!” Thunder, mixed with a host of screams, split the air. “The armies, they are ready!”

“Then let the Second Age of War begin!”

“What is to be done with the Dark Child?”

“If she cannot be reclaimed, kill her! I have prepared others for such an occasion, but in order for one to rise up and take her place, the Dark Child betrayer must be utterly destroyed.

Now, let blood wash over the holy!”

“Once again, I have proven that there is not only hope in the darkest of souls, but change.”

“What will be done now, milord?”

“Let us see where this will lead. Give her power, equal to the evil she must unavoidably face. She must be free to choose. She must not be forced. She has yet to face such dark trials which might cause her to shrink and flee back into the darkness of her tomb. Who are we to force her to be what we wish her to be . . . and who is the dark lord of the Underworld that he can force her!”

Thunder rolled across the sky, followed by a host of triumphant shouts.

She watched herself sleep for three days, laying in a deathlike slumber. Through the eyes of Chrysalis, she stayed by her side. She was happy to get the rest she had needed for so long. It was a long time in coming, and it felt good. The king let her stay in the palace, and checked on her frequently, bringing her food and drink, seeing to her every need.

“How long will you sleep? he asked Chrysalis, concerned.

“My body has evolved a number of times. The stress of the journey was not as rough as the mental strain of it all. I'm tired, milord.” Looking at Chrysalis, King Asmond smiled.

“What's it like, being two?” Chrysalis thought about it for a moment, then shrugged, making a slight face.

“It took some getting used to, but it's nice to know two perspectives, two angles on life, and at the same time. If you wrote two letters at once, you could only do so by switching back and forth between pages. I can write them simultaneously. Truthfully, I am enjoying all this.” He shook his head.

“Incredible,” he whispered. She neared him.

“Thank you for all you have done for me. I owe you so much. Thank you.” The King embraced Chrysalis.

“You are most welcome, sister. Thank you for coming to me.” With a great sense of relief, she hugged him tight.

“I have a brother”, she thought happily. Letting go, she turned her attention to Raven as the king brought two chairs over and set them close to the bedside, one at Raven's head, and one midway down the couch. He offered Chrysalis the one by her head, then sat down on the other, his attention on Raven. Chrysalis turned the chair, with the back facing Raven and sat down, resting her chin on her arms, she closed her eyes.

“You want to know about my stay in the tomb.” King Asmond continued to watch over Raven, nodding.

“I would not ask you, and you certainly would never have to tell me anything.” Eyes filling with sympathy, he looked upon Raven, slowly shaking his head. Chrysalis reached down and gently removed some hair from Raven's face.

“You know, I've heard people say time heals all wounds. You know what I think?” He glanced at Chrysalis briefly, shaking his head.

“No, what do you think?”

“It is an ignorant cliché. Time causes wounds, and when the time is far greater than the time you have left, well, how can you heal when the wounds are so deep?” He looked at Chrysalis.

“I don't want to cause your wounds to re-open.” Looking at him, she tried to remain unemotional. Yet, witnessing the depth of compassion this man harbored, her resolve to keep

silent on her greatest trial quickly began to wear down her resolve to keep silent.

“I will tell my king anything.” Taking an unsteady breath, she felt her heart grow cold as she began searching and sorting through the darkest memories of her life. As she focused upon the first memory, she shuddered, then recoiled backwards out of the chair, her eyes shading to lightless black. As she spoke, her sounded voice hollow and distant.

“As I slumbered within my darkness, I dreamt I was within an auburn forest, called Vermillion, where the roots of every tree were exposed, as if they struggled to be free from the soil that gave them life. I wandered there, lost for many days,” Chrysalis shuddered, almost crying out, “before they found me. I thought I was being rescued. I was wrong. They were like the Sardakk Elves, yet were only men.” Exposing the inside of her right arm, she pointed to it.

“Each of the seven had a circle of red runes, and a black band of gold upon their finger. Chrysalis flinched and dropped to her knees.

“In silence, they tied me to the roots of a Vermillion Tree and rent my tunic so my back was exposed. I pleaded with them, but never a word did they speak. They whipped me, scarring my back with fiery stripes. After finishing with me, they simply cut me lose and departed in silence . . . without emotion . . . without a word.” The King looked down upon Raven, suddenly very alarmed.

“Was this a dream, or reality?” Chrysalis raised her arms up, as if the King were about to strike her.

“When I awoke on that cold stone floor, my back burned like fire. I had a mirror, I remembered, and frantically searched until I found it. I took it and looked. My back had the wounds of being whipped.” The King stood, a shocked look on his face. Turning his attention Raven, he ran his fingers through his hair.

“Is there anything more to this dream? Do you know who they were?” Chrysalis shuddered and nodded, slowly rising.

“I have made my choice. I am a Knight of Vannar. I have broken away and carved my own path against the will of those who yet seek to force my subservience.” She paused, thinking, her eyes returning to amethyst-blue. Hugging herself, she returned to the chair and sat down.

“Milord, they did return. Again, I found myself in that same forest.” Chrysalis grit her teeth, narrowing her eyes, as if she was suddenly the predator; a wolf eyeing her prey. “Upon finding myself in that nightmare, I looked to my leg, where my dagger had always been. Always been . . .” For a time, Chrysalis stared at her hands, seeing only red.

“This time I would kill them. I would probably die trying, but it no longer mattered. He was not coming back to get me. Something had happened, and either he was dead, or no longer cared for me, no longer loved me.” The King lowered his head.

“You mean Artemis.” She nodded once, her eyes hardening.

“I know him, milord. At that point in time, I feared he had lost his life, for I knew him well enough to know he would not abandon me. As I knelt in that horrid forest, I knew I was alone. Being alone is my single greatest fear, and this fear nearly drove me to become the monster I had rejected for so long. But I held on, a spark of diminishing hope still burning within.” She shuddered, and focused her thoughts on her story.

“Seven found me - seven died. When I awoke, I held seven rings in the palm of my hand, still wet with their blood. They would never beat me again,” she choked. “I am a murderer. I have killed, and not just on that occasion. I am a monster.” Moving his chair over next to Chrysalis, the King rested a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Do you want to know something about me?”

“Yes sir,” she wept, gritting her teeth.

“When you look at me, do you see a monster?” She immediately shook her head.

“I do not.”

“What do you see, Chrysalis? Be honest.” She smiled, tears cascading her face as she struggled to keep her composure.

“I see a very handsome man. I see a leader of nations. I see kindness and love unfeigned. I see love. I see power and authority. I could go on, sir.” Smiling, he lowered his eyes in humility.

“Thank you,” the king stated. “When I was on my path, I had to defend myself on many occasions. And on many of those occasions I had to kill. Chrysalis, once upon a time, I thought I was a monster . . . a murderer, just as you have expressed. Do you want to know a secret?” She swallowed, nodding.

“If it's one of those good kind of secrets - I like those.” Softly, he laughed.

“You be the judge of that.” The king sighed, looking down. Then taking in a breath to steady himself, he looked into her eyes.

“In the past, I have thought myself a terrible monster, just as you have. And, in thinking such things, I thought at times to end my life to spare others. Of course, as you, I did not. You see, to become a great leader means to put yourself up against those who would harm those you are sworn to protect. Chrysalis, Raven, to champion a nation takes more than a monster to succeed. You see, I am a monster.” Chrysalis's eyes widened in disbelief.

“I don't see you as a monster. You don't feel like one,” her voice quivered. The King smiled.

“I made my choice to be a good monster long ago . . . but a monster I am. Do you see what I'm getting at?” Slowly, she realized what he meant. What this powerful man had just told her, not only shocked her, but instilled a great comfort within her entire soul.

“I buried the rings in a crevice of split stone in my tomb and never took them back.”

Ignoring her comment, the king continued.

“Why did you not remain a Vampire? Why a Soul`Reaver? I don't understand.” She stood and held out her hand, palm facing up. She blinked once, and as she did, her eyes became like molten gold. Within her palm rose a city with a golden road leading to it.

“I have the gift, and I know this is the reason I am no mere Vampire. I change, I evolve. It is what I am, because it is what I desire.” She closed her hand and blinked again, her eyes returning to normal.

“You know where this tomb is . . . the memory of it is yet fresh?” Instantly, Chrysalis's eyes widened.

“Yes, please don't make me go back to my tomb. Please don't make me go back into my grave.”

“I will never make you do anything. Chrysalis, do you know what a Gorgonoth Vahkrin is?” At the mention of it, she looked at Raven and burst into tears, nodding.

“I do. Everyone keeps telling me different things - about what I am - but they don't really know. I do!” Chrysalis choked. “The Gorgonoth Vahkrin comes from the Underworld and is used to lead lessors into war. The Gorgonoth Vahkrin sets the stage - sets the example of what is to be done according to the will of its master. It gives power to its minions. There will never be more than one such Vahkrin in a legion of invaders, for one will kill the other,” she mourned, “so driven are they to dominate all before them.” The King nodded.

“Do you know how they are created?” Trying to control herself, Chrysalis shook her head slightly.

“No, but I do know they . . .” Chrysalis retreated back, knocking her chair over, horrified. She shot a panicked look at Nishane Asmond, High King of the Zurkel Mainland, her brother in the Knighthood of Vannar. “Some time after I had killed the seven, I again found darkness and sleep as I recovered from the wounds of that battle. I slept for three years, finding solace in my dreams . . . dreams that slowly gave way to compliment and cater to the whims of a monster . . . me. I remember one dream in which I found the border of the Vermillion Forest. I finally found my way out of that terrible place. For so long it had been my cage, my prison, but I had finally escaped it. Nishane, there were many other experiences that plagued and haunted me there.” Chrysalis pulled her hair back and out of her face. “Now, I move foreword to the significance of something I spied out when I found them in their own castle.” The King listened attentively, eyes riveted on her. “I do know how the Gorgonoth are spawned! I know!” She screamed without sound, casting her eyes upon the floor, watching on as if something terrible were taking place before her eyes. The King frowned at her and stood.

“You don't have to continue describing it. I have seen it before as well, though not as you did.”

“No, no, there's more. You can't know this, but you need to! You must! You have your

people to protect. And, I want to be with you to see they remain safe.” His eyes hardened even more, his brows furrowing, a presence emanating from him that caused Chrysalis to run to his side. She took his arm, feeling strengthened, bolstered. She looked at Raven and wept bitterly.

“The Vuolg. They are the conspirators and masterminds of deceit and chaos,” she cried. “There is a creature in the realm of the mind. Not your mind, nor any other sentient creature’s mind. This is another Plane where they dwell. They are eternal, never being created, never having an end. The Vuolg have harnessed the ability and power to trap these creatures of pure thought . . . they are called Figments. Each Figment desires to become a living soul. To accomplish this, each must prove worthy by a temporary trial. If a Figment succeeds, or passes the trial agreed upon, it is then granted the status of Soul. This is a Figment's greatest desire, and it will do anything to be granted the status of a living creature.” Desperately, she looked at the king.

“The Vuolg have found a way to capture and shape a Figment, bending it to their will. They send it out into Utaemia, anywhere, to give it experience . . . a trial of their own creation. As they give it experience, or a history to anchor it its new existence to, they plague it with terrible, unholy experiences. In the final days of its transformation, it begins to . . . evolve, steadily becoming what it was meant to be, or forced to be.” She could see the heavy burden of what she was saying weigh down upon the king.

“Raven is Gorgonoth, milord.” Fresh tears cascaded Chrysalis’s face as she held tight to his arm. “And I am her escape, or that was the plan.” She pulled her arm from his and approached Raven, kneeling beside her. Touching her face, she tried to smile.

“I know what I am, or what those hideous monsters want me to be. I felt myself slipping . . . giving in the dark nature of seduction and power.” A grim expression hardened her beautiful face.

“But they made a mistake by allowing me to come in contact with another who had no soul. Chrysalis was their mistake, an error I took full advantage of. Seeing no crime in taking her body, and knowing she was never conceived of naturally, I knew there was no wrong in vanishing from the Vuolg . . . escaping them.”

The king neared and knelt by Raven. Placing a hand upon them both, he pondered the situation. Crimson tears began to fall from Raven's eyes as they slowly opened. She tried to speak, but could not. Chrysalis kissed her on the temple, stroking her hair with a look of sorrow and terrible regret.

“I had to tell you all this because Raven, the other half of my soul, cannot. She is bound by their power. In creating me, she slipped past their safety nets. Because of this, my king now knows the truth.” Turning to him, she gripped him by the arm. “Please, I want to live. I love life, but not the one they intend for me. I would rather return and wait another ten-thousand ages for the chance to become a Soul. I would rather spend eternity yearning for life, rather than harm

another. The one thing the Vuolg did not foresee was the gift I have. I believe there is hope in this. I know there is. I have been to El`Anara, the Golden City of the Kithillian Elves.” The King pondered her words for a moment, then nodded.

“How else could you have shown me the golden road, and the exact image of that blessed realm?” he whispered, suddenly loving both these women as if they were his own children. Raven sat up, giving the king a delicate look filled with hope. Smiling, he embraced them both tight, weeping with them.

“My dear sister, welcome . . . welcome to this realm. I promise to give you a fair chance to pass a test that will allow you to become a permanent, living Soul here on this, the Earthen Plane.” Raven tightened her embrace, bursting out with emotional joy and wonder.

“Thank you, thank you,” Chrysalis wept. “Thank you.” The king held them both for a time before continuing.

“Holy Vannar,” he whispered, “please allow me to set the bounds of a trial for this one. She has been stripped from her natural home and forced to become what she has not chosen. Please, let me help her.” Raven heard his fervent plea, and silently added to it.

“I will serve as thy Knight, bringing justice and order to all in thy name. This is my heart's desire.” As she finished, a light began to emanate from the King. Raven and Chrysalis released him as he stood and drew his blade, the brilliance of which bathed them both in splendor. In a voice not his own, the king spoke.

“Raven, if you will make a covenant with me, that you will uphold the laws of the holy knighthood, by which you are appointed, I will set the path to fulfill your desire to become a living Soul.” Raven wept for joy, holding out a hand to the King.

“I agree. I accept,” Raven said.

“Trials await you, and the reward at the end of them. Stand fast in my Knighthood, even should events become difficult. Darkness will come, as well as light. Power I give you, but only as a steward. Prove yourself worthy to stand in the ranks of my army, and I will fulfill my end of this promise. Break your end of the covenant between us and I will not fulfill my end of the promise. Now, learn the oath of my Knighthood. Learn it well, for this is the Oath of the Knights of Vannar.” The light filling the room diminished, fading away, until the king was himself once more. Raising his holy blade, he touched them both upon the crown of their head. As he did so, Raven felt a strength flow into her and her other self.

“Rise,” he commanded. “I must teach you the Oath of the Knighthood.” They stood, all in wonder.

“Stand for truth at all times, in all places.

Serve your fellow countrymen.

Uphold Honesty, Virtue, Mercy, Justice.

Quench the flaming darts of the wicked.”

Again and again, Raven repeated it until she had given the oath ten times by herself without fail. Chrysalis also repeated the oath with Raven. Once the oath was fixed in her mind, the king embraced them both.

“We are now, truly, family.” Raven kissed him on the cheek as Chrysalis kissed him on the other cheek.

“Thank you milord,” they both said in unison.

“You are very welcome. It was a great privilege to be here with you. It is an honor to now call you my own.” Offering each of the two beautiful women an arm, he smiled.

“Knights of Vannar do not go about their duties without their armor, weapons and supplies. Come, I will show you to the armory.” Each took an offered arm, and were escorted into the deepest area of Wardenoth Citadel. There, below the burning flames of torches, Raven and Chrysalis were fitted with their choice of armor.

Raven chose a set of skin armor that fit so smooth against her skin, as well as under her red traveling clothes. In this, it did not show. It was strong, yet surprisingly light. As for a weapon, she wore the blade Artemis had left in her bedroll so long ago. She had also been given a blade by the sea monster, but forgot where she had put it. The last time she recalled having it, was when she had surrendered it over to the Guardians at the Healers Guild. This troubled her. She would ask Artemis about it when she returned.

Before being freed from her first tomb - her prison - she recalled burying many items deep in the earth at the base of the hill. Sighing, she weighed the decision to go back and retrieve all of it, if it was still there.

Chrysalis chose an enchanted robe that aided its wearer with not only casting spells, but protected her from the elements. She also picked a silver long sword, and a shield housed within a crystal bracelet.

As Raven watched Chrysalis pick what she wanted, she thought more seriously about retrieving her Vampire’s items. Just as Chrysalis was finished, she made the decision to go back to where the darkness had tortured her for centuries.

Keeping her hands busy, so as to hide their trembling, she and Chrysalis said their goodbyes to the king. The last thing she told Nishane Asmond, as she embraced him, was, “I love you.”

He paced back and forth within his room in endless anticipation and worry. For the last few days, anxiety had been his constant companion. He knew she was safe, and in the best possible company, yet by the nature of her chronic habits, Raven had the innate ability of falling into trouble all the time, every time. It now was, more than ever, he missed her.

Since he first laid eyes on her, his love and devotion for her had grown and strengthened, even through the pitfalls. Now his commitment was a forever solid and eternal as the never ending circle of gold wrapped about his finger. Walking over to a pitcher of water on the table next to his soft-chair, he picked up the glass next to it and poured himself a drink. Setting down the pitcher, he took a drink, wishing he and Raven shared the same connection as Katcha and Mitcheio. He missed his Raven. Pacing once again, Artemis sipped his drink until it was gone. After refilling it, he put it down and walked to the door, looking at the handle. If he left the guild, he might miss her coming back. Then again, if he did not get out and do something, this restlessness would continue.

Making the decision to go out, he reached for the door handle just as it began to twist on its own. Stepping back, Artemis waited, a smile forming on his lips. As the door began to open, he decided to give Raven a little surprise. Quickly, he dodged behind the door as it slowly opened. It was neither Raven or Chrysalis, but one of Mitcheio's apprentices. Her name was Taia, and she had brought his food and water twice during this last week. Previous visits had always been preceded by a knock. This time, she had simply entered. What more, he had failed to detect her.

“Artemis,” she whispered as she poked her head in the door. “Artemis, are you sleeping?” She was Quadrate; a race of people who could adapt to any climate, element, or challenge they were effected by, and quickly. She was Human in appearance, yet he knew she was much different. This race could swim in lava without harm, if given a few moments to adapt to it.

He was fascinated by the Quadrate race, yes, but what was Taia doing entering his room like this? This was alarming to say the least, for she was Mitcheio's lead apprentice, which meant she possessed the same power as Raven. As she slipped in through the door, she quietly shut it with a wave of her hand, not touching it. Whatever reason for her coming here, he could take no chances with her. She could be a great ally, or a dangerous adversary.

Artemis extended his fangs, his eyes shading to black. With all his longing and desire, he reached out into Taia's heart and mind and planted the seed of well-being and relaxation. Her heart instantly changed rhythm as he impressed upon her the need for him, and his need for her. Coming to a halt, Taia raised a hand on her head. She was resisting, and this one was strong willed, slippery. Focusing upon a more nurturing side, Artemis focused love and commitment into her heart, impressing upon her longing and desire.

“Artemis are you here?” she whispered, her eyes illuminating with a golden hue. Artemis felt the power this simple apprentice harbored, and it touched him deep within, causing him to stagger. He understood it! With all his soul, he gazed at Taia, feeling the Essence of Eternity invite him to be one with it. Gladly, he accepted. As he bent his thoughts upon it, that same golden light slowly grew within his eyes, filling him with a power he could not explain.

He willed Taia to stop. She stopped, and as she did, he focused trust upon her. He then reached into her mind, willing her to him. Taia slowly turned and faced him as he stepped out from behind the door.

“Why did you not knock?” he asked, suddenly locked in a power battle with her. She shivered, as if suddenly cold, the golden light in her eyes gone.

“I wished to,” she trembled, “but there are unseen others. To knock on a door in this guild opens you up to be watched and heard. Even the slightest touch reveals you.” Curiously, Artemis approached Taia, bending his mind upon her, keeping her at bay with the force of his will.

“What do you want with me?” A tear escaped her right eye as he felt her struggle against him. “You have nothing to fear with me, Taia, but you are scaring me, truly.” She relaxed.

“Artemis, you have the gift also. We are kin. This is incredible. Did you know?” He smiled, slightly.

“Only just now.” She relaxed even more. He could feel her heart beating more evenly now; a sign his charm had rooted deep within her. Reaching a hand out, she smiled.

“I need to be like you.” He raised an eyebrow in surprise at this turn of conversation.

“You need?” She nodded.

“Yes, need.”

“Why need? Please, enlighten me,” Artemis said kindly, wondering what could possibly justify the necessity to become undead. After his failure with Raven, he knew those who harbored the Essence of Eternity would become more than a mere Vampire.

“To truly become what I am, I need this to happen.” Taia grit her teeth, shuddering as she struggled to overpower his charm. “Please, believe me, there is no other way.” Slowly feeling his power over her begin to weaken, Artemis gasped at the sudden energy Taia radiated. In a few moments he knew she would break free.

“Don’t do this, Taia,” he said, then simply set her free and stepped close. Closing her eyes, Taia caught her breath and wiped sweat from her forehead.

“You have just now tapped into the power. You are indeed strong.”

“This is a difficult road, Taia. Are you sure you want it?” She staggered, shaking her head as if coming out of a dream. Reaching out, he took her by the shoulders, steadying her balance.

“Yes, my people need my aid. I have watched Raven, and Chrysalis, and I wish to walk

the same path.” Shaking his head, Artemis tenderly brushed the hair out of her face.

“What if we come and help your people? Would that be enough?” Gritting her teeth Taia shook her head, her eyes suddenly blazing gold.

“Taia please don't do this. Have you counseled with Mitcheio? I hold great resources, and gladly offer my assistance for nothing in return. Like you say, we are kin now. I like that. I love having more family.” As if he had just proposed to her, she stepped closer and nodded. Wrapping her arms about his neck, she began to cry. Looking into his eyes, her countenance changed suddenly to regret and sorrow.

“I'm so sorry, but I do know what I'm doing. I can control the negative side effects of the virus within your blood.” Wrapping his arms about her, he pulled her tight, intent on showing her what she would be forced through, but when he pressed the vision upon her it failed, shattered, as if his will were simple glass struck by a blacksmith's hammer. She shook her head in disappointment, tears streaming her face.

“Do it, now,” she whispered.

“No.” he refused, and began to push her away.

“Do it now!” She yelled at him. Within, Artemis felt his will break. His defenses burned away, like morning dew before an erupting volcano. The power she harbored gripped him so thoroughly, he felt he were a puppet and she the puppet master, pulling and manipulating his strings. He felt compelled to bite her, and could not resist. Like a helpless spider trapping its victim, he pulled her into an embrace so tight, it caused her to scream in pain. With no tenderness, he located her jugular and snapped his jaws into her neck, biting deep, then recoiled from her, wiping his mouth off and spitting.

“Taia! I have never bitten another! What have you done to my soul? You have destroyed me! Why? Why!” In shock, Taia fell to the floor and tried to scream, yet only choked from the deep impact of his vice-like bite. Quickly, Artemis took up the pitcher of water and filled his mouth. Keeping his teeth within the water, he expelled the blood from his fangs three times, then set the pitcher down. Picking up the glass of water, he did the same, then lifted the glass, looking at the water. It was clear! Very little blood had stained his teeth, and he had not swallowed it. In relief, Artemis hung his head, panting as sweat began to trickle down both sides of his temples and cheeks.

“You will regret this, Taia,” he stated in a dangerously smooth tone. You will rue the day you ever set eyes upon me.” Kneeling on the floor, hunched over, Taia held her neck. It was bleeding profusely. In the same moment there came footsteps outside the door, not far down the hall.

“I'm so sorry Artemis, she managed to say as the wound in her neck slowly began to close. Taia looked up at Artemis, who began walking to the door, shaking with rage and mental anguish. Taia watched him, a look of regret etched into her face as she wept.

As he slipped out into the hall, he spotted Raven and Chrysalis, who both greeted him with a grin and a loving smile. Holding up his hands, he walked toward them.

“Go and get Mitch-“ A desperate cry came from within his room, cutting him off and startling both girls.

“That came from our room,” Raven stated, pushing past Artemis. Chrysalis stood there, looking at him, a worried expression on her face. As Raven entered the room, Chrysalis's eyes widened in disbelief. Artemis froze, locking eyes with her. It appeared she wanted to say something, but no sound escaped her mouth as it moved. Tears welled up within her eyes.

Artemis thought about the situation for only a moment. Within him, rage swelled, tempting him with the sudden desire to return to the room and kill Taia. But she would defend herself, and this would put his wife in terrible danger. He knew Raven would fight to protect him. There was no way he could do that. He could leave, but that would confirm his guilt. It would also leave Raven alone, and he could never bring himself to abandon her. Turning, he stepped to the door of the room, placing a hand on it.

“Mitcheio, I need you here, now,” he whispered, looking into the room. Taia was on the floor with Raven, who knelt beside her, trying to calm her down. A trail of blood led up onto his bed. He noticed it was unmade and the pillow was stained heavily with her blood.

“I should have ripped your head off,” he hatefully whispered, then turned away. A few paces down the hall, Artemis turned and set his back against the wall, and waited. Not long after, Mitcheio, Katcha and four Guardians arrived, running down the hall. Ignoring him, the dark Witch entered their room and began tending to Taia. Katcha stayed at the door and watched, a stern look on his face. Of the four Guardians, two stood at the exit doors to the guild. The other two split up, one to watch the hall that led toward Mitcheio's room, and one stood by Artemis in silence. After some time, Katcha entered the room, then came out bearing Taia in his arms. Mitcheio trailing him.

“She needs to go to the basement, Katcha, please.” He did so immediately, taking with him two of the four Guardians. Motioning them to stay, she re-entered the room and looked around, scrutinizing everything. After a while, she called Artemis into the room. Leaving his wife, who he never took his eyes from, he entered in and shut the door. In stoic silence, he stood before her, unwilling to break eye contact. After a few moments, Mitcheio sighed heavily.

“I can go into both your minds to see what happened. Artemis, I'm not going to. I know the guilty when I lay eyes upon them.” She drew close and placed a hand over his heart.

“You have a beautiful bride out in that hall whose fragile heart is waiting for my edict on this matter.” Looking into the depths of her eyes, Artemis beheld compassion burning within.

“Why?” he suddenly choked, tears filling his eyes. Mitcheio smiled sadly.

“That is what we need to discover. So, I ask you to remain silent until her motives are made known. Artemis, I abstracted your virus from her body. She will not change. I will place

you in the prison downstairs. You will be shackled. Artemis, silence from you will be of the uttermost importance. Can you do this?" Wiping his eyes and face, he composed himself.

"Yes. How do you know I am innocent? What if you are wrong? What if it was me?" Smiling, Mitcheio placed an open hand over her heart and bowed her head slightly.

"You are a thoughtful, protective man. Always trying to protect the ones you care about. That is why I trust you on this matter." Bowing, Artemis found himself speechlessly flattered. Walking to the door, Mitcheio stopped, placing a hand on the door handle, then turned to him once again.

"This is my guild, and I am entitled to know the workings which go on within its walls. Though, by far, I do not know all things, this is my domain. I crafted it out from next to nothing." Pulling the door open, she stepped out of the room and pointed over her right shoulder with a quick motion.

"Arrest him. Put him in the prison, shackled and chained. I will speak with him when he decides to talk. Raven, Chrysalis, you may speak with him shortly, but be quick.

Raven paled, her eyes widening at Mitcheio's words, then slowly entered the room, her chest so cold and empty, she considered her tomb easier than this. As she entered, she looked at him, expecting him to say something, anything. He did not. Instead, Artemis looked at her in stone-cold silence. Reaching up a trembling hand, Raven smoothed his hair back.

"Whatever has happened, I am with you. I know you." With that said, Raven turned and departed. A single tear escaped and ran down his face as she left him standing there alone. Shortly after, two Guardians came into the room, swords drawn. As they looked at Artemis, he silently surrendered to their will. Stripping himself down to all but his under garments, he offered no resistance. Quickly, they led him through a confusing number of halls, and down many flights of stairs. Artemis did not try to remember the way to the cell door; it would have changed anyways. This guild was enchanted.

When they came to a stop before a door of what appeared to be oak-wood with a small window blocked out by five short bars, he waited, taking in the entrance to his new accommodations. There was a small opening at the bottom for sliding in food and drink without having to open the cell door.

Never in his long years had he imagined he would be a prisoner for a crime. He watched one Guardian produced a key, fit it into the keyhole. There was a latching sound and the door gave way as the man pushed the door open. The other Guardian placed shackles on his wrists and ankles.

Without being asked, Artemis entered the cell and looked around. There was a cot with a pillow, a blanket and a large bucket. Upon the floor was a small stack of writing papers, quill and ink. The door shut behind him, then latched.

Raising his hands up before his eyes, he stared at the chains binding him down to captivity. There were games afoot.

Raven and Chrysalis were moved into the room next to Mitcheio and Katcha. As Mitcheio and two Guardians escorted them into their new living quarters, Chrysalis climbed upon the king sized bed within the room and wept herself to sleep.

“Thank you. That is all,” the dark Witch informed the two Guardians. Bowing formally, they exited the room, shutting the door. Raven saw every luxury within this room, but failed to appreciate such. One thing that struck her curiosity was the door halfway down the right wall. She suspected it led to Mitcheio's quarters.

“Is there anything you need of me?” Mitcheio gently offered. Raven turned, shaking her head.

“No, mother, unless you can find me a heart.” Sadly Mitcheio shook her head.

“That, you will have to find for yourself. For now, let me offer you the services of Dennik, who has recently passed the Guardian Trials. He is new to his post, but is quite capable to serve.” Mitcheio motioned to Katcha, who open the door and let in a young Human with sandy-brown hair.

“I will be in the room next to you.” She then departed with Katcha.

After they were alone, Dennik bowed.

“If you need me -” Bowing, he turned to leave. Raven grabbed his arm, doing her best to smile.

“Thank you.” Raven looked at his robes, noticing the entire border was blank.

“Dennik, can I purchase your services for a short while?” The Guardian looked down at Raven's hand, noticing her knuckles were white. Dennik motioned to a nearby couch.

“Please, sit,” he said. After she sat down, he joined her, staying at arms length. “What do you need?” Raven felt her emotions beginning to surface. Taking in a few slow and deep breaths, she managed not to fall apart.

“I need you to protect Artemis, my husband. I need you to be discrete and hidden while doing so.” Dennik shook his head.

“I cannot. He is a prisoner.” Without warning, Raven began to sob, shedding black-as-night tears. Dennik watched in fascination for a moment.

“Dennik, he is innocent. Artemis would never do anything to hurt another. He is rock-solid in his devotion to uphold all those he comes in contact with. He is faithful in his dedication to me. Something is wrong in all this. I can feel it.”

“Be that as it may, I cannot vow to the service of one who is a prisoner. However, I can serve you, if that is acceptable . . . if you need me.” Raven thought about it.

“A Knight of Vannar needing a guard,” she whispered. Dennik's eyes widened slightly. Instantly he stood and bowed in respect.

“Please forgive me for my lack of formality, milady.” Motioning him to sit back down,

Raven tried to smile.

“Please, Dennik, sit. Please.” Reluctantly, the newborn Guardian returned to the couch.

“Thank you milady.”

“Please, my name is Raven.” She wiped her eyes, composing herself, then laughed.

“A whimpering, sniveling, Knight of Vannar,” she jested, trying to regain control.

Dennik found no humor in her comments.

“Just because you are Vannar's Knight, does not mean you are less Human.” Raven looked at her left wing, but refrained from correcting him. She understood his meaning.

“I would enlist you to watch over Chrysalis, who lies sleeping upon the bed there. Keep her safe.” She took out the Storing Sack and opened it. Reaching in, she grabbed one of the large gems she and Artemis had gotten from the top drawer of the dresser on the ship they took. Pulling it out, she looked the ruby which was, no doubt, worth a fortune.

“I will give you this as payment for your services, if this is acceptable to you.” Dennik looked at the gem within her hand, then at Raven.

“That gem is worth far more than the service I could provide you. To give me that as payment for serving Chrysalis would be like paying a simple waitress a thousand white-gold for a mug of brew.” Raven tossed the gem to him without hesitation. Dennik caught it, then looked to Chrysalis, taking in a deep breath, probably curious as to why she needed a one-on-one protector.

“She needs to be safe, sir. Thank you for your honesty. I understand the gem is worth a lot, but I care less about the money. Please, Dennik, I need her to be safe. She is worth more than that gem.” Standing, the Guardian looked at the sleeping beauty. Walking over to the bed, he looked down upon her.

“I give myself to you as both sword and shield. My blood spills freely for you. In my mind, I see you as I do my own reflection in a mirror. I feel your pain, your joy and sorrow. This pledge I seal into my soul.” As he finished, letters appeared on the borders of his black Guardian Robes. Dennik looked at his sleeves, then the border of his lapel. Chrysalis, as well as Raven, appeared in silver script, openly confusing him.

“I don't understand,” he said, turning to Raven. “How can this be?” Raven stood.

“Dennik, please keep it a secret that Chrysalis and I are one person. It is important that this remains unknown.” Without further question, Dennik formally bowed.

“I understand and promise you total secrecy,” he vowed without hesitation.

“Mitcheio, Artemis and Katcha know. Now you know. Thank you for helping me. With what has happened lately, it will be good to have you close at hand.” The Guardian smiled slightly, but his expression was by no means light minded.

“It is my great pleasure to serve you,” he stated as his countenance steadily fell.

Troubled, and if suddenly in the throes of misery, Dennik placed a hand to his chest and groaned. Looking to Raven, he slowly shook his head, gritting his teeth.

“What is this you live with?” Becoming aware of what she had just done, Raven eyes widened with instant regret. The constant pain and anguish she had lived with for so long was now being shared by the power of the Guardian’s connection. It crossed her mind to release Dennik from his charge, as she had not given him enough information before recruiting him. She had lived with this dreadful darkness for so long, it had escaped her mind to tell him what his senses would adopt as his oath bound him to her. In him, she perceived instant suffering.

“Dennik, I release you from my service.” Instantly the names of Chrysalis and Raven vanished, slowly fading away, leaving a very disturbed and trembling young man standing before her. Wiping his face, he looked at her in not only in shocked amazement, but horror, failing to keep his composure. She felt guilty for not telling him what he would experience when he made the Guardian's Oath.

“Please forgive me. I should have told you about all this beforehand.”

“Raven, how long have you lived with this?” She searched Dennik for genuine care. His eyes told her he was honest. He was a Guardian, and in Mitcheio's guild-house, which indicated integrity, loyalty, honesty. But then again, so was Taia, and she suspected foul play on her part. Slowly, she placed a hand over his heart.

“What manner of a man are you?” There was no hesitation to his answer.

“I am not complicated. I serve Mitcheio's guild-house because I am at peace here. My communications are simple. I eat and drink, just as you, and I sleep as anyone else. I don't know what else to tell you, Raven.” She smiled, satisfied with his answer. He gave her a curious look. “What are you?” He asked

“Dennik, what I am, I will not say, but I’ve lived for over nine-hundred years.” Astonished, he shook his head.

“Well, you don't look a day over twenty.” Raven suddenly laughed, liking this man very much.

“Thank you sir.” He nodded shortly. Raven could see he was very curious about her teeth. Sighing, she gave in.

“Dennik, I am a Soul`Reaver. I feed upon the soul essence of a living creatures, using those souls as fuel to heal, or whatever I desire, but only if I wish to consume it. Each soul temporarily enhances my power.” Repulsed by the idea, Dennik shifted uneasily.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever done that?” Raven narrowed her eyes at Dennik.

“Actually, I brought you here for just that reason.” the Guardian coughed, then chuckled, openly nervous.

“You are a Knight of Vannar.” Suddenly grinning, she shrugged.

“You got me on that.”

“Raven, you know, you are something very special.” This sudden comment threw her off guard.

“Special?” she asked. “Why would you say that, and in what way?” In all seriousness, Dennik replied, “To be all your are, then be granted the title sought by many, and given to almost none . . . now that means something, or I'm a fool.” She thought about it.

“Well, thank you for putting it that way,” Raven awkwardly replied. “I've never thought about it like that.” Standing, Dennik bowed. Raven stood also, feeling more than horrid about not telling him about the pain of being her.

“Dennik, I'm sorry about what I did. I ask your forgiveness.” She looked at the Guardian in earnest, wondering what his real thoughts were.

“Raven, why do you need Chrysalis protected? You did not include yourself in the bargain, but you are her.” Raven sighed, thinking about his question. He was calculating, and smart.

“I am going to leave here for a short while. Where I am going, Chrysalis cannot follow. I need her protected while I'm gone. I wish there was a way to separate us in the deal. Is there? I would not wish the curse of my being, and the feelings it weighs me down with, laying heavy upon your shoulders.” Dennik placed a hand on his chin. She remained still and silent, so as not to distract his thoughts. If anyone would know, a Guardian would.

“There are certain conditions which must be stated when I perform the Guardian Oath. I could be specific in the wording. I must tell you, that was the first time I had ever been hired privately. I have guarded objects, structures, and other inanimate objects, but not a person.” He looked at her, raising an eyebrow. Raven thought about it.

“Can you try again, this time being more specific?”

“Yes milady, I will do my best.” Walking over to Chrysalis again, he looked at her in silence. Raven heard him begin to quietly whisper. As before, most of the same words were spoken, yet the wording was changed to specify certain parameters of the oath. One thing that caught her attention was the addition of the words, “half-soul”.

Again, the words, Raven and Chrysalis appeared in silver on the entire border of his Guardian Robes. He bowed his head and raised a hand to his forehead, taking in slow, deep breaths. Walking to his side, Raven gently placed a hand upon his arm, fearing this was yet too much for him to bear. He looked about eighteen seasons, and was fairly new at this, giving her doubts about his ability to perform such a weighty Guardianship.

“Dennik, are you alright?” Turning his attention to Raven, his eyes locked onto her's. Raven was shocked to see his eyes, which were solid, lightless, black. Smiling slightly, he turned. Suddenly wary of him, Raven expected him to attack, or levitate off the floor. Dennik's

brows came together, concerned.

“Raven, what is wrong?” Shaking her head slowly, she looked at him in all seriousness.

“I trapped a Shaedling within my soul. Only I have the power to release it. In becoming my protector, it has awakened. Dennik, a portion of my power to Soul`Reave may have manifested itself through you, into you.” The Guardian froze in sudden apprehension. Not wishing to panic her Guardian, Raven shrugged and turned away.

“My eyes are the source and power of Soul`Reaving. Dennik, maybe we should call it quits. You can keep the ruby.” He shook his head.

“Wait, I believe I can master this.

“Dennik, I’m not concerned with your willingness to help, but this seems too much for you to bear. I’m sorry.” Dennik shook his head and relaxed, holding the ruby out to her. Pushing it away, Raven shook her head.

“Please keep it,” she insisted as a warning exploded in her gut. It was at this point that Raven realized what she had done. Keeping calm, she motioned to the gem. “It’s yours. I don’t care about the value.” Dennik gazed into the gem, and slowly smiled, a gleam igniting in his eyes that screamed to her of danger.

Raven felt his heartbeat quicken, and suddenly. She knew what the rhythm of a heart touched by adrenaline felt like. In the time it took to inhale, then exhale, Raven analyzed a few outcomes.

One: The gem in his fist created a weapon for him to strike her with.

Two: If he willed it, he could attempt to take her soul.

Three: His free hand rested upon the hilt of his Guardian Blade.

Picking the first option, she assumed he would strike her in the head; incapacitate her as quickly as possible. Turning her head away, she offered Dennik her temple, the most vulnerable area possible as she pulled her right wing tightly to her shoulder. She was not surprised to see him take the bait.

With all his might, he swung, aiming for her head. With a quick wing adjustment, she blocked his strike as he unsheathed his blade. Turning directly into her Guardian, she stepped close enough that their bodies collided. As she felt him against her, Raven wrapped her arms up about the back of his neck, gripping the back of his head. Pain struck her just over the hip as he tried to run his blade through her. The armor she had been given turned all the but tip of his enchanted sword. Still, the wound was deep. The tip painfully dug into her hip, drawing blood, but she dared not let go. If he broke away, Raven would lose the advantage she had just created. She saw the danger as he turned his attention to her wing. With all her strength, she wrapped him with both wings, trying desperate not to injure her Guardian. Again, she had compromised

his safety . . . his soul. She knew he was watching everything, trapped, helpless within himself, powerless to fight the thing that had been caged within her. He was so young! How cold she have been so foolish!

As she shifted to keep her a firm hold on him, Dennik fought like a madman, trying to force her off. She could easily end it, here, now, yet it was not Dennik she fought, but the trapped Shaedling, desperately attempting to free itself. She would not harm her Guardian. There was absolutely no use talking to him; it wasn't him that would answer back.

Pulling him as close as possible, she wrapped him with her legs, tripping him onto his back. As they crashed to the floor, Dennik began growl like some distantly approaching abomination. Snarling in frustration, he tried with all his strength to get her off him. He did manage to turn her onto her back, but, as of yet, she had the advantage. Still, Raven was not sure how long she could keep the advantage. Gripping him to her as tight as possible, she felt her arms beginning to weaken. Suddenly, he relaxed.

“Raven? What is happening to me!” She felt her heart break for Dennik, but did not answer. She wished Mitcheio was here. She needed help. She had an idea.

“Dennik, just relax. It's going to be alright. Relax.” She felt him try as best he could to do what she told him. As he did, she whispered, “Relax, it's over. I'm going to let you up.” As Raven spoke, Chrysalis slowly and quietly slipped off the bed and came up behind Dennik. By the time he became aware of Chrysalis, it was too late. Like a charge of electricity, their lengthy hair expanded and came together at the ends, linking them as one. As they became one, Dennik struggled in vain to be free of Raven.

“You can't make me go back! I'll tear the soul of this body and consume it,” the Shaedling snarled, filling the room with an inhuman cry. “I will be free!” Dennik screamed and twisted as both Raven and Chrysalis shut their eyes and willed the soul of the Shaedling into the ruby still gripped tight in his hand.

As Raven felt the soul of the Shaedling begin to slip, she could feel Dennik's soul twist together with the Shaedling, intertwining them both into one. Just as she thought she had this creature cornered - to her surprise - it tightened its hold on Dennik's soul, and this left her helpless to help him. Alarmed, she felt it beginning to feed on him. As it did, Dennik cried out in misery and torment.

Raven knew her Guardian was not only about to die, but cease to exist. Filling with regret, she wept bitterly as Chrysalis gripped Dennik by the head, even as Raven's eyes began to glow with a black light that quickly flooded into her Guardian's eyes, penetrating deep. After a brief and violent struggle, Dennik went still, relaxing onto Raven, who kept her Guardian's head in her hands, forcing him to look directly at her.

Chrysalis began weeping as she helped Raven. Into him, she probed, seeking both Dennik and the Shaedling. She felt Dennik twitch as she found him, or his soul, hiding within a

memory of his childhood. Pulling away from him, she became bent on finding the Shaedling. The most difficult thing about this was that Dennik had too many, many memories. But the Shaedling could not hide forever, and soon she found it tucked away within the memory of a hole Dennik had dug in his seventh year. Into the hole, she invaded, sharing the same memory with the Shaedling.

“Mercy, mercy,” it begged in terror. Without hesitation, Raven took it up and feasted upon it, until she consumed the last darkened scraps of its once former soul. As she finished consuming the Shaedling, she felt a terrible energy cleave unto her soul. In that moment, a darkness settled within her, strengthening and empowering her. She – someone was coming!

Withdrawing from Dennik's mind and soul, Raven began to flee out from him. Before leaving, she found him, still hiding. With compassion, she caressed his soul with her will.

“Dennik, you are safe now. It has been destroyed. Look up. Look to the light of Vannar, Guardian. Come with me and be free of this darkness.” She coaxed him out from his past memory, and slowly, he followed her. Leading him back with soothing words, she embraced him with all the warmth and love she possessed.

“Continue to be her Guardian,” she communicated, caressing his soul, soothing his fears and doubts. The darkness of Raven's eyes slowly withdrew from Dennik's. So very gently, she separated from his soul, so as not to damage him, then looked up into his eyes, waiting, hoping he had followed her back into the living world.

Chrysalis withdrew from off her protector's back as Raven smoothed back his sweat-soaked hair, watching his eyes; waiting to see life ignite within them once again. Slowly, as if coming out of a deep, deep sleep, Dennik's eyes filled with cognizant awareness. Confused, he blinked, looking down upon Raven, slowly coming to the realization of where he was. Instantly he struggled to be off her.

“Why am I on top of you?” Releasing him, Raven stood as Dennik unsteadily regained his feet. “I feel like I've been trampled by a War Horse,” her Guardian stated as Chrysalis grabbed and steadied them both. Sighing in relief, Raven looked at Chrysalis.

Welcome back, sir,” she whispered as exhaustion began to weigh heavy upon her. Shaking his head Dennik instantly noticed blood on the top-part of his blade.

“What is this?” he whispered, his eyes widening.

Raven felt she was about to pass out. She felt dazed from the exertion in devouring the Shaedling, and bringing Dennik out with her. Pushing Chrysalis's hand from her shoulder, she knelt to the floor, she fell back, even as the door to the room burst open. In rushed Katcha, Mitcheio trailing him. They stopped, seeing Dennik, one of the Guild Guardians before Raven, who lay in a small pool of her own blood.

Seeing what was about to happen, Chrysalis lunged in-between Raven and Katcha, who gripped the hilt of his blade. In a last effort to make things right for Dennik, Raven Raised up on

her elbows, catching Mitcheio's eye.

“Dennik is innocent in this attack.” Groaning, she fell headlong into a dream in which the Shaedling was her master, and she his slave.

Mitcheio placed a hand on Katcha's shoulder.

“Wait,” she whispered, instantly halting the advance of her Guardian as she eyed Dennik, who stood gazing at his blade in disbelief.

“Did you do this Dennik?” Without hesitation, he nodded, lowering his head in shame. Chrysalis's jaw dropped open in disbelief.

“It was the Shaedling, not my Guardian,” she refuted as Mitcheio hastened to Raven's side. Chrysalis threw Katcha a worried look.

“Mother, trust me, I hired Dennik to watch over Chrysalis while I was gone. Something went terribly wrong, and a portion of the Shaedling's soul was divided into my Guardian. It was my fault; I should have given him . . . I should have told him everything. I'm sorry,” she begged, her voice beginning to break with emotion as she turned to Raven.

Mitcheio knelt on the opposite side of Raven, facing Dennik, still cautious. Looking Raven over, the Witch shook her head.

“I need to see the wound. Katcha, Dennik, out!” Katcha turned and headed into the hall, followed by Chrysalis's Guardian. After the Guardians had departed, Mitcheio motioned for Chrysalis to shut the door. Quickly, she obeyed as Mitcheio hastily stripped Raven of her armor, and clothing, exposing her wounded hip. It was deep, and she was not regenerating.

Mitcheio shot Chrysalis a brief look, as she worked Raven's clothes free enough to tend her. She then pointed across the room.

“Chrysalis, there is a basin of water, just over there behind you. Get it and some clean towels. The towels are in the cabinet below the basin. Hurry!” Chrysalis hastily fetched the basin. After setting it down by Mitcheio, she quickly retrieved the towels as well, returning to her mentor.

“Good, now get me a clean sheet from the closet.” Chrysalis did as she was instructed, and soon joined Mitcheio in tearing it into long strips. After carefully washing the wound, the Sardakk Witch began wrapping Raven's hip and legs until her upper leg, hips and mid-section were expertly bound. Eyeing her work, Mitcheio scrutinized the cloth, just over the wound.

“The pressure of this field dressing will keep the wound closed, and stem the bleeding, even though she has already lost much blood. Being Soul`Reaver should keep her alive, but why is she not regenerating?” Chrysalis placed a hand on the shoulder of her other self.

“Why can't I feel the wound, Mother?” The Essence Magician Guild Master looked at her.

“Your Guardian is feeling the wound. He has taken the Guardian's Oath, thus he takes on your pain.” Chrysalis looked to the door and cringed. Mitcheio grabbed her chin and turned Chrysalis's her head to face her.

“I think a better question is, why is Raven not regenerating? This wound, though deep,

should be healing.” Chrysalis stood, looking down.

“Can we get her on the bed and covered?”

“Of course child, of course.” Mitcheio stood. “Move, so she has no obstacles.” The Sagen Gleighdor took a few steps back, pulling her snow-white wings to her back, watching as her mentor held out a hand and closed her eyes.

“Mishaluna (levitate),” she whispered. Slowly, Raven raised up from the surface of the floor, as if carried by a large, invisible hand. Steadily she floated up and then over the bed. Ever so gently, Mitcheio set her down upon its surface.

“Now, rest. Do not get up.” She turned on Chrysalis. “You are to go absolutely nowhere, Raven. Understand? I’ll be back as soon as I can. Keep Dennik in this room.” Chrysalis lowered her head in submission.

“Yes mother,” she said in obedience, regretting. Satisfied, Mitcheio snapped her fingers, instantly causing the blankets to adjust, pulling gently out from under Raven, and covering her, tucking her in to safe-guard her dignity.

“Now, I will send Dennik back in.” She kissed Raven on the forehead, then Chrysalis. Giving her a worried look, Mitcheio left the room, pulling the door closed behind her. After a few moments, there was a knock at the door. Directly after, Dennik opened it a crack.

“May I enter?” Chrysalis looked at the mess on the floor. Not wanting her Guardian to see, she hastened to the cabinet and retrieved a stack of towels.

“Ummm, not yet. I’ll come get you when we’re ready,” she called out to him, then began cleaning up.

“Yes milady,” he said, and shut the door. Quickly, Chrysalis cleaned up the mess. Wrapping all the blood-stained cloths in a bed-sheet, she placed it in a nearby hamper. Closing the hamper, she stepped back, taking in the room to make sure she had not missed a single detail. Satisfied, Chrysalis washed up, then returned to Raven, gently sitting down next to her on the bed.

“Dennik, come in!” she called out. Immediately, her Guardian entered the room, his eyes taking in everything. Walking over to the bedside, he first looked to Chrysalis, then to Raven.

“Her heart does not beat,” he whispered, fighting obvious emotion.

“It has not for a very long time,” Chrysalis whispered, a haunted look filling her eyes. “Yet, she bleeds.” Dennik laid the back of his hand across her forehead, his face twisting in regret. Chrysalis looked at Raven’s wound, if only through the blanket, picturing it.

“Dennik, I know why I can’t feel the pain of my wound. You are the bearer of it.” He nodded.

“When I stabbed her -” “When she was wounded by the Shaedling, Dennik, the Shaedling,” she quickly corrected. Lowering his head in shame, he nodded ever so slightly.

“When she was wounded, I felt my sword sink into my own hip, as if I had attacked

myself.”

“This is not your fault. It is mine, and mine alone. There is a dark history to this, but I’m not going to recite it to you.” After sitting in silence for a long while, Chrysalis looked down to see blood about her Guardian's left foot. Quickly, she retrieved another towel and approached him.

“Dennik, I missed an area when I cleaned up.” She pointed beneath him. “If you will move, I'll get it.” Her Guardian held a hand out.

“Please, allow me. It's no problem at all.” Handing the towel to him, she turned her attention back to Raven, continuing to watch over her. Soon, he was done, and, after putting the towel into the hamper, returned again to the bedside. Taking Raven's hand, he watched her with an expression of worry and pain. Chrysalis observed Dennik watching Raven, and after a time, slowly came to the realization just how much Dennik cared. A question came to mind as she watched him.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, milady, anything.”

“Is it your pledge or your nature that brings you to care so much for us?” Dennik smiled and closed his eyes. She noticed, or thought she noticed, he looked a bit pale.

“I would care, even if you released me from this oath. It is because you are good, that I care. The only reason this Guardian's Oath is necessary, is due to the advantage of the abilities gained when your name lines the hem of my robes. In this, the oath makes a significant difference.” Chrysalis thought about it.

“What if you did not have your Guardian Robes on?” Without hesitation he replied, “Your name would then appear in my mind.” Confused, she pressed the conversation.

“So, then, why do you wear them?” Without hesitation, he answered her question, as if expecting it.

“If I stand out, I become the target.” Chrysalis cringed.

“Oh, I see. What made you want to become a Guardian?” Dennik shook his head, then looked down at Raven's hand in his.

“I've always wanted to help others,” he stated soberly. “I just didn't know how to do it in the best possible way, until the guild found me, took me in.” He looked at Chrysalis. “Now, I know how.”

“Do you have a family?” He nodded. Biting her lip, Chrysalis felt a shadow touch upon her heart, even though it was brief, hinting at a tragic history Dennik had been a part of. She could feel him reaching out to her, 'I could not save them', a distant cry echoed within her mind, as if she had thought it herself.

Suddenly, Chrysalis felt guilty. She had asked questions which were much too personal. She could feel how heavy his heart was, and wished she could lighten it.

“I’m so very sorry for your loss, Dennik,” she whispered. “I’ve lost all my family as well. Raven has been dealt a far more brutal hand.” Questioningly, Dennik looked at Chrysalis, a look of surprise and pain in his handsome face.

“Loss . . . my loss. How do you know this?” Chrysalis smiled lovingly through a sudden haze in her eyes.

“I think when one has lost so much, it is not so difficult to see it in another.” Her Guardian agreed with a slight shrug and turned his attention back to Raven. Chrysalis became silent and wiped her eyes, thinking about what had just happened. He’d spoken to her, but not with his mouth. She could feel his words, as plain as if he had said them aloud. In silence, she contemplated what it meant, coming up with no logical answer, other than Mitcheio’s training.

A sudden knock at the door brought Chrysalis out of many dead-end thoughts. Sliding off the bed, she walked over to the door and opened it. Mitcheio threw her a brief smile. Behind her was a red-haired girl in green robes who gave her a slight curtsy. This was the same girl she had seen at the castle earlier that day. Chrysalis looked into her eyes, a deep focus settling into her mind. ‘I’m Cyann, the Healer. I want to help’. There it was again. She heard the girl speak. It was not in her mind, but a feeling, for she did not hear her thoughts, she felt them.

“Hello Mother,” she said in a hopeful tone. Dennik stood as Chrysalis led the two over to Raven’s side. Before attending Raven, Mitcheio stopped and looked at Dennik.

“You look pale. Are you well?” Bowing, Dennik moved aside to let the two get near Raven.

“I’ll be fine, milady, thank you.” Mitcheio frowned, throwing him a look of doubt, then turned to Raven. Chrysalis watched the Healer step up to Raven and grab the blanket. Dennik turned away respectfully, and as he did, Chrysalis could not help but see he had to slightly correct his balance. Quickly, he adjusted his footing and stood at attention, alert. When Dennik has lost his balance, Chrysalis’s eyes were drawn to the floor where his feet were. At first, she doubted her own eyes, thinking she was seeing blood. She looked away, then back at the floor discretely. Again, there was blood by his feet. It wasn’t much, but it was there. Suspiciously, she retraced his footsteps back to the side of the bed. To the Healer’s left side was more.

Realizing what was happening, Chrysalis walked over to the cabinet, opened it and reached in beneath the water basin. Grabbing a towel, she returned quietly and began cleaning it up, starting at the feet of the Healer. Both Cyann and Mitcheio did not seem to notice, no doubt distracted by their focus on Raven. As she wiped it up, Dennik walked to the side of the room. As Chrysalis carefully wiped up the small trail of blood, leading to her Guardian’s feet, she stopped and stood. Moving close, she whispered, so the other two could not hear.

“I was worried about Raven and didn’t see. Dennik, from now on, I’m ordering you to tell me when you need the slightest medical attention, do you understand me, Guardian? Please,” she added, resting a hand on his forearm.

“Yes, milady,” he answered, then placed a hand over her hand. “I need medical attention. It's not a large wound, but it still bleeds, and I feel the drain. Would you mind if I rested for a few moments on that chair?” She shook her head and walked over with him. Slowly, Dennik lowered himself, avoiding the bulk of his weight on his injured side. Once seated, he exhaled and relaxed, trying to be discrete.

“Thank you,” he whispered, closing his eyes. Feeling his forehead and cheeks, Chrysalis looked utterly disappointed.

“This was all my fault. If I hadn't -” “No, please, no more of that kind of talk,” he gently interrupted. “The past is the past. Let's get on with the future, agreed?” She looked at him, beginning to like him very much. Dennik was good; she could feel it.

“Okay,” she whispered, still concerned. Satisfied, Dennik looked over at the Healer. Chrysalis saw his eyes widen a bit as she and Mitcheio worked on Raven.

“I'll have her look at you as soon as possible,” she said quietly, raising an eyebrow at him. Placing a hand on the back her his chair, she bent down.

“You look as though you wish to tell me something,” she whispered.

“Will you be so kind as to get her name for me?”

“Her name is Cyann.” As she told him her name, he suddenly smiled.

“That's what I thought.” After a while, Cyann and Mitcheio covered Raven. Chrysalis pointed toward the bed, silently informing Dennik they were finished with Raven. Struggling to get up, Dennik clenched his teeth, obviously trying not to make a scene. Refusing her silent plea to sit back down, Dennik stood. Composing himself, her Guardian stood, swaying slightly. It was then that Mitcheio noticed his attention to Cyann. Briefly touching the Healer's hand, she looked to Dennik, drawing the Healer's attention to him. She was instantly concerned.

“Do you need Healing, sir?” She politely offered, approaching him. Tears welled up in Dennik's eyes as she spoke.

“This day, I am healed of a terrible wound, and merely by your presence, Cyann.” She stopped.

“Whatever do you mean, sir?” Smiling, his eyes glittered with emotion.

“I am your third cousin. It's me, Denna, as you used to call me when we were children. Dennik unfastened his helm and lifted it from his head. Cyann thought for a moment, then walked over to him. As she slowly approached, her eyes filled with sudden wonder as he continued. “There was a fire. We barely got out, but only just. Do you remember?” A look of astonishment instantly filled her face.

“Denna?” she stated, all in wonder.

“Yes, it's me, Cyann.” Cyann was suddenly speechless. Chrysalis, placed a gentle hand on both their arms.

“Take your time, please.”

“Thank you milady,” they both said, then quietly laughed.

While the two conversed, Chrysalis excused herself and walked over to Mitcheio, who was staring at Dennik and Cyann with no apparent expression. As Chrysalis stopped beside her, Chrysalis glanced back at the two.

“Mother, when I heal, I must go do something that will take me back to the Tchurjen Westlands. I have to go alone.” Mitcheio considered her for a moment.

“Will you tell me what you are going to do?” she asked.

“Yes, of course. I need to retrieve Artemis’s belongings. They are his, and the guilt of taking them eats at me. Truth is, I don't know if they are still there, but I need to try.” Chrysalis looked at her mentor, waiting for the advice she might give.

“Well, that is a long journey,” Mitcheio finally responded. “Would you be opposed if I enabled a shortcut for you?” Chrysalis looked at Raven and sighed.

“Mother, I have this feeling I should go alone, and without assistance. This is important.” Taking a handful of Chrysalis’s hair, Mitcheio stared at it for a long moment as Dennik and Cyann quietly spoke.

“You know, Raven, I don't think you could have picked a better host than Chrysalis. She is unique.” Chrysalis blushed.

“I could say the same for you. Your hair shines in the sunlight; mine doesn't reflect any light. Your skin, mother, is very beautiful.” Mitcheio let go of the last few strands of Chrysalis's white hair.

“Thank you,” the black Witch replied, flattered. “In all our differences, we bleed red, just the same, you and I. I have always been curious to know about all the races of Utaemia. If a vision opened up and took me back to the very beginning, I wonder how we would I see all the races today? Are we decedents of one set of parents, or did the Jahtha create us all with differences, so we could enjoy each other more?” Chrysalis grinned, modestly enthusiastic.

“Can we pursue that knowledge when I return? Imagine what gems of truth we might find through our gift.” Mitcheio embraced Chrysalis with the tender love of a parent holding her own daughter.

“You inspire me, Raven. I love your childlike nature and willingness to let go the darkness in life. I tell you what: Go do what you have to do, and then return. When you come back, I will show you something you can sink your mind into.” A concerned expression invaded Mitcheio's face; a shadow. “Just come back. I would miss you forever, should you take another path.” Wrapping her arms about Mitcheio, Chrysalis squeezed.

“I will, and I would like that very much. Thank you.” Gently stroking her long snowy hair, Mitcheio smiled, a pain filling her eyes.

“You are most welcome, daughter.” Pulling away, Mitcheio motioned toward Dennik

and Cyann. “Now, let's interrupt the family reunion over there.” Chrysalis nodded with a smile, blushing.

“Before he asks her to marry him?” she whispered. Surprised, Mitcheio gave her a shocked glance, a twinkle in her night-like eyes. Grinning, Chrysalis nodded. “I bet you one of my gems against your one copper piece, I'm right. Look at them go,” she laughed, trying to whisper. Ignoring any further speculation, Mitcheio walked over and stood by the two in silence, waiting to be noticed. Cyann finished her thought, then turned, as did Dennik.

“How is Raven?” Cyann inquired, becoming very serious. Mitcheio quickly and quietly explaining everything concerning the Shaedling, leaving out no small detail. When she finished, Mitcheio looked at Raven.

“She is sleeping. Cyann, she is supposed to regenerate. Do you have any idea as to why she is in not?” The Healer raked her hair back with her fingers, looked at Raven, then nodded.

“While Dennik and I were talking, he told me what happened. Mitcheio, I do not believe the Shaedling was destroyed – at least not the part of it that remains within Raven. I think when Raven went into Dennik, it taxed her strength. And while her strength was lessened, the Shaedling was able to do something, even though it was still trapped. Remember, Shaedling are soul feeders. Everything about a person makes up his or her soul. Mitcheio, if you were a wounded Shaedling, trapped inside another, who could regenerate, would you not seek a way to heal, especially when a part of your soul had been devoured?” Mitcheio narrowed her eyes.

“Do you think Raven's regeneration will start again, after the Shaedling heals?” Giving Mitcheio a serious look, Cyann bluntly asked, “Would you give it back? Mitcheio, my efforts seem to do little or nothing when I heal Raven. At first, I thought she might be cursed. Now, I believe, when I heal Raven, the Shaedling is saving the energy of every spell I cast upon her, storing up enough power to break free from her corporeal form. It yearns to be free. That is my worst case scenario.” Mitcheio appeared disturbed.

“I have the power to annihilate that unnatural creature. But, could I save Raven at the same time?” Resting a hand upon the arm of the Witch, Cyann bit her lip.

“You need a Deth`Knell to do this with the least risk.” Her comment provoked a serious look from the Witch.

“A Healer, advising me to recruit a Deth`Knell . . . unheard of.” Cyann flinched at her jest.

“Mitcheio, as much as I despise Deth`Knell, the honest truth is, you would be most successful using one. I could ask around -” “No, no, I know one. Thank you for being so blatantly honest.”

“Who is he, or she?”

“His name is Selman VanDrake,” Mitcheio said. “I will inquire after him. Thank you for the insight Cyann. You have been invaluable in this case. I will make sure to send a letter of

gratitude to your master.” Cyann looked at Raven.

“I just hope she’ll be alright.” Mitcheio looked in earnest at Cyann.

“Are you going to tend to Dennik?” Cynn looked at the wounded Guardian.

“I will now.” Approaching him, she smiled sympathetically.

“Ready for some magical stitching?”

“Please,” he responded, a fondness filling his countenance as he looked upon her. “I’ve never actually been wounded like this. First time for everything.” Concerned, he looked at Raven. Cyann could tell her condition bothered him to no end.

“Can you show me the wound?” Dennik nodded.

“I’ll need some assistance unlatching my chest and abdomen plate-guards.” Chrysalis stepped up to Dennik.

“I’ll help you.”

“No, no, please, I can do it. Thank you though,” Cyann gently interjected. Chrysalis backed off as Cyann began aiding Dennik. Glancing over at Mitcheio, who was watching, she threw her a secret raise of an eyebrow that plainly stated, “I told you”. Mitcheio motioned Chrysalis to follow her.

“We are going to be in my room,” Mitcheio stated. “I need to speak with Chrysalis.”

“If you need me, I’ll be here, milady,” Dennik said. Through an adjoining door, Mitcheio led Chrysalis. Once in her personal chambers, she turned and gave Chrysalis a look that confused her.

“What? Did I miss something?” Chrysalis laughed, causing her master to laugh also.

“Chrysalis, you are his Ward.” Chrysalis leaned toward Mitcheio, as if there were others in the room who could overhear.

“Help, please?” Smoothing down a feather on her student’s right wing, Mitcheio shook her head.

“Oh that I could be so innocent when I have lived as long as you, my friend.” Chrysalis nervously smiled.

“What am I supposed to say, or do?” Holding up a hand, Mitcheio silenced Chrysalis.

“I think you have done exactly what needs to be done to get them to have dinner together. I think they should be in charge of the rest of their destiny. What do you think?” Chrysalis bit her lower lip.

“Alright,” she said, resigning herself to doing nothing more. She then raised a finger between them and added, “They grow up together. He saved her life! They are the only two survivors. So romantic,” Chrysalis whispered, her eyes lighting up. Mitcheio looked at her student with sudden soberness.

“Chrysalis, cease and desist. It’s rather obvious they like each other. I’ll mail you letters every day for the next one-hundred years with news concerning your match-making abilities. Is

that good enough?" Cringing, Chrysalis pretended to groom her wings.

"I got a little - happily - carried away. I'll stop. Did you see they way they look at each other?" she added, then blushed and bit her lip. Shaking her head, Mitcheio bit her lip and smiled.

"Come on, let's get back to Raven, and you get back into your Guardian's sight. It is adverse for a Guardian to be out of the sight of his Ward, especially when events such as we just experienced happen. Come." The Witch turned to the door and slowly opened it, entering back into the room. As she entered, she glanced at Raven, frowning severely. Stopping, she turned her attention to the main door of the room.

Instantly, her Guardian opened the door and entered the room. Dennik, who was just clasping his chest piece back into place - with Cyann's help - turned and saluted Katcha, giving him a look of pride and respect, even if it seemed he might faint. Katcha briefly saluted in return, giving him the same respect, then motioned Dennik to follow him. Dennik instantly looked at Chrysalis.

"Dennik, come with me now," Katcha ordered, his voice hardening. After a moment, Katcha placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. Still, Dennik did not move.

"You are in this guild because of Mitcheio. You will come with me, or I will strip you of your rank as Guardian. Is that clear?" Dennik, once again, looked at Chrysalis, but did not move. Mitcheio approached Chrysalis's Guardian.

"This is my guild, and you will do as Katcha says. Go, now!" She commanded, then gestured toward Katcha.

"Now, Dennik!" Katcha ordered. Instantly Cyann's eyes widened in fear.

"Please, Dennik, just sit down. You look like you are going to pass out. Please, Katcha, Mitcheio, in all due respect, he needs to rest, just for a short time. He needs to sit down until he can get his strength back. He has lost a lot of blood." Without taking her advice, Dennik looked at Chrysalis, unmoving and silent. Chrysalis didn't like what was happening in the least. Why were they so suddenly interested in him?

"He needs to rest up," Chrysalis interjected. "Dennik, please let Cyann tend your wounds. Sit down and rest up, please." Dennik carefully sat down. Cyann stopped him from sitting down.

"No, I need you to lay flat on your back, so I can see the wound better." Dennik reached out and took her hand, gripping it tight as he began to lower to the ground. Quickly, Katcha aided Cyann in getting Dennik on his back. After he was laying down, Katcha left the room and shut the door.

Concerned at what had just transpired, Chrysalis retreated to the furthest point in the room from her Guardian, motioning for Mitcheio.

"Mother, Is Dennik in trouble?" Mitcheio answered her question, keeping her voice very

low.

“No. What just happened was to enlighten you, not him. Did you learn anything?” She pondered hard, but still did not understand.

“I must be thick headed. I’m sorry - I don’t see.” Mitcheio sighed.

“A Guardian will not obey the command from anyone else but his Ward. You and Raven are his Ward. However, Dennik will disobey your command if you ask him to do something that would needlessly threaten your life, or the life of an innocent. So, depending on the situation, Dennik will always look to you to give him the okay to listen to the command or request of another.”

“Oh, I was never told that.” She looked at her Guardian. “What if I told him to kiss that beautiful Healer?” Mitcheio shook her head.

“He would do it, but only with the consent of that Healer. In any case, I don’t think that would be necessary.” Mitcheio lowered her voice to a whisper. “Look how she tends him, and look how he responds to her. No, you need not do anything more to get them interested in each other.” Chrysalis smiled happily.

“Good. They deserve all the happiness in the world,” she whispered. Mitcheio looked at Chrysalis, and then to Raven.

“I’m sure your Guardian, and that Healer, have a tale to tell. And I bet you one of my very largest gems to your copper piece their tale is filled with hardships, terrible loss and trials, just like someone else I know. I need you to focus, Raven.” Subdued, Chrysalis threw one last secret glance at the two.

“They are a perfect couple.”

Mitcheio rolled her eyes and gave up.

In an inn, sitting at the bar, sat a man in black satin robes, a slender chain of silver fastened about his waist. Before him, on the counter, the man played absently with a mug that he raised to his lips now and then. Occasionally, the bartender would come by and pour him more drink, then move on in silence. The black robed man did not speak to anyone, but remained in silence, deep within his own thoughts. His blue eyes were set with vertical pupils, similar to that of a cat's. No one, including the bartender, seemed to care.

The entirety of the inn's structure was crafted of one single piece of Dremmin-Wood; a very rare and valuable lumber. It was unique, in that there was not a single nail, or hinge in the entire establishment. What was more astonishing about this inn was, while within its walls, violence was not possible. This was the Black Griffon Inn.

It was designed this way in hopes of bringing in customers from all the regions of Utaemia . . . even if they were enemies. In this manner, the owner had been successful in creating trust, even friendships over the past three centuries. In fact, the owner of this amazing establishment had prevented three wars, and largely due to the nature of the establishment. Anyone who had eaten at the Black Griffon Inn was charmed by not only the chef, but the service he rendered.

Rumours and tales whispered of a dark queen, the queen of all evil dragons, had visited this very inn, and had come in the guise of a human female. When she had departed, she abandoned the idea of slaughtering all in the region, as she fancied the food very much. Of course, this was only rumor. Again, rumor had it, the chef had accepted her invitation to dine privately within her own castle abode, deep within the Underworld. While those who heard this story, thought it made up . . . it was the absolute truth. Her true name was Tha'Shealin, but she went by the name of Zane while travelling to and for within the regions of the Earthen Plane.

As Selman fiddled with his mug, he felt a presence he recognized all too well. He had not felt it in a long, long time. It glided silently up behind him and stopped, just without arms reach. Closing his eyes, he took in the unmistakable scent of dragon. Only a handful of others in all of Utaemia could pick up such a scent, and then only if they were Dragonborn.

He felt the quickening of the hearts in all the patrons in the entire room, signifying instant love . . . if that's what men called desiring a strange woman, only due to her beauty. Setting his mug upon the counter, he mused aloud.

"You and I have known each other for over three Ages. I alone came to you when you were banished, and it was a great pleasure to have spent nearly every day with you as you suffered in the confinement of banishment for a full century. We read, I know not how many books. We walked and talked, trust building between us until, finally, you allowed me to hold your hand, hold you. When once we were the bitterest of enemies – now my heart is taken. Why? I beheld the real you. Tell me, Dragon Queen, if I were outside this inn, would I have need to fear?" A silken voice answered him, a tinge of challenge in it.

“I came to get something to eat. Lucky for you, Ardenoth is not on my menu this day.” Selman smiled, his eyes brightening. He stood, turned and bowed slightly, utter admiration and respect in his demeanor.

“Would you care for company, or do you eat alone today, milady?” Flashing Selman a smile, she squinted her molten auburn eyes showing a sentimentality earned through consistent, long term, genuine affection.

“I would not eat alone.” She moved ever so slightly, provoking him with her flawless physique. She had always teased him, ever since he had proposed to her before the gates of Wardenoth Citadel, even as he barred her from taking the city.

With all her unholy soul, Zane hated Nishane Asmond, the King of Gaunten. The catch to this was, Selman was a sworn protector of Gaunten, and a dedicated guardian of the Sardakk, a people he knew she would obliterate is given the chance.

“You look lost in thought, Selman VanDrake. Do you yet mourn the past?” Selman led her to a table, pulled out a chair for her and waited. She smiled and let him seat her.

“Thank you, sir.” Selman sat directly across from her.

“My past is ever present in my thoughts. It helps me with the decisions I make now. I only regret one part of my past.” From the kitchen quickly sped a man in a white apron. Within the time it would take to blink, he zipped up to the table and stopped, his apron flapping once, as if a gust of air had blown it. Zane instantly laughed and looked up at the chef of the Black Griffon Inn.

“I will take a vegetable chicken platter.” The cook smiled at her happily.

“And you, sir?”

“Just vegetables for me. There’s plenty enough meat here,” he whispered, looking at Zane. Zane chuckled and shook her head at Selman. Smiling brightly, the chef repeated the order.

“Two vegetable and one chicken platter. And to drink?”

“Water for me, please,” both Selman and Zane stated in unison.

“Thank you Kaiman,” Zane quickly said as he zipped away. Zane turned her attention back to Selman.

“What is this one thing you regret?”

“That you did not say yes,” he whispered. Zane looked at Selman for a few moments, her expression unreadable. After a time, she broke the silence between them.

“Did you know Kaiman has nine brides? Yes, your cook is married to nine. One is a Wolden Lycanthrope named Shree, one is a Dryad, one Sylph, two Elves, three Humans, and one is Liquorian Vahkrin. What . . . a . . . mix.” Shrugging, Selman could not help but admire Zane’s hair.

“You have done your homework on him. Any special secrets discovered?” She thought

about it, gently biting a nail.

“No, but I am jealous.” Selman laughed and looked away for a moment.

“If you are serious, then I would presume the nine are already dead. If they are not, you are attempting to make me jealous.” She laughed quietly, obviously pleased with herself, the end of her tongue playing with her upper-left fang.

“I would not harm them. I would never burn the bridge against anyone who cooks like he does. There is only one bridge like this I know of, and I'm not about to spoil that.” Selman leaned forward in all seriousness.

“You are not just here for lunch,” he quietly accused.

“Stop it,” she hissed.

“Stop what?” he returned, loving the social fencing they always challenged each other with.

“Figuring things out. Do you always have to think?” He nodded, but did not reply. “Did you ever figure out why I declined you, Dragonborn?” Selman looked instantly intrigued, and placed a hand to his chin.

“Well, I was in your jaws, and you were chewing me.” She nearly laughed.

“Not then, when you used to read to me, while I was held prisoner.” Selman immediately raised a finger. Zane was all ears.

“Because you don't want a Dragonlord, or Dragonborn - whatever they call people like me nowadays - to control you. That's what we Dragonlord's do . . . control dragons, see?” Her eye instantly narrowed.

“You could never control me.” Selman quietly smirked, and looked around as if to spy out other patrons who might be eavesdropping. He then leaned across the table.

“I never wanted to,” he returned.

“Good, milord,” she replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm. Sighing in content, Selman took a sip of water just set down by Kaiman. Two plates of hot food skidded before each of them.

“Your money is no good here,” Kaiman said happily, then zipped away in a flash. Rolling her eyes at Selman, she looked after Kaiman.

“Are you all of the race of Ardenoth at this inn?”

“As far as I know, just he and I. Do you want a serious answer to your question?” Picking up a green bean, she smelled it. Curiously, Zane popped it in her mouth and nodded.

“In all seriousness, I would say it's because you are the Queen of every living, black-hearted dragon in existence. Your petty minions, what would they think of their terrible and relentless, merciless Queen becoming the wife of a defender of those they loath and hate?” Selman picked up his fork and skewered three sliced carrots. Winking at her, he ate them. Selman noticed she was playing with her food. “Are you going to play with your food, or eat

it?" he inquired, setting her up. Slowly, Zane looked up at him, an intensity brewing within her eyes.

"I always play with my food before I eat it," she whispered vehemently.

"Yes you do," he gently replied, throwing her a smile. Zane looked away.

"I wish you would not do that, sir." The Dragonlord picked up a napkin and wiped his mouth. He then stood and held out a hand.

"Come with me. We will only be a moment." Slowly, Zane stood, slipped her hand into his, instinctively suspicious. Helping her up, he kept hold and walked back through the main hall that led outside. Without hesitation, he opened the door and stepped out onto a perfectly manicured lawn. Zane laughed, gripping his hand tight and pulled him to a stop.

"You are suicidal, you know that, right?" Selman turned, grinning, then gently pulled, showing her he wanted to keep walking. Rolling her eyes, she let him guide her out back of the inn. Behind the inn was a very large barn, which he guided her around. Once behind the barn, Selman turned.

"Here, I cannot hide from you. I have no defences up. But, before you make the decision to kill me, will you consider hearing me?" Scales shimmered across her cheeks, as a darkness passed over her eyes, prior to core-fire igniting within them.

"I'm listening," she stated, her appearance not unlike that of viper ready to strike. Selman fixed a few strands of her hair which had blown across her face, ignoring the danger into which he had just placed himself.

"Remember, after your brother came and took you away?" She nodded slowly, the fire in her eyes diminishing, leaving a hardened angry gaze.

"I was banished for one-hundred years. You were the only one, besides my brother, who visited me. You came to me daily, or as often as you could, for the entire time I was caged." Selman smiled happily.

"I loved reading to you. It was the happiest time in my life. Each time I departed, you would always ask me to take you as well. Though I wanted to, I could not, and you knew it. The level of banishment you were placed under, I could not undo. In secret, I did try, and more than once." The hatred in her eyes slowly melted away as he spoke, giving way to indifference.

"The Jaded Unicorn was my favorite story," she said as she turned her gaze out upon the Navarian Sea, not a stone's throw down the gentle incline from the barn. Closing her eyes, Zane breathed in the salty air, and the breeze caressing her hair. Abruptly, she opened her eyes as Selman gently kissed her on the corner of her right eye.

"Please let me in," he said.

"Why?" She countered, the indifference in her eyes turning to curiosity. Selman ran his fingers through Zane's long, wavy, black hair, giving her a look that made her, once again, avoid his eyes.

“Because, I have grown to love you,” he reverently admitted. “Ay em esh il sulna veth suel (I am so in love with you).” Abruptly impressed, Tha`Shealin looked at him.

“Really?” Nodding, Selman smiled.

“Yes. You have utterly captivated my heart.” Narrowing her eyes at him, she gripped his hand.

“Now, down to business. I should consume you. There is nothing that can save you now. You have been a perpetual thorn in my side for so long. Have you any last words, Selman VanDrake, High Wardenoth of Wardenoth Keep and protector of the King I hate?” Selman shook his head and gently pulled the most lethal of all evil dragons close, gently taking his free hand and tilting her head. For the first time, Zane, his most powerful arch nemesis, who had murdered many of his allies and friends, kissed him with a tenderness that surprised him. Letting go his hand, she snaked her arms up about his neck and held on for quite some time before letting go. This was the first time she had ever returned his affection. After parting, she squinted at him, causing him to genuinely smile. Hand in hand they began walking back to the inn.

“Well, this was unexpected,” she stated, her eyes hardening. Selman squeezed her hand, a slight smile touching upon his lips as they walked.

“All that time we spent together, reading, laughing, walking, talking, dreaming, you captured me, Tha`Shealin. I would hate to let all that go on the mere idea that we are arch enemies. Just think about it: We are rulers that can’t say and do what we please? Preposterous!” Looking at him, a smile played into her eyes, the hardness within completely vanishing.

“Selman, our forces serve our every whim, not the other way around. I consider you my enemy no longer . . . until I do.” Selman slipped his arm about her waist, pulling her tight.

“Exactly,” he said, throwing her a smile. Reaching up, he gripped the handle to the back door of the Black Griffon Inn and opened it for one of the most deadly creatures in Utaemia.

“Ladies first,” he stated.

“Thank you, sir,” she said as she re-entered through the back door of the inn. He followed her in, admiring her thoroughly. After returning to the table, they continued eating their meal, which had not cooled in the least, much to the queen’s liking. After the first bite, she raised both hands, glancing at the kitchen door.

“Does Kaiman Morkaine think of everything? My food it still hot.” Selman hrmphed softly.

“Of course not. That was my doing when I created this inn.”

“Aren’t you the clever one,” she whispered, bearing her fangs at him. Ignoring the soft snapping of her teeth, he shrugged.

“I just don’t like cold food,” he said.

After lunch, they both stood on the front lawn of the inn. Zane held up a single thumb-

sized, ruby.

“This will take you to my throne room. Show my guards the ruby and they will take you to me.” Selman took the gem.

“Can I see you soon?”

“When?” she inquired, her demeanor changing to sly.

“Dinner?” She laughed softly, then snickered, as if something struck her funny.

“I would love to have you for dinner.” Nodding, Selman gave her that smile again. This time, she forced herself to keep his eye. Gently he kissed the back of her hand.

“I’ll come promptly at sunset.” She narrowed her eyes.

“I’ll be expecting you.” Zane vanished without another movement, or sound, leaving Selman alone out in front of the Black Griffon Inn. Holding up the gem, he gave it a curious look, then reached into his robes. Producing a small, flat, ornately crafted box, he unfastened the latch. Slowly he opened the lid for the first time in over seven-hundred years.

Within set a band, crafted from raw substance, only found within the Substance Dimension. The band alone had taken him three years to successfully form. After well over a hundred failures, he had finally gotten it right. The most difficult part of the ring was setting two large slivers of Ironese Crystal into the eyes of a small dragon’s head - another nigh-impossible task using pure substance.

Once the ring was prepared, the Dragonlord had sealed the spell of Imprisonment within the ring’s left eye. Into the right eye, he had sealed the spell of Life, with the help of an ally. The spells would never fade from the Ironese Crystal; they were permanent. All the wearer of this ring had to do was use his or her own magical stamina to cast the spells.

“I hope.” he whispered. Slowly, Selman closed the box and put it back into his pocket as, behind him, the front door of the inn opened. Closing his eyes, he felt a familiar heartbeat approaching from behind.

“Shree, how are you?” he asked in a gentle tone. He turned, opening his eyes, watching her warily approach.

“I am well, milord, and you?” He admired her simple beauty of dark-brown hair, eyes of the same colour and skin that appeared to be crafted by the sun.

“I’m good, thank you milady.” She looked around suspiciously.

“That woman who was eating with you, I heard her talk about Kaiman’s nine brides.” Selman was impressed by Shree’s ability to hear whispers, even through multiple walls.

“Shree, she was just trying to make me jealous, nothing more.” Nervously, Shree wrung her hands.

“She scares me, Selman. Ever since she first came here, I’ve had nightmares about her. If she wanted, she could mount my head on her wall.” Selman neared Shree and took both her hands in his.

“My dear, don’t work yourself up. You know what that does to you. Then you will be the one the locals will talk about in fear, just as you speak of her.” Tears clouded Shree’s eyes quickly.

“What about my fears?” she insisted.

“Shree, if something happened to you, Kaiman would cease cooking for her. I am sure she would not risk such a thing. If anything, I think she would be kind to one of the nine wives of her favourite chef.” Relaxing, Shree looked up at Selman, smiling briefly.

“That sounds good to me. Thank you.” Giving Selman a quick hug, she jogged back inside, only looking over both shoulders once.

Selman watched her return to the inn and vanish inside. As he turned and looked out over the grand expanse of rolling grasslands, a feeling came over him, as if he was being watched. Looking up, Selman searched the sky, or appeared to do so.

“Who is watching me?” he stated in sudden curiosity. In reply, an instant voice floated down from above, carried by the nighttime breeze. Though faint, he instantly recognized who it was. Closing his eyes, he smiled as if being reunited with an old friend.

“Selman VanDrake, I need your help.” Instantly, the Dragonlord’s cats-eye pupils narrowed, filling with a grey light, enhanced by the full moon in the sky above.

“I know you, Sardakk Witch. I know you. Name it, and I will do what I can.”

Mitcheio took a long look at Raven as Cyann tended to Dennik. She needed help on this one. She could remove the Shaedling from Raven herself, but it would be an arduous task, and one that might permanently damage or kill Raven. She needed to conserve her strength. The one thing that bothered her, was the Shaedling had been to El'Anara, the heart and soul of the Essence of Eternity. It was disturbing to think of the Shaedling hearing the secrets of this power. Something had to be done about this situation, and now.

"Chrysalis," she whispered. Chrysalis turned her attention to Mitcheio and walked over to her briefly stretching her wings.

"Yes mother?"

"I will be in my room. If there is any change in Raven, please come tell me right away. Do not knock, just come in." Chrysalis looked at Raven, suddenly worried.

"I'll keep both my eyes on her," she said. Mitcheio reached up a hand and ruffled her white hair. Chrysalis loved Mitcheio's attention. "I'll let you know," she assured the Witch.

"Thank you," Mitcheio replied. "You are so beautiful for one so old." Chrysalis touched her arm.

"If it makes you feel any better, you seem much older than you are." Mitcheio's eyes widened.

"You are going to get it for that, count on it. Oh, in all seriousness, we have to talk. I have picked up on something you should know a bit more about. No questions on this subject for now." Smiling, the Magician Guild Master winked, turned and entered her personal chamber, shutting the door behind.

Once inside, Mitcheio walked to the center of the room and knelt upon a lush throw-rug, made from the mane of an adult Morgel Lion. Closing her eyes, the black Witch focussed her will upon contacting the only Deth`Knell she knew. Like an eagle she rose up from the guild, travelled at an incredible speed north-east, over the Iron Mountains which divided the continent in half. On she bent her will toward a place she knew would be her best chance to find him. Over grasslands and forests, hills and swamps she soared, making her way toward the Navarian Sea. Spotting a pure-white inn, the Black Griffon Inn, she focussed in on the High Wardenoth of Gaunten, Selman VanDrake, and touched upon his mind. Seeing him, Mitcheio neared, feeling the remnant of a dark and sinister evil fading from the area. She smiled as he looked up at her.

"Who is watching me?" he stated in sudden curiosity. In reply, she answered him.

"Selman VanDrake, I need your help." Instantly, the Dragonlord's cats-eye pupils narrowed, filling with a grey light, enhanced by the full moon in the sky above.

"I know you, Sardakk Witch. I know you. Name it, and I will do what I can."

"I need a Deth`Knell; one I know I can trust." Curiously, Selman tilted his head to one

side, highly intrigued.

“Not lightly does another entreat me as a Deth`Knell. What is the situation?” There was a brief silence before the Witch’s voice came again upon the wind, echoing from afar.

“I need to remove a Shaedling from one of my pupils. I understand this is an expertise of yours. I will pay you handsomely for your assistance.” She saw him frown.

“Shaedling are deadly. I will not do it for payment. May I come to you?” Mitcheio grinned, pleased beyond measure.

“Yes, of course, Dragonlord. Center your thoughts upon the western section of the Morgel Lion’s mane, and you will have safe passage. Gladly, I receive you.” Selman knelt and dug a small hole in the ground. Taking out the ruby the dragon queen had given him, he placed it in the hole and covered it.

With a thought, Mitcheio dismissed the scrying spell and waited eagerly for one of the most powerful mages in history to appear in her personal abode. Moments later, Selman materialized before her. Placing his right hand over his heart, he bowed his head in respect.

“Hello, Mitcheio. How are you?” She placed a hand over her heart, briefly bowing her head.

“I am good, thank you sir. I hope you are doing well?” Selman stood and held out a hand, which she took.

“I’m good, thank you. I have a dinner date with Zane. Isn’t that good news?” She instantly frowned.

“You know your own business, sir. Don’t vanish forever from my eyes, is all I ask.” He laughed.

“I’m still trying to break her down . . . give up war. We’ll see how this goes.” Mitcheio slid her hand down to his arm in escort style.

“Weaver.” He thought about her statement, then nodded once.

“Precarious business, the weaving of a spider. Every thread must be placed perfectly, so prey can be ensnared. But, I think this time there will be no ensnaring, or fighting. War bores me. It always ends badly, no matter the outcome.” He shook his head sadly. “Her hatred has ebbed considerably. I hope to know her for who she is, not what she was. Through all the trials, I have always seen something other than destructiveness and hate in each of my enemies. Is it not so with you?” Without hesitation, she turned on Selman, fixing him with a serious eye.

“No, it is not. My son, who is not my son, was diabolic through and through. Selman VanDrake, counsel I give you now. Keep up your best guard. Do not let her charms beguile you. Do not lose everything on a whim.” He smiled.

“I love you,” he whispered. Mitcheio’s eyes hardened.

“I mean it, Selman.” Selman sighed.

“Don’t you worry about me.” She laughed.

“I can’t help it.” Selman looked about the room. “Where is Katcha? I have a joke for him.”

“He is out the door and to the left, if you are serious.” Selman instantly headed to the door, opened it and turned left, intent on delivering his joke to Katcha. Not two steps toward the large Sardakk Elf Guardian, Selman froze. Spinning on his heel, the Dragonlord set his eye upon Raven, who lay upon the bed. Chrysalis and Cyann backed away from Selman as he glanced at them. Dennik put his arm about Chrysalis, eyeing Selman, a hand slipping to the hilt of his blade. Mitcheio stepped away from the Dragonlord, giving Dennik a quick motion to stand down.

“Chrysalis, Dennik,” the Witch stated, “this is the High Wardenoth of Gaunten, personally handpicked by Nishane Asmond himself.” Instantly Dennik relaxed, his hand slipping from the hilt of his sword. Even so, he kept a steady eye on Selman, as if expecting a sudden attack.

When this man had entered the room, Chrysalis felt a terrible presence wash over her. In fact, it threatened to paralyze her, so intense was the feeling he radiated. Cyann looked like a cornered rabbit. Mitcheio stood just inside the room, her eyes on Selman.

“I can assist you by amplifying whatever you do, sir.” He nodded slowly, moving to the side of the bed with caution, his attention rivetted upon Raven. Stopping, he looked down at the sleeping Karritch Gleighdor, his cat-like eyes, glistening with sudden energy.

“I sense pain, misery. She is being slowly caged. Its design is to obtain her physical body. It strives to live again. If I fail, she will be lost forever.” Mitcheio began walking toward Selman, intent on helping. As she approached, he held up a hand.

“Stay back, my friend. I will not risk one hair of your head. Please,” he added respectfully. She stopped and slowly backed away.

“I am no simple Magician, milord. If you begin to falter, I will step in.”

“Agreed, he replied. Slowly, Selman reached down and placed a single finger upon Raven’s throat. Closing his eyes, he whispered something that brought pain into the entire room.

“Mithrakashun,” he whispered. Raven’s back abruptly arched as an unnatural scream pierced the air. For a moment, only her heels and head made contact with the bed. Then, slowly, Raven lifted from its surface, shuddering as if repulsed by his touch.

Katcha neared Mitcheio, a grim and troubled expression on his face. Without taking her eyes off both Selman and Raven, Mitcheio reached over and set a hand upon her Guardian’s arm and Chrysalis gagged for breath, her back arching spastically as her wings expanded full.

Cyann was instantly knocked to the floor, striking her head on the side corner of the table next to the soft-chair. Blood instantly spread below where she now lay unmoving. Dennik

grimly reached out and gripped Chrysalis's hand and closed his eyes, chanting through clenched teeth. The moment he took her hand, Chrysalis reached over and unsheathed his blade, turning on her own Guardian. With all the force she could, Chrysalis, struck him with her wing, forcing him into Selman's back. Blood dripped from Selman's teeth as Dennik landed into the Dragonlord's back. The force of his impact was no more than being hit with a child's doll. Ignoring the disturbance behind him, Selman narrowed his eyes.

"There you are," Selman whispered through crimson-stained lips. "You are a bigger fish than I suspected. An ancient, perhaps? Top-of-the-food-chain . . . well, almost. Tell me, for I am very curious."

Chrysalis snarled as Dennik leapt to his feet to face her. Yet, her Guardian was not the target. Launching with all possible speed, she lunged through the air toward Mitcheio, bent on running her through. As if expecting it, Katcha pulled his Ward back, using himself as a shield, and took the full impact of the blade to his chest. Chrysalis slammed into him, failing to do more than create a deep scar in the steel of his chest-plate. Chrysalis began to scream, breaking into a fury of blows in an attempt to kill him.

Selman ignored the battle raging on behind him, focussing all his attention on Raven.

"Fine," he spit out hatefully, "I was going to spare you." Gritting his teeth, he slowly lifted his finger from Raven's throat. As he did, Selman forced the words of a terrible spell between clenched teeth.

"Balck Noe Troysed!" he hissed hatefully, his once pleasant demeanor changed to that of more than a monster, his wrath fanned to full bloom. Blood began to seep from the veins in his hand as he steadily drew it away from Raven, as if he was lifting a heavy weight. Nearly touching his forefinger, a writhing mass of twisting darkness followed.

"I forbid you harm the girls. I have spoken!" he commanded, his voice sounding as though a dragon were speaking in unison, matching its words perfectly with his. "I diss-empower you to harm anyone in this room but me. I am now your target, and only escape. Through me is freedom to do and go as you please, if you can take me." A ghastly moan filled the room as Dennik chanted, his eyes locked onto Chrysalis. Sweat dripped from his temples and forehead as he focussed on his Ward.

Hatefully, Chrysalis abandoned Katcha and turned on Selman, waving a hand past Dennik, who staggered to the right, leaving Selman exposed from behind. With all his might, Dennik tried to intercept his Ward, but failed.

"Die, Deth'Knell! Dithinoth take you into everlasting madness!" As Chrysalis shouted the curse at the back of the Dragonlord, a visible wave of energy ripped into him, affecting his garments, like a sudden burst of wind striking him. Selman grinned as blood freely cascaded his face.

“Selman, are you with us!” Mitcheio shouted, as Chrysalis drove the blade’s point into the back of the Dragonlord, between his shoulder blades. The moment the tip struck him, Chrysalis was repulsed back across the room, striking the far wall, Dennik’s blade ripped from her grip by some unseen force, and fly into Dennik’s hand once again.

“Fool!” Selman shouted in exultation of the power coursing through him. Darkness gathered about he and Raven as she began to thrash in mid-air.

As Chrysalis struck the wall, Dennik jerked, falling to one knee as multiple bones snapped in his back and arms. Mitcheio threw Katcha a worried glance, to which Katcha wrapped his free arm about her and moved to the side. He did nothing more than simply observe, ready to protect his wife at all costs.

Sweat, mingled with streaming blood, flowed from Selman as he continued to raise his finger up and away from Raven. As he did so, a shadowy creature desperately writhed and thrashed in the attempt to break loose. Mitcheio’s eyes radiated a golden hue as she now focussed all her attention upon her Guardian, shielding him from danger.

“Then they die with me!” A terrible voice screamed, echoing throughout the room. Chrysalis, who had fallen to the floor, stood and rushed Dennik, who raised his free arm to ward off her attack. But she was not attacking him. With both hands, she grabbed Dennik’s blade and pulled it to her neck, even as Raven placed the tips of her fingers to her chest.

Selman stepped back gripping the writhing figure of what appeared as a humanoid, void of flesh, a shadow twisted and bent. It moaned and cursed him hatefully for a moment, as Chrysalis pulled the sharp of the blade into her neck and instantly ran her throat down its edge. Raven’s claws extended into her chest at the same moment the Shaedling was pulled completely free of its victim. Yet, neither the blade’s edge, nor Raven’s nails harmed either of them. Selman eyed the struggling shadow, a dark glint flashing in his eyes.

“Curious, the beings we are so fortunate to cross paths with in Utaemia. You, Shaedling, are one of the more interesting. Did I not curse you, that you could do no harm to any in this room but myself? Yet, in all the Ages you have existed, you never learned the wisdom to know when you should plead for mercy. I am one who would have given you such. Why continue a battle you are destined to lose?” It moaned hatefully at Selman, becoming still for a matter of three breaths, during which time a wind blew through the room.

“Forgotten you will be; forsaken and forlorn.” Selman shook his head in disappointment. With a bloody grin, he increased his grip on the Shaedling.

“You should have chosen a different curse, my friend. I have already passed through those trials as well. Now, I take your essence into my own, building my own power.” Increasing his grip on the Shaedling, Selman’s eyes dissolved into burning black tongues of fire. From the Deth Knells’ black robes flames ignited. Causing all to pull back from him as a rune-etched scythe materialized within his free hand. Like a wake, a terrible dark energy filled the room,

causing all but Mitcheio to fall to the floor, groaning in abrupt misery, fear and pain.

“Spare me, milord. I will trouble them no more. Slay me not. Your servant I will be.” Selman looked at Mitcheio, who shivered, then shook her head once. Instantly, the Shaedling began to moan, as if it had already been caught up in the grips of the eternal Blackened Abyss.

Without further communication, Selman pricked the Shaedling with the point of that terrible weapon he held, then slowly inhaled, drawing his enemy close to his mouth. Shrivelled and twisted, it screamed in horror and final terror, as it drained away into the Dragonlord, entirely consumed by the Sardakk Elves greatest protector and servant.

“I am Death,” Selman whispered, a sadness twisting into his countenance, as if something terrible suddenly pained him. He gave Mitcheio a look that caused her to weep. “Now I am more than before you called me milady. Forgive me, noble Sardakk, I should not have affected you in such a manner. Speak not of what you have seen this day. It is best left unknown to all beyond the walls of this room, for there is no danger to you in what I am.” As if she had just been shown some dark secret, Mitcheio took in a quavering breath, as all present began to rise. Slowly, she gripped Katcha, her eyes blazing as two brilliant, golden stars. Katcha placed a hand over her’s and looked at her, openly relieved.

Katcha looked at Dennik, who was now struggling over to help Chrysalis. She was badly shaken. Chrysalis lay on the floor, weeping and grinding her teeth. Mitcheio ran to Chrysalis, knelt down and gripped her by the shoulder. Instantly, Katcha knelt to her right and held out a hand. Gripping it tight, she closed her eyes, that golden light yet slipping between her eyelids. Katcha stiffened as she transferred Chrysalis's wounds to him. Multiple snaps causes the Master Guardian to moan and grit his teeth, but he did not falter.

“I want it all,” her faithful Guardian commanded. Instantly, Katcha was driven down to one knee. Just as quickly, he regained his feet. Mitcheio then did the same for Dennik and Cyann. Selman waved her away, declining to be healed. When all was done, Mitcheio stood, turned to her Guardian, tears forming in her eyes as that golden essence dimmed and then extinguished.

“Katcha?” He raised a hand to the left side of her head, where six braids were visible. In a deep voice, Katcha simply stated, “You know, I think I'm getting used to this.” Raising a hand to the six braids on the left side of Katcha's head, Mitcheio broke down in tears.

“What would I ever do without you?” Very few times in Katcha's life did he smile or grin. This was one of those occasions, and it made Mitcheio more emotional yet.

“You see what smiling causes?” he whispered. Mitcheio laughed, trying to regain control of her emotions.

“Katcha,” Chrysalis exclaimed in wonder, “I saw you take a frightening number of blows, and yet you live.”

“A fellow Guardian cannot be harmed by another Guardian's blade. Also, my blade cannot harm my Ward . . . the Shaedling was ignorant of this.” Chrysalis gripped her own neck, then looked at her hands, seeing no blood. She tried to smile, but failed. Feeling the trauma of the situation, she felt empty within.

As if Raven had suddenly called out her name, Chrysalis looked over at the bed where she lay. With reckless speed, she slipped past Selman as the dark flames of his being subsided. The Dragonlord quickly moved away, avoiding contact with her as the Sagen Gleighdor jumped onto the bed, falling upon Raven, a panicked look in her eyes.

“I am not, I am not! Where have I gone? Mother, I need you!” she screamed.

Selman looked upon the scene, then backed away, the dark fire extinguishing from his eyes. Turning to Cyann, he removed a ring from his finger. Kneeling, he took her hand and slipped it on her thumb as Chrysalis panicked. Nearing his lips to her ear, he whispered something that Cyann instantly repeated, as if talking in her sleep. In a moment, the ring illuminated with a blue light, spreading from her thumb to her hand and down her fingers. It then cascaded up her arm and into her shoulder and neck, making its way over her head and then

down her chest and other arm. Steadily, the light cascaded down over her abdomen and hips, then washed over her legs and feet, engulfing her entirely. The Healer's blood flowed back into her head, as if time had reversed. With a gasp, she opened her eyes as the gash upon her head closed and vanished altogether. Looking up into Selman's eyes, she froze in terror. Selman slipped the ring from her thumb and placed it back on his own finger.

"Peace, Daughter of Life." Gently taking her hands, Selman lifted her up as he stood. "You are priceless to me," he whispered. As he let go, Cyann looked down, noticing he had placed a dagger in her left hand, and a Talisman upon a silver chain in her right.

"To further the purposes of your journey, milady," he reverently stated. The fear in Cyann's eyes instantly changed to surprise and wonder. She looked at the Talisman and dagger and gasped in amazement as she gazed down upon the rune-covered blade.

"Maiden Dagger," she stated, all in wonder. Looking up at the Deth`Knell, the opposite of her order, her mouth slowly spread into a fragile smile. "I don't know how you came by this dagger, but thank you. Thank you. What is the Talisman sir?" she said, looking at it. "It appears as an arrowhead crafted from pure crystal. But, what does it do?" Selman gave her a bloody smile.

"This Talisman will increase the power of your spells, tripling their potency in all aspects. Also, the material used to house the enchantment of this talisman is Agez Crystal, which was hollowed out. Within the hollow is liquid Sagis Crystalline, which gives the power to the Talisman." Cyann's eyes widened.

"Why would you give me such gifts?" Selman stepped back and bowed.

"I feel you are the right one." Taken back by his words, she looked at the items.

"Thank you milord. I can never repay this." Selman's eyes brightened as he looked upon her.

"You are Lifebringer," he whispered, "and that is payment enough. Just know this, upon your departure from mortality, I will reclaim them." As he turned toward the bed, Selman approached, a grim look etching into his countenance. Selman pointed at Raven.

"Can you help her?" Cyann hung the Talisman about her neck and walked over to the bed upon which lay the still form of Raven, and Chrysalis, knelt by the still form of Raven, a look of disbelief and sorrow twisted into her face. Cyann crawled up onto the bed, kneeling across from Chrysalis.

"Chrysalis, it is going to be alright," she said, running her hands over Raven from head to toe, not quite touching her. Instantly, a soft, blue, luminescence began to flow from her hands, flooding down over Raven like a thick fog.

"Now, Chrysalis, "call her name." Chrysalis wiped her face.

"Raven, Raven, can you hear me? Raven, I need you here." Quietly focussing on the Karritch Gleighdor, Cyann began to chant. An instant strain took hold of the Healer as she

focussed her will upon Raven. The Healer's eyes shimmered with a silver-blue light as she grit her teeth, chanting more fervently. Illumination from within her robes indicated the Talisman about her neck had come to life.

Determined, she silently begged for the help of her Jahtha and master, Arial Anarias, as she continued to pour all her energy into Raven in the form of healing and regeneration. It was then that Cyann realized she would need the help of another, one who was her true opposite in life. A voice whispered in her mind as she struggled to bring Raven back.

"You are the light of life. Combine that light with the darkness of death. Only together will you bring this lost one home." Cyann looked back at the man she had previously wished to flee from. She held a hand out to this Deth`Knell, motioning him to her.

"Take my hand," she called to him as she felt the strain of healing Raven begin to tax her body. There was not much more time before she would have to rest, then try again . . . if Raven could still be saved.

"Without hesitation, Selman crossed the floor and gripped Cyann's hand in his, instantly feeling a heavy burden laid upon his soul. He felt as though he was reaching far down into a darkness more deep than the Abyss itself, and it challenged him to try and pluck Raven free from its vice-like, merciless clutches. His eyes instantly shaded to darkness as he growled in defiance of Raven's death-like shackles binding her down.

"Morgel ishanna vul extolem (Death release her soul)," he forced through blood-stained teeth. Cyann continued to chant, and to call upon her master for aid. As she did, the Talisman broke forth with a brilliance that forced the others to shield their eyes. Pressing the fight to save Raven, they both focussed their energies as the others watched, hands raised to shield their eyes. The structure about them began to shudder and creek, stressing under the combined power of a light and darkness that danced and twisted together upon Raven.

Selman felt Cyann's strength and will being taxed, and knew she could not be the medium of such a force of power for long. She was yet too green in her field. Still, together, this was possible. He could feel her, as if he was her, aware of her fears and weaknesses, as well as her devotion, trust and faith in her master. As he became attuned with Cyann, Selman perceived her entire life in a moment's time, suddenly knowing her as well as he did himself. Reaching deep into the darkness of Raven's prison, they both grasped those terrible, merciless chains binding her down, and shattered them into oblivion.

Cyann felt Raven stir, and as she began to move, a terrible power flung her from the bed, directly into Selman. Catching her, he staggered backward, even as they brought Raven out of her prison, setting her free. The light in Cyann's Talisman flickered twice, then extinguished as they fell backwards to the floor. Cyann landed on top of Selman. As they fell, he pulled her close, sheltering her from being harmed.

Twisting about, Cyann turned on the Dragonlord, looking down at him, her eyes

widening in disbelief, astonishment. Something had occurred as they made contact. Selman perceived it by the look she gave him. As he knew her, she now knew him. Everything was an open book between the two of them. In that moment, he knew she would be repulsed, or she would accept what he was. He also knew her entire history, and it was filled with anguish and mental darkness. Only in the past two years had she caught hold of something that gave her enough purpose to keep her from ending it all.

Before she stood, he pulled her close and whispered, "I don't blame you if you hate me," he whispered. Visibly taken back, she shook her head and slowly got to her feet, eyes yet locked with his. After she was clear of him, Selman stood, his unnatural eyes following her. She knew everything, everything. She could unravel everything he was working toward. All she had to do was open her mouth, and three thousand years of preparation and planning would shatter like glass.

Giving her a slight smile, he waited. In the past, had someone discovered him in this manner, Selman would have instantly taken them down. But now? He knew this wonderful woman, as if he's been there from her first day of breath, and would not dare harm a precious hair of her head.

The air between them seem to flee as she wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve. As she looked at him, he wondered at how this happened. It had to have been the side effect of their powers combining and working together. Slowly, Cyann returned his smile with a smile of her own.

"Thank you for helping me, sir. I could not have done it without you. And thank you for the wondrous gifts. I am in your debt." He bowed slightly.

"I am, and will always be, happy to assist those I love, milady," he whispered, feeling a great sense of relief.

"I will always be ready when you need assistance. I am with you, always," she returned privately. Then to his great surprise, Cyann embraced him. "When do you think –" "I will speak with you later about this, agreed?" Selman cut her off. She nodded, shivering, as if suddenly cold. Parting, he gave her a reassuring look, taking her hand. "I promise." Letting go, he returned and bowed to Mitcheio and Katcha.

"Would you happen to have an extra towel handy?" Mitcheio quickly reached down into the cupboard, below the basin of water, grabbed two and handed them over.

"You're a mess. Are you alright?" After wiping his face and neck off, he looked at her and grinned, his teeth still crimson.

"More than you know." He had just been given a daughter, and he was going to take every advantage of it. To him, Cyann was worth slaying an army for.

"Thank you for your assistance. Without you, things would have ended badly, I'm sure." Selman bowed again.

“I must depart, my friends. If you are in need, please contact me through Mitcheio.” Katcha saluted Selman with pride, as did Dennik. Worried, Mitcheio embraced Selman tight and whispered, so none other could hear.

“Selman, the thing you are about to do will not only risk your life. Again, whatever you do, be wise and on your highest guard.” Wrapping his arms about her, he whispered his reply.

“Sometimes we must take chances to set in stone the safety and well being of those we love. Ita sevor min (I love you), he said in her own tongue. Letting go, Selman stepped back, glanced at Raven and Chrysalis, then laughed in quiet triumph.

“Amazing,” he whispered, then made a quick motion with his hands. In an instant, he was gone, vanishing into thin air.

Raven opened her eyes to Chrysalis, who smoothed down her hair.

“Hello Raven,” she whispered.

“Hello Chrysalis,” she returned. She was getting good at playing the part of two separate people.

“The darkness of that fiend is no longer within me.” Chrysalis said, a slight smile playing across her lips.

“No, it’s not,” Raven replied, then slowly slipped from the bed and onto the floor. Spotting Mitcheio, she neared and threw her arms about the dark Witch, squeezing her tight.

“Thank you mother,” she said. Mitcheio returned her affection.

“That was the second time I thought I lost you. Please stop doing that, okay?” Raven let her go and stepped back.

“I’ll try,” she replied, noticing Katcha watching her. She grinned at him, hoping he would lighten up a little. He did not.

“Are you angry with me, Katcha?” She asked in all sincerity, feeling suddenly small before him. In return, he took her hand, pulled her to him, and embraced her tight enough to force the breath out of her.

“No. You are safe now. Stay that way.” He then let her go, shaking his head, his countenance hardening once again.

After she and Chrysalis were alone, Raven’s anger and hatred began to grow for the Vuolg who had forced her onto this destructive path. It was a destiny that, if accepted, would lead her into war, power and glory, all at the expense of many innocents. A part of her desired that path. All she had to do was give in. She thought about what she could become, what she could have, and it tempted her.

Kneeling on the floor in the center of the room, Raven bowed down, burying her face in her arms, the inside of her forearms and hands curling about the back of her head. The struggle with the Shaedling had been so incredibly taxing, she did not try to climb up on the bed. Closing her eyes, she took in a few deep breaths, pondering what she could truly evolve into, should she bend her will upon it. At that moment, up until now, Raven had missed the obvious. Why could she not tap into the Essence of Eternity to evolve as she desired?

As she entertained the idea, it brought to mind the fabled Genie Lamp. If found, one would have three wishes. One could dream away and be granted anything. What was the difference between the power within her and such a lamp? There was a huge difference, for the Essence of Eternity was everything, meaning she, even a Genie Lamp, was part of that power.

“And I can wield the Essence,” she thought. “I can shape my own evolution.” Then again, what she would miss out on, should she go back on the promise as a Knight of Vannar?

By her own free will, she had agreed to certain things. To be a living soul, independent and free! Being granted the status of Knight of Vannar would make her an even more powerful Gorgonoth, wielding darkness like none other!

There is was, that far away beckoning, like one reaching for her through the past. She could feel it in her bones; a call. Somewhere out there, Raven was being summoned, tempted, nearly causing her to leap up and flee the guild. In all truth, she wanted to go. Images of treasure, wealth, and power in all its splendor played out before her like a vision. Servants at the ready stood in the tens of thousands, willing to please their queen. All she had to do was leave this place, now, and bring back the knowledge Mitcheio had taught her to control. Now she could truly evolve into the daughter of darkness she was intended to be.

“No,” she thought. “I have a choice, and its mine to make.” She shuddered as an inner battle raged within her mind, two temptations dancing before her. If she left the guild now, she would be doing the same thing that brought on trouble. The thing was, Gladius, and his sickening crew of fifty-nine peasants, paled in comparison in what would follow should she succumb to the temptations. Wherever she went, whatever she did, she knew she was truly a monster. But, what kind of monster was she? It was at this point, she realized a truth. Wherever she went, wherever she stayed, wherever she concealed herself, chaos would ensue. No matter how powerful the pool of allies grew about her, they, even Mitcheio, could not be there to save her every time. Eventually, she would hurt them, merely by the being she was. As well, innocent people would always be caught in the crossfire and struck down. It was unavoidable. Every time she made a choice, even a correct one, bad things happened, and she was the cause of it.

“I almost killed people tonight,” she lamented. “Death follows me wherever I go, as if I am a Herald of destruction.” Standing, she looked back at the door that would give her freedom. Her tomb called to her. Raven felt so tired. If she could only get back to her resting place, she could be free to hide away from the cares of the world. Her motives for returning to that dark existence melted away, replaced by a sinister feeling. All she had to do was walk, leave, retreat from this guild to find the answers. If she could get away, a deeper belonging could be forged.

The feeling to go back, burned within her as a growing flame. Shuddering at her thoughts, Raven thought of the oath she had made to the King she now called brother . . . of her covenant with Vannar. Tears of regret began to stream Raven’s face as she struggled.

“A thousand years of building, and preparation wasted?” Cynically, Raven laughed, as if that was funny. “I have a mother and a brother now.” Again she laughed, her voice beginning to sound unnatural – so unlike herself. Disturbed, she raised her other hand, gripping the side of her head.

“Mitcheio,” she whispered, “I need you. I don’t know what to think anymore.” Approaching the door, she twisted the handle, deciding she would flee the guild and go back to

her tomb. Opening the door revealed her mentor, calm as ever.

“I do,” Mitcheio replied. For a long moment, the Witch stared at Raven with no visible expression. “Come with me.” Mitcheio turned and headed back into her personal chambers. Raven followed, suddenly terrified. Once inside, she stood still, not daring to speak or move. After a few moments, the Guild Master pointed at her.

“Three spells, I will instill within you. You will be able to cast them as I can, but only once. Just will them to be with your mind, and they will happen. You say you feel the call to return to your tomb, as you call it. However, counsel I give you to be on your guard. I believe a being of great power is attempting to bring you back into the Underworld. I know you feel its tempting lure, and I know why.” Raven looked in earnest at her mentor.

“Why?” Mitcheio neared, placing a finger on the side of Raven's left temple.

“They want this figment to fulfill their goal. They don't love you like I do, Raven. They would use you to their own desire.” Like the bitter-cold of hoarfrost, a dark despair seeped into Raven. Raising a hand to the center of her chest, Raven struggled to keep her breathing steady.

“Then, I am a monster,” she hissed. Mitcheio quickly took Raven's head in both her hands and gazed deep into her eyes. Her next words shocked Raven.

“True. You have the traits and abilities for inflicting terror. I have a question: What were you before you gave yourself such a judgement? A monster? I know you were not. Think, Raven, think. What were you?” Crystal tears began to escape Raven's eyes as she struggled to answer.

“Figment, waiting for a chance to prove myself,” she whispered, her chin beginning to quiver.

“Exactly! And what do you want to be, specifically?” Raven struggled with the answer for a while, then gave up on any decision she might conjure.

“I don't know, mother. I'm so confused. I didn't have to let all those souls free. I didn't want to. I could have multiplied my power a hundred-fold. The energy of their essence would have given me great advantage. Truth is, I want power.”

“Then, Raven, why did you not consume them?” Raven laughed, sounding hoarse and hollow.

“They were once living beings, who now needed to move on to the next stage of their journey. Who was I to decide their fate? I could not extinguish them . . . undo their souls.” Mitcheio smiled and ran a hand over her hair. It felt so good, she did not want her to stop. Her mother had only frisked and beat her, hoping to find something valuable. The memory of them lay mingled with the horrific vision of two long-since-dead carcasses.

“Raven, come back to me. Let not your mind wander in death and woe. The souls, Raven, why would you do that for them? Why would you release them?” Raven struggled through a dozen answers, but only came up with one truth. Taking a deep breath, she looked at Mitcheio,

bursting into tears.

“Because, feeling those souls, I instantly came to love them.”

“Exactly, Raven, exactly! Your love for life aided them in a hopeless situation. They existed within an ever-constant state of chaos and horror. Raven, even with a heart that no longer beats, you have a heart of gold. Don’t you see what I’m telling you?” A single tear ran slowly down from her mentor's left eye. “Raven, relish in what you have accomplished, and stop dwelling on so much negative. I'll say it again: You have freed so many hopeless situations, and set them on a course to their rightful destination.” Raven had never thought of it this way. But, as she listened to Mitcheio, she wondered what the other side would say. She felt warm and pulled at her collar to get cool air to her skin.

“Thank you.” Raven looked deep into her eyes. “I wish I had a Guardian like yours.” Mitcheio began to gently smooth Raven’s hair back. As she did, Raven closed her eyes, once again absorbing all the tenderness she was giving.

Raven began to feel sweat strickle down her back. With a sigh, she parted from Mitcheio and knelt down upon the cured skin of the Morgel Lion Mane, suddenly terrified at what was about to happen. Mitcheio knelt close by, throwing Raven a worried look.

“Raven, hear my words. I want to show you something that few of my order are ever privileged to see and experience. Close your eyes Raven, close your eyes. At that moment, the door opened of its own accord, and Chrysalis walked into the room.

“I heard your call, mother. Here I am.” Dennik was with her, noticing Raven was holding her mid-section and sweating profusely. She moaned, and would have faltered if not for Dennik, trembling by the power of his Guardianship. Raven looked over her shoulder with a look of regret and deep sympathy.

“I am to do this alone, Dennik. Do not interfere.” Instantly, her Guardian withdrew from aiding Chrysalis, his hands trembling. Mitcheio looked at Chrysalis.

“I counsel you to release your Guardian. He has no part to play in this, and would surely be lost.” Chrysalis looked at Dennik, who harbored a look of shock, mingled with hope. It didn’t matter. She knew what was about to happen, and Dennik, if he followed, would be in the worst possible danger for a man without the gift of Essence.

“Thank you Dennik. I hold your Guardian’s Oath fulfilled. I release you as my Guardian.” She beheld the names on Dennik’s robes fade away, leaving the borders solid black once again, signifying he was no longer her protector, and she no longer his Ward. Staggering, he caught himself on the frame of the open door, composed himself, then bowed.

“May the hand of Vannar uphold you.” In return, Chrysalis threw him a grin, then staggered as pain struck her, flowing unmercifully through her, driving her to her knees. Gritting her teeth, Chrysalis looked up to him.

“You better send me a wedding invitation,” she threatened, she added, paling at the

growing pain within. At a quick wave from Mitcheio, Dennik turned and left the room, looking back one last time before Mitcheio motioned to the door, which slammed shut on him.

“Now, focus together, as you naturally do. Help Raven get through this by lending your strength to her.” Looking to Raven, Chrysalis’s hair snaked up over her right shoulder as Raven’s hair moved to meet her’s, both quickly joining together and illuminating.

Raven felt bolstered in strength as something within her tore. Gripping her chest, Raven felt as though an arrow had pierced her heart. Then, as quickly as it began, it ended, leaving her doubled over in pain. This one had been quick, though intense.

“I hope that was the last time. I don’t know if I can take anymore of this,” she panted. Mitcheio pulled Raven into her arms and rocked her back and forth for a time in silence as Chrysalis’s hair slowly parted from Raven’s on its own accord.

“Thank you for saving my life, mother. If not for you, I would no longer be.” Mitcheio smiled and squeezed Raven tight.

“I was fortunate enough to be in the right place, at the right time. You are most welcome, daughter. Now, as I told you, I am going to show you something . . . gift you with magic. You will feel the power of five spells. These are the ones I offer. Choose three. Are you ready?” Raven looked up, sweating still.

“Yes.”

Mitcheio began a short chant, whispering strange words. As she did, her eyes slowly changed, becoming like that of a mirror. Looking into her eyes, Raven beheld her own reflection, yet the Raven within her mother’s eyes was not mimicking her, as does a mirror. Curiously, she watched herself looking over an unrolled parchment, a scroll containing five spells.

Maelstrom  
Permanent Spell  
Plane Travel  
Summon  
Teleport

Looking upon each spell, Raven perceived and knew them as if they were but common knowledge.

“These are ascended spells, mother.” With her forefinger, Mitcheio touched Raven’s forehead.

“Incartunos hessura invocanis,” she whispered. Raven felt as though she could suddenly take the magic in the scrolls before her by simply willing it to be.

“Merely speak the spell names aloud, and they will distill within you. After you know them, speak, or will them to be, and they will come to life as if you had cast them. Hurry now.” With shaking hands, Raven took up the scroll she saw before her, but could no longer read them, her hands shook so badly. Seeing herself struggling, Chrysalis quickly neared and steadied Raven's hands so the spells could be more clearly discerned. Raven looked the five spells over as blood began seeping from her eyes.

“Teleport, Teleport, Plane Travel,” she cried out, feeling as though her chest was being torn. Instantly the scroll burned to ashes without a visible flame. As the last shreds of it consumed, she was herself once more, without pain. Looking up, she held Mitcheio's fading eyes as Chrysalis embraced her.

“Mother, I'm scared,” was the last thing she said before finding herself at the end of a tunnel. Walking out from the tunnel, both she and Chrysalis came before a runed-covered, Iron-wood door, set into a glyphed archway of stone.

Chrysalis let go of Raven and slowly stood, gazing at the doors. With considerable effort, Raven regained her feet. Chrysalis looked at her, the corner of her mouth forming a delicate smile

“You look as though you have been beaten.” Brushing herself off, she took in a few slow breaths, feeling her strength returning.

“I feel like it, but I’ll be fine. I should get a trench coat, like my husband’s, so I can carry too many clothes to use,” she jested. She looked at a set of great doors before her. “How do I get in?” Chrysalis gently ran a delicate hand over the runes. “Maybe push it open? It could be that simple, but I doubt it.” Together, they held out their hands, and as they did, their eyes waxed gold. To Raven’s surprise, the doors cracked, then slowly opened inward, revealing a sight beyond description. As the doors opened, she beheld a pathway that snaked through mounds of gold and gems and treasure. Both girls eyes widened in amazement at the scene before them.

“Would you feast your eyes on that, Chrysalis? Do you know what you could have with this kind of wealth?” Chrysalis briefly smiled, taking it all in.

“A castle eerie amidst the crystal peaks of Scry`Call. I would set up at the uppermost peak of Sky`Shrine,” she replied. Throwing Raven a look of sudden doubt, she shook her head, even as Raven stepped forward.

“Something tells me not to touch anything here. It is set here for a reason. Think about it – treasure in all its abundance. You see that Crystal Ball over there?” Raven said, pointing. Chrysalis closed her eyes and stepped up beside Raven.

“That is a trap, or I’m a fool,” the beautiful Sagen Gleighdor whispered. Raven looked around, utterly astounded.

“I mean, look at all the sets of armor, and those shields!”

“And the racks of weapons,” Chrysalis added, “begging me take one. Something is going on here.” Raven froze, seeing the most brilliant pile of radiance she had never imagined in all her life.

“This is cruel,” she grumped.

“Don’t do it,” Chrysalis warned, as she looked upon a great pile of diamonds mixed with flawless pearls of many colours. The mound was so high, it blocked the view of the cavern roof and beyond. As the two entered in, they did not see the doors behind them faded away to be replaced by natural cave stone.

Slowly walking to the radiant mountain of splendor, Chrysalis and Raven stopped. Opening her eyes, Chrysalis looked at Raven as Raven turned her attention to Chrysalis. Both had an expression of astonishment etched into their faces. Looking both ways, the mountainous piles of wealth stretched out of sight both ways, fading into obscurity.

“Well,” Raven said, “there seems no way around it. We might as well go over it. But

don't touch it." Chrysalis looked at Raven.

"What do we do then? Fly? It reaches up to the top of the cavern." Raven pointed to the right.

"I have an idea. You go right, I'll go left. Meet back here."

"Right," Chrysalis agreed. They both turned away, taking flight in opposite directions, and followed its border, but to no avail. The ceiling-high mound of treasure did not end. After a time, they both returned, Chrysalis panting heavily. Raven pointed at Chrysalis.

"That body gets tired easy." An idea came to Raven's mind. Both girls moved close, and as they did, their hair snaked together, each strand connecting with another of the opposite shade. Nothing happened.

"Well, I was sent here for a reason, so I can't leave until I figure this out. Hmmm, what about the runes on the doorway?" she pondered. "I should take a look at those. Maybe they will give me a clue." Raven and Chrysalis turned back, only to discover they were gone. Placing a hand on the rock, Raven frowned.

"Well, this wasn't here before," Chrysalis whispered, rather taken back. As she did so, she looked to Raven and frowned.

"Raven, what is the matter?" Startled by Chrysalis's question, Raven threw Chrysalis a panicked stare. "Why ask, when I should know? Our connection is severed!" Raven gasped as a warmth spread into her mid-section, just as it did before leaving Mitcheio.

"I think, Chrysalis, I think, oh no, not again! Will this never stop?" Worried, Chrysalis put an arm about Raven, then abruptly laughed.

"I'm giving myself comfort. How pathetic. Straightening with great difficulty, Raven looked up.

"This is hard to do. Please help me, holy Vannar! Thy Knight needs thy help!" She waited, but nothing happened. Chrysalis held out a hand.

"Hold my hand, maybe it will ease the burden a little." Raven looked at her hand, then suddenly doubled over in agony

"Pain!" she screamed, pushing Chrysalis's hand away in shock. Raven knelt, stripping her leather clothes off. As she removed her skin armor, Chrysalis shook her head.

"What are you doing?" The only answer Raven gave her was a snarl, causing the Sagen Gleighdor to retreat a step, her eyes widening in abrupt trepidation.

"Taking precautions. Chrysalis, if you left right now, you might become a living soul! Raven's eyes bled the color of grey. Chrysalis shook her head.

"No, we are Knights of Vannar. We do not run away." Raven's jaw snapped.

"Then why did you recoil from me?" Feeling fear like never before, Chrysalis bent her focus upon Raven, took a deep breath, then lunged at Raven, embraced her tight . . . and screamed. The moment she made contact, a terrible pain shot through her entire body. As she

screamed in torment, their hair came together and fused at the ends, each strand illuminating with that golden light. Amidst indescribable pain, Raven grinned, bearing her fangs.

“Chrysalis,” she managed to yell, “it gets easier. Bear with it. Embrace it as if it were your only child. Her words did little good as Chrysalis broke away. Not knowing what else to do, Raven tackled her and held on tight.

The evolution occurring, and the death pains it brought on, mingled with the mortal body of the Sagen Gleighdor. Chrysalis was physically vulnerable to the deep rending, inner pain which struck her body with devastating impact. In sudden shock, Chrysalis screamed in silent torture as her eyes lost their amethyst-blue brilliance, shading to gray.

“Hang on Chrysalis, hang on!” Raven snarled, recalling the first time this happened to her. She had died without dying, and the pain of that first instance still pained her. That was when she no longer needed to breath. She did not wish this on her worst enemy, well except one, and he had been thrust into an eternal thousand year time loop by Mitcheio.

Raven held Chrysalis tight, so she could not escape, even as her other self begged for mercy, pleading with Raven to let her go. Raven suddenly wept in bitterness, realizing just how much torture Chrysalis was experiencing.

“I’m so sorry Chrysalis! Darkness will forever be our light!” Chrysalis convulsed, then doubled her effort to be free of Raven.

“Please, please, we are Vannar’s Knights. Doesn’t this mean anything to you? Your oath, Raven!” Raven wept and desperately looked up to the cavern’s ceiling as Chrysalis’s pleaded with her in vain.

“You know the intent of my stilled heart. Make it not cold again. At least give me - us - a chance to know the dark from the light. Even now, they call to me. Am I worthy of being called a Knight of Vannar?” She gasped and shuddered as hand-length spines protruded from her backbone, piercing out through her flesh below her neck and extending to the base of her back. From the bottom of her spine a long tail extended, set with a silver, hollowed barb. Adjusting her hold on Chrysalis, Raven looked and saw no such tail. What she did see were silver, razor-sharp talons at the end of every finger and thumb of her hands.

“My feathers!” Chrysalis screamed in dismay as they began to fall one by one to the great cavern's floor, combusting as they fell, each consuming just before making contact with the ground.

“Wait,” Raven encouraged Chrysalis. “Watch!” As each feather fell from her wings, another quickly grew, replaced by snow-white feathers once again. Chrysalis cried out in dismay, and went still. Slowly releasing her, Raven stood and stepped back as Chrysalis slowly stood, her eyes widening in sudden wonder. Looking at her own hands, she shook her head in disbelief.

“Now fly!” Raven cried. “Go, go!” she urged her other self. “Not too high!” Chrysalis

beat her wings once and easily lifted from the ground.

“What is this?” she sobbed. “My wings are like yours!” Touching down, she dropped to her knees, and hung her head, trying to catch her breath as she fought her emotions under control. As she rested, she wiped her face, then wrung a good amount of sweat from her hair without using her hands. Suddenly curious, she slashed the path with a single swipe of her wing, leaving a deep slash in the stone. Raven narrowed her eyes, a slight smile playing across her face.

“That’s exactly what I did. Chrysalis, if we are destined remain apart, you must keep this a perfect secret.” Chrysalis gave Raven an inquisitive look.

“Why?” Raven instantly replied.

“Because they, the Vuolg, would take us and bend us to their will.” Raven turned her back on Chrysalis, retracting her spines instinctively.

“Look close at my back. Do you see these scars? Chrysalis neared and squinted.

“Yes.” Raven shuddered.

“They found me in the Vermillion Forest. There were seven of them. They tied me to the roots of a tree and whipped me. The first stuck me once, the second one struck me three times, the third one lashed me six times, the fourth laid ten scars across my flesh, the fifth calmly, silently *gifted* me with fifteen strikes, the sixth gave me twenty-one more, and the seventh, twenty-eight, all for a grand total of eighty-four lashings.” Reaching as far as she could over her shoulders, Raven felt the sting of that day, though not half as bad. Each stripe on her back, though faded, still burned. With a look of sympathy, Chrysalis embraced Raven tight, suddenly an emotional wreck. Silently she held her other self for the longest while before letting her go.

“Chrysalis, I would not have survived, but for the vampiric virus flowing in me.” Raven snapped her teeth and growled. “Then, they untied me and simply walked away. It was as if they were on a simple stroll . . . no emotion . . . no hate . . . no threats. It was like they had nothing better to do. Each had a band of black-gold, and a thumb-sized, intricate, red tattoo on the inside of their right forearm. They came, they went. Though the burning has never stopped, it has diminished considerably. I think I’ve gotten used to the pain, since it’s always there.” Chrysalis’s eyes widened.

“Raven, I’ve felt it as well, though not as acute. I had no idea that was the cause of it. I’m so sorry. I’m so very sorry. Let’s kill those seven; make them pay for what they’ve done! We should go back and find more of them . . . make them suffer!” the usual gentle-spirited Sagen Gleighdor fumed.

Never had Raven seen Chrysalis display such anger. It was as if she was trying to be enraged for the first time, and getting the facial expressions and body language wrong. Still, she really was mad. It was almost funny, yet not. Her anger was real, even if she wasn’t scary.

“Chrysalis, there are thousands of them. They are a mighty nation. How do you expect just the two of us to do such a thing, let alone escape?” Chrysalis flipped her white hair back, giving Raven a not so convincing look.

“Mother gave you three spells.”

“I – I thought she blocked you from seeing that?”

“She did not,” Chrysalis stated.

“Well, you are right. Maybe she should give you three spells as well. We can hope. Then we could cause some serious mischief among those handsome, dark-skinned Vuolg.” Chrysalis laughed.

“You have a crush on the one that beat you first, don’t you?” Raven clicked her tongue at the Sagen Gleighdor.

“Yeah, I sure do. I can’t wait to see him again.” Chrysalis laughed.

“I bet when you see him you are going to give him a wonderful kiss.” Raven burst out laughing.

“He’s bones! I did find them, all seven. They paid for what they did, but it would give me great pleasure to hunt others.” Raven entertained the idea, and as she did, the spines down the center of her back extended. Quieting, Chrysalis looked at them. She then took up Raven’s tail and looked at the silver, hollow stinger, causing Raven to stiffen. Pulling her lengthy tail out of Chrysalis’s hand, she wrapped it about her waist and walked over to her clothing. Before slipping into her skin armor, Raven cautiously exposed her back and spines to Chrysalis.

“These are lethal, or I’m a fool. See how they are hollow?” Chrysalis looked at them closely.

“Yes.” Reaching out, Chrysalis moved as if to touch them, but Raven moved away, keeping her from making contact.

“Don’t play with them. Our feathers are safe, if we so choose not to hurt another, but these spines, and the poison of my tail, I cannot say.” Raven sighed at the look her other self gave her. “Chrysalis, into you, I gave all the good – my dreams and hopes, mercy, kindness, and everything else I wished to keep. I had plan. Artemis set me straight on that, and so I fled from that design.” Sighing heavily, Raven mentally pictured her husband.

“Through his wise counsel and support, I have abandoned such a plan. Now my plan is so much different, so much deeper, so much darker.” Retracting her spines, Raven donned her armor, slipped back into her leathers. Once she was dressed, Raven neared Chrysalis.

“Well, come what may, we are going to always be together, you and I. I don’t want anything less than that. Artemis has gotten used to you, I’ve noticed. He highly fancies you. I’ve known that since the moment I broke out of that stone box they tried to seal me in. Yes, he is very pleased with you.” Raven gave Chrysalis a knowing look, causing her to blush.

“I know you did, but I am you, Raven, and you are me. Have you noticed, here, we are

separate? We are not just talking ourselves, like we usually do.” Raven shook her head, suddenly smiling from ear to ear, as if thinking something funny.

“What, what are you thinking?” Chrysalis pressed.

“If I was a stranger, listening to you, I would think you mad. Once we are out of here, this will end, and I’ll be talking to myself again. When I am in public, I have to play the part. If others only knew, they would probably think I’m insane.” Chrysalis put a hand to her mouth, stifling a laugh.

“You are insane, Karritch.” Raven’s jaw dropped in mock offense, and they both burst out laughing. After a few moments, Raven was steadily filled with longing and hope.

“You are my only hope for the future. I cannot risk you for any reason. I would rather be mortal again, and age, rather than my line end. That is what scares me the most. You know, Chrysalis, if you are faithful to your purpose as a Knight of Vannar, if you keep to this one path without err, you will be granted independent life.” Chrysalis smiled excitedly.

“Chrysalis means something special.”

“That is why I gave you that particular name.”

“What does it mean?” Chrysalis asked, suddenly eager.

“Metamorphosis, like when a caterpillar spins a cocoon about itself, only to emerge as a butterfly.” Chrysalis liked the idea.

“You mean I will change?”

“For the better, yes. You will be glorious, Chrysalis, as I diminish. I have one great hope of surviving my transformation, but it is only a fleeting hope. Chrysalis, I have lived a very hard and pain-filled life. I am so tired. Thus, I do all the good I can before the end.” Chrysalis frowned.

“But, Raven, what would I do without you? We are one. Why, after so long, and through so many trials, would you die?” Weaving Chrysalis’s fingers through her own, Raven smiled.

“You see me?” Chrysalis nodded, yet Raven shook her head.

“You see me as a Soul`Reaver, who steals souls. My tail and spines,” she began weeping black tears without emotion. “My heart is still, though it warms me now, blessed by Vannar’s power. I am also blessed by the Essence of Eternity. I think I get it now. I’m just frightened, scared, just as that little girl was so long ago, the one who was locked in her room by parents who forgot they loved her . . . loved me. I’m remembering more than I can bear. A thousand years, and it still hurts to remember my wasted years as a four year old, desperately yearning and trying to please her parents. All that little Karritch Gleighdor received in return was so many heartaches. Even now, it hurts.” Chrysalis pulled her hands away, stepped back, and pointed at Raven, laughing at her.

“Fool Karritch! Do you not remember the promise we were given by the King, when Vannar spoke through him? Do you doubt the power of the Jahtha we serve?” Raven thought

about it for a moment, then shook her head. She saw what this Sagen Gleighdor was getting at, and it pierced her heart with a sudden shame.

“No. I just forget so easily. Thank you for reminding me.” Chrysalis shook a finger at Raven.

“You’re welcome, Raven, but you are not getting off the hook so easily, especially after the crap you just spewed in my face. Get your head on straight, and I will support you here, now. Once we leave, you need to remember my words. Do you get it?” Raven struggled with her thoughts for a few moments, fighting a conflict within.

“Chrysalis, I have a work to do. A work that I fear will bring the Second Age of War crashing down on the realm we live in.” Chrysalis narrowed her eyes at Raven, seeing a lack of direction and conviction in her other self. Sighing, she looked around.

“We are safe here. There are no prying eyes. If the act you are about to commit is dangerous, and will risk the safety of your friends and husband, then why do it? Raven, by this conversation, I believe I know what you intend to do. Do you realize what they will tempt you with?” Sobered by the question, Raven looked around, taking in all the treasure and wealth in sight.

“Yes, I do,” she whispered.

“And you are willing to risk that? How could you possibly resist? You know the inner workings of Gaunten, the guild. Why would you try this? You are a Karritch Gleighdor, a species filled with the lust for power and riches. You are too easily susceptible to temptation. Do you want to join them? Do you want us to die?” Raven sighed heavily.

“I was prepared - from the very beginning - for this very thing. I have sacrificed my all to become the Gorgonoth. You were my escape; my safety net.” Chrysalis drew her blade on Raven and advanced. Placing the tip of her sword to Ravens chest, she pressed it in with no gentleness. Rather surprised, Raven looked down at the tip of the blade set against her.

“It won't work. If it did, you would be doing the greatest service of my undead life. You need to decapitate me, then burn my body with holy fire. Do you have any?”

“Liar,” Chrysalis wept. I could scatter your remains to the four corners of Utaemia, prolong your rise for countless Ages.” Raven laughed.

“They would have one less ally to work with. Still, the enemy would advance. Chrysalis, they are going to wage a war against the earthen plane. What chance do you think these peasants have? They know nothing more than a pitchfork, a hoe and digging in the dirt strewn with animal feces. They will be cut down like the wheat they harvest every season.” Raven gripped the sharp of Chrysalis’s blade and raised it to her neck.

“Do it,” Raven begged without any emotion in her voice. Chrysalis shook her head in disbelief.

“You don’t even care for them? These peasants, as you call them, need us, and we need

them.” Raven stared until the white-haired, amethyst-eyed girl of surpassing beauty lowered her blade, then sheathed it. Throwing her arms around Raven’s neck, she began to plead with her.

“Return to me. Please, return to me. We have other work to do. Promise me you will come back!” Raven embraced Chrysalis tight.

“Oh, I plan on it. But you need to know my return will be as a forerunner of war.” In silence, Chrysalis lamented, desperately squeezing her other self. “At that point, Chrysalis slowly let Raven go, staring into the void of her eyes as if looking for something.

“Upon my return, you and I will have much work to do. I hate them Chrysalis. With all that is left of my un-beating heart, I hate them. They need to be hunted. They are lessers.” Chrysalis’s mouth twitched.

“You know so much more than you let on to Mitcheio, Artemis and the King. Why don’t you just tell them?”

“Then they would over prepare, and I would not want my forces depleted unnecessarily. My forerunners of doom would take too many casualties. If my legion was cut down, it could very well spoil the tide against me. I would not have my own destroyed. With all my un-beating heart, I want you to know something.” Reaching up, Chrysalis gently smooth out Raven’s hair with a trembling hand, a look of disbelief carving into her face.

“I’m sorry I drew my blade on you.” Raven waved a hand between them, then brushed the back of her hand over Chrysalis’s cheek.

“Think nothing of it. Forgive me for being so hard headed,” Raven soothed her other self.

“So what do you want me to know?” Chrysalis asked.

“Because I was raised and beat by peasants - robbed by them - they will suffer and die at my hands, just as the Book of Lies stated. I will have my revenge on a society that could have raised me to be naturally loyal to them. I would have been their greatest ally.” Raven moved slowly back and knelt in mediation, ignoring Chrysalis’s horrified expression.

“I think I’m going mad,” Raven whispered as Chrysalis knelt before her, placing a gentle hand on Raven’s forearm. Raven rested a hand upon Chrysalis’s.

“Vannar help me, please,” both girls whispered in utter desperation.

A vibration ran throughout the massive cave, disturbing the mountain of precious coins and gems which lay before Raven and Chrysalis. Chrysalis moved close to Raven, slipping her hand into hers' in abrupt fear and doubt. Raven looked down at their joined hands, a slight grin playing across her lips.

“Do not fear,” she whispered as the massive mound before them suddenly parted to reveal two great dragons. One dragon was far beyond the shade of night, the other golden, with a sheen of brilliance that made Chrysalis blink back sudden tears. Both dragons spread their wings out, stretching as they shook their heads, then looked down upon the girls in silence for a time, unmoving, as if they were mere living statues. At length, though her mouth did not move, the Golden Dragon broke the silence, speaking with the voice of a female.

“This is a unique situation. The white haired one has not been to El`Anara, yet the dark one has. It is interesting that both have the same history and soul. Both have been to the heart of the Kithara. Interesting.” Chrysalis felt Raven grip her arm, though she did not look away from the dragons.

“Fear them not,” Raven whispered in awe, “for these are the embodiment of the Essence of Eternity. One, the dark of the Essence, the other, the light.” Chrysalis marvelled at her void of memory concerning this place, for Raven and she were each, again, one half of one living soul. The Black Dragon shifted, sending a wave of coins flowing down either side of it, and raised its massive wings.

“Fear and wonder not Chrysalis, for all things done and said in our presence, are done and said as if you and Raven are independent souls.” The Gold Dragon looked upon the two. Locking her gaze upon Raven, she froze, suddenly still, as if turned to stone.

“War is at our doors, yeah at our very feet. Though our enemies may seem our greatest foes, they can evolve to confederacy. There be one with you who will aid in the turning of this terrible tide, whether from Wardenoth Citadel, or against it. The action of one will earn her the label of traitor by the one who once stood as a pillar of strength.” Chrysalis looked at Raven, terror filling her as Raven’s eyes began to emanate darkness in the form of smoke that trailed steadily up her brows, through her hair and into the air above. Still, Chrysalis did not let go of Raven.

The Black Dragon listened carefully to the Golden Dragon, thoroughly fixed on her words. When she was finished, he then spoke, turning his eye to the two girls.

“Hatchlings, do not separate from each other. Strength flows when you remain together. Raven, I know it is your plan to do this deed alone, but stay your hand. For by your decision the onslaught that may ensue could very well be against the light. If you fall to temptation, an Age of War more vicious than the first will ensue. Raven, a lone knight cannot win a war. Again, I counsel you to stay together, for the Second Age of War has been in the works since the first,

when Talc`Eerie was shattered throughout all of Utaemia.” The Golden Dragon nodded.

“Tha`Shuril speaks true. Do you have questions for us, children?” Chrysalis wiped her eyes, taking courage, and stepped forth, drawing the attention of both dragons as she manoeuvred through the wealth beneath her, not daring to touch even a single coin. Desperately, she desired not to invoke the wrath of the ancient dragons.

“No longer concern yourself with the gold and gems, and the priceless things you see. These riches represent the greed and avarice of many who fail the test of gaining admittance to El`Anara. You may touch them now, as you have already passed the test of the heart. Be not afraid my friends. Indeed, you may take what wealth you can carry. Use it for good.”

Chrysalis timidly made her way up to stand before the Eldar Golden Dragon. She felt her whole body shaking, as if she was standing before, before . . . an executioner. Only this dragon had told them not to fear, instilling in her a more sure confidence. Still, the size and ferocity of this most ancient of dragons planted a profound terror in her she could not overcome. She could be easily ended.

“Be not afraid, Chrysalis, for we are the embodiment of the power you possess. You need not fear us. Please, come.” The Golden Dragon observed her with growing interest as Chrysalis hesitantly neared.

“You are Gleighdor, kin of the Sagen breed, and are very beautiful. I would wager the apple did not fall far from the tree when you were brought into this world. Was she as beautiful as you? Did she walk with the same grace as do you?” Chrysalis nervously smiled, flattered.

“I don`t remember her.” The Great Golden Dragon pondered her answer for a moment.

“If you could remember, would it help your situation?” Chrysalis thought for only a brief moment.

“No, it was too long ago. I would only be seeing another of my kind. It would hinder the work I have to do.” Thoughtfully, the great golden dragon looked upon her.

“What work is that?” Chrysalis looked back at Raven, who looked at her, stone-faced and quiet, unmoving. “Is she your work?” Chrysalis shook her head.

“No, we are our work.”

“Expound on ‘our work’.” Chrysalis sighed heavily, and began telling her tale – the complete story – up until the present. Raven then recited her story as well. When she finished her tale, there was silence between the dragons. At length, Raven stepped forward and laid a hand upon the arm of the Black Dragon. As she did, it moved its great head, its abyss-like eyes falling upon her. As terror, worse than any she had ever experienced, seized upon her. Tightening her grip upon the great arm of the dragon, Raven looked into the eyes of Tha`Shuril, letting go the one chance she had to flee. Within its eyes, Raven saw her own death . . . and ignored it. The question she had was far too important to simply run away, or hide from.

“Tha`Shuril, am I a monster?” The Golden Dragon glanced at Tha`Shuril, The Black, as

if startled. The Black Dragon, seeing the sudden emotion of the Golden Dragon, bent close to Raven.

“Did you touch the treasure?” he asked.

“No.”

“Did you find and give Artemis a Storing Sack?”

“Yes.”

“Even after he forgave the debt?”

“Yes.”

“When you nigh beat him unto death in the Chamber of Pools, did he forgive you?”

“Yes.”

“When you spent your dark years in your first tomb, when you were whipped, beaten, tortured and humiliated, nearly broken, and when you believed what they wanted you to believe, what did you do?” Raven staggered, repulsed at the memories of what she had become. Tha`Shurin’s questions struck her full in the heart, causing her to fall to her knees, forcing her to recall more than she ever wanted to.

“They earned their reward,” she cried out, snapping her teeth as though the throats of the Vuolg were within striking range. “Am I a monster? Is my chance at humanity lost?” Tha`Shuril looked at Tha`Shurin, then turned to Raven and inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of not only her body, but her spirit and mind. As he did this, Raven clung to him desperately, yearning for an answer.

“Your thoughts are clear to me, Raven, Soul`Reaver, Gorgonoth. Betrayal flows through you as the darkness that ascends from your eyes.” Realizing what the Black Dragon was implying, Raven shook her head.

“My question yet remains. Am I a monster? In the end, when all is said and done, am I to be cast down?” Raven then confessed the darkness of her deeds, holding back nothing. Chrysalis had an expression of revulsion and horror on her face as Raven cried out her deeds to Tha`Shuril; terrible to hear.

Chrysalis could not believe what Raven was confessing. Tha`Shuril and Tha`Shurin bowed their heads in silence as Raven held nothing back but the truth. After a long while, and as Chrysalis shrank away from Raven, Tha`Shuril broke a long silence.

“Raven, did not the holy King mantle you a Knight of Vannar, and place you under the oath and influence of Vannar himself?”

“Yes,” she managed to spit out.

“Raven, monsters are born of creatures who willingly destroy.” Raven thought about it.

“Then what of Selman VanDrake and Tha`Shealin? The Black Dragon stirred, shifting uneasily at the true name of Zane, the Queen of all Evil Dragons.

“I will not inquire as to how you learned of those two, for vast are the possibilities of a

thousand years. Raven, she was never put in check until the Deth`Knell came into her life.” Tha`Shurin, The Gold Dragon, looked at The Black Dragon. Becoming still, Tha`Shuril became silent, letting Tha`Shurin speak.

“We are the ones who ask questions. We are never questioned. Still, we see you harbor many unanswered mysteries of your own. We accept that. On this occasion, we will answer as we may. Then, you must answer ours as best you can. Is this fair?” Simultaneously, Chrysalis and Raven agreed. The Golden Dragon continued.

“Chrysalis, you will be first.” Chrysalis thought about what she had heard, and what she most desperately yearned for. She also feared she might end up knowing too much, which could alter the future. She neared the Golden Dragon and whispered.

“Will Raven die?”

“Hard to see, the future,” the dragon whispered in return. “There are many ways to die, and death is not an event bound only to the body. The mind and spirit are susceptible to death, as is the metaphysical. I know why you have been given the name you have. Raven hopes to one day give you all her soul. Then she will be one with oblivion. Chrysalis, things change. Do not give up hope. Have you noticed the differences between the both of you now? Raven has no idea what we speak of. She is deaf to our conversation. I could be wrong, but there have been growing instances in which you have had your differences. She is trying to create a separation in preparation for your final evolution.” Chrysalis layed her head against the mighty Golden Dragon, Tha`Shurin. Tha`Shuril, the Black Dragon shifted uneasily, watching Chrysalis as if he were about to lunge.

“I’m glad I’m here Tha`Shurin. You instill in me a great belonging.” The Golden Dragon glanced at the Black Dragon.

“Tha`Shuril is my opposite. He is as protective of me, as I am of him. We never knew a beginning, and unlike you, we will never know an end. We are the light and the dark of the gift you both possess, as rare as it is. He is the dark side of the light; I am the light side of the dark.”

“Where did El`Anara come from?” Both dragons let out a short breath, signifying a complicated answer. Tha`Shuril looked back at the great, shimmering doors behind her.

“Beyond lies the golden road. Many who enter therein become hopelessly lost, or become mad and willingly lose themselves,” she stated, glancing at Raven. “Wings are of no use off the golden road. Do not attempt it. Tha`Shuril looked at the doors, then at Raven, who did not move, frozen as if in stasis.

“Raven has been there, so your chance of reaching Al`Enara is more sure. Even though she has successfully travelled into that blessed ream, this does not ensure a successful journey for the both of you . . . especially you, Figment.” Crushed, Chrysalis lowered her head.

“Would you go back if you were I?”

“No,” The Black Dragon stated without hesitation. “I would take the chance rather than

return to the place of my origin, as a Figment, to wait for unknown Ages before gaining the chance to be. No, I would pass through these gates. I do not directly answer your questions willingly, but Tha`Shuren has set the terms, and I will respect this.”

“If I fail?” Tha`Shurin looked down upon Chrysalis, pity filling her eyes.

“My young aspiring soul, is it better to wait as what you were, or live for a short span of time as something special?” Chrysalis kissed Tha`Shurin on the side of her great jaw, then threw her a tender, childlike smile. Tha`Shuril moved toward Chrysalis, its void-like eyes narrowing dangerously. The Gold Dragon blocked him quickly with her tail, barring his way.

“Mother, I wish to go to El`Anara. Will they accept one such as I?” She nodded, giving Tha`Shuril a warning glance, then lowered her tail.

“If you can find the city, of course they will. Now, I have a few questions for you. How much of the Essence of Eternity have you experienced?” Chrysalis thought for a moment.

“When Raven and I put the ends of our hair together, our power increases significantly. I can pull runes from the surface of objects with my finger. I evolve, just as Raven does, yet she is more advanced than I. My wings are as blades and cut into stone. That is all I can think of.” Tha`Shurin looked at Tha`Shuril, then down upon Raven.

“We have asked you many questions. But, I would ask you about these new attributes you have become.”

Raven suddenly began to move once again. She looked up at the great dark dragon, admiring him openly. Resting a hand on the tip of his bottom jaw, she began to caress the scales.

“My tail is toxin, as are my barbs. I am becoming that which I despise. I must take Chrysalis to El`Anara, so she can learn and grow, or all may be lost for her . . . for me.” Raven’s eyes suddenly became the color of blood. “Then I will be into the Vuolg Stronghold and join with them. Together we shall indeed perform the dance of death against our enemies.” Tha`Shuril looked at the other dragon, then to Chrysalis.

“What is to be done?”

“We must let them pass.” The Ancient Black Dragon shook its head, as the Golden Dragon sighed heavily, glaring at Raven.

“You do realize this will effect all of Utaemia, not just the Underworld and the Earthen Plane. Raven, do not force us to fight.”

“Tha`Shuril, it seems another Age of War may be upon us. Is it going to matter, the consequence of these two?” Resigning, the Black Dragon shifted carefully, its massive eye making Raven feel so very small.

“I will give you counsel in this matter, Raven. Will you receive it from me?” Raven looked at him with no expression, then nodded.

“First: You are nothing more than a Figment. You must embrace that reality and not be

offended by it. Second: No matter what Rynox, or his petty minions try to convince you of, no matter their promises or gifts, should they attempt to charm you with such, they will strive to warp the wisdom of your heart and the logic of your mind. Their promises and words are all based on deceit and lies. Third: Bide your time; be patient. Act like the Gorgonoth they intend you to be. Obey your master without question. With the Gorgonoth, there is no hesitation.” Tha`Shurin shifted, lessening the distance between he and Raven. “There is a way to detect a fully matured servant of the Vuolg King.” The Golden Dragon shifted uneasily, signifying she wished to speak. Raising its massive head, Tha`Shurin nodded once to her, then become still and silent.

“Tha`Shuril is right. The leader of the Vuolg will bring captives before you.” The Golden Dragon shuddered, openly repulsed by her own thoughts. “He will command you to devour their souls, then feast upon their bodies until only their screams yet linger within you. But, this is not the end of them. Rynox will covet those souls.” Raven bared her teeth.

“How will he get these souls from me?” Falling silent, Tha`Shuren, became openly disturbed. The Black Dragon shook its great mane.

“With a welcomed kiss. And that is not all he would have of you. In order to take them, you must be with him. And, at a certain time, you must deliver the Kiss of Souls to him. Raven, you must mean everything you do, or he will send you into his deepest pit, to suffer among others who have failed him. Can you do this and mean it?”

Chrysalis shuddered at the thought . . . the act. What horrified her more than anything was Raven’s instant reply.

“Yes. This is what I was created to do. What do I do next? Now?” Raven asked, chilling Chrysalis to the core of her being. The two dragons moved aside as the great doors began to open. As they opened, the girls beheld a golden road suspended in an endless blackness filled with stars.

“Chrysalis,” Raven called out softly, “come with me.” Chrysalis hesitantly followed as Raven passed between the great dragons, stepping out onto the golden road. Turning, she waited for Chrysalis.

“Tha`Shuril, Tha`Shurin, I will not fail.” The Black Dragon snorted.

“Then what you strive to achieve will play out, for good or ill, to the defence of the kingdom of light, or the strengthening of the kingdom of darkness. Farewell, Raven. I may meet you on the battle field. If I do, I hope you shine as a true Knight of Vannar. If not, we will dance, you and I.” Raven placed her right hand over her heart and bowed her head to the dragons as Chrysalis slipped through the closing gates.

The great gates sealed with a great boom as Chrysalis looked at Raven, pity and revulsion in her eyes. Raven turned and embraced her with all the love and energy of a most trusted kin.

“Chrysalis, trust me, we were made for this.” Wrapping her arms tight about Raven,

Chrysalis sobbed, as if Raven were already lost forever.

“I do,” she managed to say and kissed Raven on the neck, “and I always will. But Raven, I also trust you to steer wrong. Remember, whatever you choose to do, I will ever be your ally, even if I am you back home.” Raven’s chin began to quiver as she felt a sting prick her heart. It was unforeseen, yet welcome . . . even if it was small and fleeting.

“I feel my heart, Chrysalis. I felt it.” Both girls gripped each other tight for quite some time, until Raven gently pulled away. At first, Chrysalis would not let go, but after soft words of reassurance, she finally released her other self . . . who was, at this time, a separate being, independent from her mind and spirit.

“I’m scared, Raven.”

“Ha! I am not! My will to finish this outweighs any hesitation I feel.” Chrysalis suddenly reached up and ruffled Raven’s hair.

“You are starting to sound like a Vuolg.”

“Good. Now, shall we walk this grand road together?” Slipping her hand into Raven’s, they turned and began walking away from the massive gates in silence.

After the great doors shut, Tha`Shurin looked at Tha`Shuril, even as he looked to her.

“The Earthen Plane, its inhabitants, and the High King are mingled in a dire situation.”

The Black Dragon grimaced and picked up a large gem, looking at it.

“She has the gift. Let us hope she uses her power in favor of the people. Truthfully, I doubt she will refuse the temptations which will be set upon her. Disinterested in the gem, Tha`Shuril flicked it into the sea of wealth before him as Tha`Shurin hung her head low.

“If Raven becomes truly enlightened by the Essence of Eternity, she could defeat us, as well as we could her. We would become equals.”

Artemis stood in wonder at the audacity Taia showed. Her arrogance seemed to know no bounds. One moment she was a dedicated pupil, the next, a threatening, overbearing child. He remembered back, when she first came into his room; he felt the same power she harbored. But was that her making him think he had the gift, or did he actually possess it? Maybe it was Mitcheio. He had to speak to her.

“Mitch – “ ”Be still, criminal,” came Mitcheio’s voice, instantly silencing him.” The force of her voice assailed him, driving Artemis to the stone floor, binding his tongue and body so he could neither speak or move. Closing his eyes, he focussed on the time when he was alone with Taia. He had felt that power; the same power students came to Mitcheio to learn to control. Maybe this was Mitcheio protecting him, right now. Either way, Taia had said something to him, and he believed it would be enough.

Artemis wondered how Raven and Chrysalis were doing. As angry as he was, their fate now rested in the hands of someone else. This was out of his control, and new territory for him, and he did not like it.

“The Gorgonoth is nigh unto completion, yet remains with the Elves and Humans, and that King!”

“Still, she knows the inner workings of their society.”

“Have you given her the Plague Seeds?”

“They are in route as we speak, Rynox, The Great.”

“You have done well. Violet lightning flashed over the dark city in silence.

“It is time. Invite the Balamur to my throne room.”

“Yes master.”

“She has nearly completed her evolutionary transformation. She swore an oath to follow the Knighthood.”

“Will she keep her covenant?”

“Are you asking for an absolute, or my personal opinion?”

“Both, if I can get them, milord.”

“There is no absolute in this. That is why I have a battalion of Sheba`Whitemane and Light Heralds ready. Another Age of War may be upon us. My opinion? Hmmm, she has demonstrated extra ordinary strength and resilience. She also accepted aid from the Deth`Knell, who seems to be conjuring some plot of his own. I do not trust the one he seeks to enlist. She is deadly. Be that as it may, I have seventy and two holy Jahthein who will put her in check if she betrays. I also have her brother, Grondelem, to aid us if things go badly.”

“You have covered yourself well, milord.”

“I hope, my friend. I would speak with the Deth`Knell. Find him, bring him. Do not upset his . . . date . . . with the Dragon Queen. Find him at his convenience, but as soon as possible. We have a most delicate situation on our hands. And I have an even more delicate matter to pursue once you are gone.”

“Yes, my liege, it will be done.”

“Thank you, Shaylan. I rely heavily upon you too much, I know. I shall reward you openly, and ten-fold, for your services.” Bowing, Shaylan smiled.

“I need no reward, but to see Utaemia in balance.”

“Thank you holy Shaylan. Can I trouble you for one more favor?”

“Yes, name it.”

“Bring me the remains of Shaxx, the Dark Lord, who’s corpse has remained untouched for centuries outside of Iron Keep. You know where it lies. Warn the steward of Iron Keep of what is about to occur. Tell him to gather in the peasants and seal his gates.” Shaylan stepped up to Vannar and embraced him lovingly.

“We will bring this under control.” Vannar, eyes tearing with emotion, embraced Shaylan in return.

“Be careful.” Shaylan, the Twilight Elf, beamed a radiant smile at his long time friend and Jahtha.

“I will take every precaution, I promise. I will change shape and go alone, so as to not attract unneeded attention. My lord, I do have the Staff of Power yet in my possession - the same with which I used to defeat Shaxx long ago. What would you have me do with it?” Vannar grinned and blinked the tears from his eyes.

“Discretely wipe out the unholy . . . no witnesses. Keep it secret, keep it guarded.” They embraced one another again, then Shaylan departed to his duties.

As he walked out of the crystalline halls of Vannar, he stopped only long enough to bow formally to Vannessa, Vannar's only daughter. Instead of returning the formality, she threw her arms about his neck and squeezed him tight.

"Hello Shaylan . . . goodbye Shaylan." Chuckling, he touched her cheek and departed in silence. The beautiful, silver-haired woman entered the throne room and bowed to her father as he bid her approach.

"I command you to never bow to me again," he stated with authority. "Please," he added, his eyes smiling brightly at her. She grinned happily as she neared.

"Father, what is my part in all this? Mother said I should seek your counsel." Vannar's eyes blazed as he looked his daughter from head to foot.

"You command the beasts and the green of the earth." She nodded enthusiastically. "I would like you to remain here until Selman arrives." A deep, thoughtful look etched into her face.

"I have not seen him for nigh a century, and even that was a fleeting moment." Vannar fought of a troubled look. He hesitated for only a moment, conquering some inner turmoil.

"Vannessa, you did not give birth to him." Stunned, Vannessa looked at her father, eyes widening.

"Father, I gave birth to him. I remember it well – it was a pain I will never forget. He is my son. Why would you say such a thing?" Shaking his head, Vannar held up a hand.

"Oh my sweet Vannessa. Do you remember the conflict? Do you remember the powers that raged throughout the Earthen Plane as Shaxx besieged Iron Keep, leaving a path of destruction in his wake as he sought to take down Wardenoth Keep?" She looked at Vannar, narrowing her eyes.

"I recall little of that scene. I was struck down. Shaylan healed me; saved me. Father, you're scaring me." Sighing, Vannar looked at her and shook his head.

"You were struck by the power of a Wish, in which you were forced into a dream state. It was Shaxx who invoked it upon you. Vannessa, dispelling that Wish threw you into Dream Trance, in which you dreamed you had a son. I believe it was your desire – a longing most females yearn for at one point or another in their lives. Just because you are a daughter of power does not make you any different than a mortal who yearns for the same blessing. Selman is not your son, although he thinks he is. He was caught within the Wish's snare, along with you. He lived it with you. Now, you are the closest of friends, but you are not his mother. He is the son of a farmer, murdered by brigands long ago. There is more to that story, but I shall not recite it to you, not now." As Vannar sat upon his crystal throne, he beckoned her come to him. Confused, she neared and took his hands. Taking her into his arms, he sat her on his lap and held her, rocking his child gently back and forth.

"Father, why are you telling me this? Why now? Why did you wait so long?" Placing his

bearded chin atop her head, he grimaced.

“You were happy. And, in him, you are safe. He loves you as any faithful child can. The wish snatched away the memory of his real mother, and transferred it to you. He thinks you escaped death at the brigands hands. He has no idea you are my daughter.” Vannar touched her hair sentimentally.

Melting against her father, she yearned for an answer, but also felt joy in his presence. She loved it when he held her like this. After a long moment of silence, Vannessa became suspicious.

“Wait, what is happening to him right now? You are telling me this for a purpose, or you would not have said anything. You have no small reason. What has happened?” She looked up at her father and pulled on his beard, making him look down at her. “Tell me, please.” Vannar let out a heavy sigh.

“Do you know what he goes about doing these days?” Vannessa shook her head and let go his beard.

“No. He is highly elusive, slippery, even for me.”

“He goes about doing as much good as he possibly can.” Vannessa’s eyes widened.

“Coming from my father, I have to believe you. What do you want me to do with him?”

“Love him. Make him feel you need him.”

“Father, I do love him. I do need him. I would love to spend time with my son, get to know him better. I miss him.”

“As much as this will be a shock to you, I admit I like him very much. You know he is really not your son . . . you know that now, yes?” Vannessa’s face showed open wonder, and an almost-disbelief.

“Why would you tell me that again?”

“Vannessa, my darling, being raised by you, he has tapped into greater knowledge, thus greater power. I need you to visit him often, stay with him. When I think of this Selman VanDrake, I have to ask, can you teach a old dog new tricks?” She gave him a wry look and nodded.

“Of all the questions you could ask, and you ask me that one?” Vannar laughed, causing her to charm him completely as she grinned. “Bad choice of words, father. I’m the Druid Queen. Animals are my speciality.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I think it fits our conversation perfectly.”

“What do you mean?” She asked, slipping her hands into his. Then, as Vannessa looked deep into her father’s eyes, she perceived something that troubled her greatly. Slowly, her grin faded to concern.

“Why did you want to speak with me?”

“Selman is trying to recruit someone who, I believe, cannot be loyal. She goes about the

land unchecked, fulfilling her every whim and pleasure, meddling in the affairs of mankind. This woman disguises herself as a dark-haired beauty, donned in a white silken dress. She wears a blue ribbon in her hair. She is traitorous beyond traitorous.” Vanessa paled.

“Tha`Shealin,” she whispered, a haunted expression suddenly plaguing the delicate features of her countenance.

“He is courting her, I believe, in the attempt to use her own armies to guard the outer realm of Gaunten, wherein Nishane Asmond, my Chief Knight, rules as High King.” Vanessa thought for a minute.

“Her minions are undead. Why would he attempt to protect a city with the very forces Shaxx attempted to destroy it with hundreds of years ago?” Vannar did not answer. He merely watched as his daughter began to get worked up.

“Also, if Gaunten weakens, she will hold her army ready to finish the city off. She will bring in her dragons in to annihilate at the first possible chance she can snatch. Is there something more she wants than Asmond?” Now it was time to play out the final move upon his daughter. He did not feel guilty for this. In truth, if he did not play this last hand, she would be eternally furious with him. And, as her father, he could not have that. To him, she was far too precious.

“Yes. Vanessa, she wants full domination of the earthen plane. Then, she will move on. She hopes to not only take Selman as a husband, but as a loyal Dragonlord; one who will do her bidding with pleasure.” He watched her eyes narrow in growing fury. Abruptly, Vanessa, the Druid Jahtha, leapt from his lap.

“No! He’s mine! I don’t care what the power of a simple Wish has woven between he and I! He is not my son in reality, but he is mine, and I will make us something. And,” a green glow, like cold smoke began to burn like fire within her eyes, “she cannot have him! Selman VanDrake will not serve that, that abomination!” In an instant, Vanessa vanished, followed by rolling, angry, thunder. Vannar stood up from his throne, pride burning in his eyes.

“That’s my girl, that’s my girl.” Snapping his fingers, he motioned to the floor before him. As he did, something moved out from behind the throne. Though it seemed only as a wind, its presence was terrible.

“Protect her. Unless there is no other option, do not engage Grondelem’s sister. Go!” The whirlwind strengthened for a moment, then dissipated, leaving a suddenly worried father all alone.

“At our very doorstep threatens the Second Age of War,” Vannar said, his tone low and deadly. And this time, I will crush you, leaving the Underworld to seek another who they can bow down to . . . and die.”

Selman dug up the ruby he had buried outside the Black Griffon Inn. He had a date tonight, and he had been looking forward to this evening for centuries. Nothing would stop him from this moment. Nothing. Holding up the gem, he placed his thumb upon it and began to concentrate.

“Selman?” Pleasantly startled, he lowered the gem, which had just begun to glow.

“Mother?” He looked around, seeing Vanessa standing on the steps of the inn. Placing the gem in his pocket, he ran to her and picked her up, spinning her around. “I haven’t seen you for far too long,” he laughed, and then gently set her down. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” Biting her bottom lip, she reached up and smoothed his hair back, throwing him a happy, yet worried look.

“I need to tell you something, something I’ve just now learned.” Taking her hand, he bowed formally.

“Anything.” She raised an eyebrow at him, giving him a brief look that instantly killed his smile. He suddenly looked as though she had caught him with his hand in the enchanted items jar.

“You know where I’m going,” he stated in a low tone. Vanessa looked at him for a moment, took a deep breath, then let it out.

“She needs the presence of a Dragonlord to control her masses with. When Gaunten weakens from Vahkrin assault, Tha`Shealin’s Undead army will lower its strength even further. After that, she will bring in the dragons. She, herself, will kill Nishane Asmond and break his line forever. This has been her plot ever since you endeared yourself to her. Because of you, and your consistent attempts to gain her hand, her strategies form.” Stepping back from his mother, Selman frowned.

“Mother, please go inside, now,” Selman whispered, his jaw clenching tight. Without a word, Vannar’s daughter ascended the steps to the Black Griffin Inn, Glancing back only once before entering an establishment filled with singing, laughter and storytelling.

Once his mother closed the door, he took the ruby back out and placed it between his thumb and forefinger. Looking at it, he inhaled deeply, held his breath for quite some time, then exhaled a white-hot flame upon it. He then dropped the glowing ruby into his palm. For a time, Selman stared at it in silence, an expression of sadness overcoming him. Clenching the gem in his fist, he worked his hand, grinding it to pieces. Tossing the still glowing fragments to the grass beneath him, he turned to the door of the inn, pain twisting into his heart.

For a time, Selman stood in silence, looking to the stars above. But, he did not stay long. She was inside, and he had not had the pleasure of seeing her for far too long.

“You do not rule me,” he whispered, his voice nearly faltering to an emotion the

Dragonlord had only felt once before.

Instantly, Kaiman was before her, but he did not bow. Perceptive as an eagle, Kaiman sensed her mood.

“What can I assist you with, milady?” She forced a smile that did not stay on her lips.

“Selman is outside. Pray that he enters this inn, and soon, otherwise, I will annihilate as much of her kingdom as I can before I fall.” Shocked, Kaiman looked at her.

“You are a Jahtha, can I just ask you, instead of pray? I mean, you are right here.” She did not find humor in his jest, though she appreciated the distraction. Moving a bit closer, Kaiman lowered his voice. “He will enter, soon. I promise. Now, you look as though you could use a cup of iced water.”

“No, thank you. Do you think Selman really loves me?” Surprised by the question, Kaiman sobered.

“I know he does. That is why he will soon come through that door.” Holding out an arm, Kaiman gave her a smile, his eyes filled with delight. “Now, shall I escort you up to his room?” Perplexed, she stared at him.

“How can you be so sure about things? You are no Fate.” Kaiman held up a finger.

“On this point, I will agree,” he stated, throwing his arm a subtle eye motion. Slowly Vanessa took his offered arm and allowed him to escort her up to the fourth floor. Standing in the open door of Selman’s room, Vanessa found herself facing a preserved Basilisk hatchling hanging perfectly to face her.

“When is he going to get rid of this?” Kaiman laughed with sudden glee.

“I thought he had. But then, I’m sure it’s a constant reminder of just how easily such a powerful Dragonlord can fall. Ohhh’ the humiliation!” Vanessa turned on Kaiman, not smiling, yet not frowning.

“I am grateful my son has loyal allies. You know, he is also very protective of his own. His companions could have destroyed him the moment this thing turned him to stone. They did not. Kaiman, will you do me a personal favor? Will you talk him into being rid of it?” Bowing, and without another word, Kaiman zipped out of her sight, bent on feeding strangers and friends alike.

“You could have answered, cook!” she laughed, shaking her head. Turning, she moved past the hanging Basilisk pup, Vanessa moved into the room, softly shutting the door behind. She knew the story as well. Selman’s closest allies delighted in rehearsing it to anyone who would lend an ear. Had his hunting party been introduced to him thirty years after his birth, the story would never have gotten past those who witnessed it. None would have dared speak of his failure. The Druid Queen looked back at the Basilisk.

“The deep-set mistrust for all but a few would have compelled you to have sent spell-

scouts ahead to flush out potential danger. This Basilisk would have been killed quickly. But, you let your guard down.” She sighed and looked about her son’s meagre living quarters.

“Do you ever dust?” she stated, frowning, and waved her hands, causing all the dust to gather up and disperse. As she waited, Vanessa found many things to organize. After that, she found a book titled, ‘The Jaded Unicorn’. Sitting down on the bed, she opened the cover, then flipped to the first page. Almost immediately, she fell in love with it. A few moments later, she closed the book, stood and put it back, wiping tears of happiness from her eyes.

“Well, my boy has good taste,” she whispered, emotion still wetting her eyes. “When did you turn this leaf?” she whispered. Taking another book, she quickly read it from cover to cover, more quickly than before. As she closed the back cover, she wondered if her little Dragonborn hadn’t become a hopeless romantic.

“I hope so,” she sighed, a gentle smile playing in her eyes. Looking at a large shelf filled with hundreds of books, Vanessa shook her head. Even though she could not take the time to enjoy them, she desired to read them all. Closing her eyes, Vanessa inhaled, then breathed a white mist upon the books, as the mist settled, she opened her eyes.

Reaching up to the top left book, she set her finger upon it. Within a breath’s time, she smirked, then touched the one to its right, then the book next to it. As she continued to make contact with book after book, a frown began to play upon her lips. Faster and faster, she read each novel, making contact with each and every one of them, the beautiful features of her face twisting into worry, suspicion, longing, regret, mental anguish, and too many other feelings, one of which she had not felt for at least two Ages – fear.

Vanessa stepped back, not seeing the air behind her bend and twist and touch upon the curtains in utter silence. She did not need to see to perceive it. With trembling hands, she gazed at all the titles, her eyes flooding to silver.

“Do not disrupt the little time I have with my son. Go and wait for me in the hall,” she commanded in a low tone. Without delay, the entity departed. Her attention focussed on the books within the shelf before her.

“Now, what have you for me to decipher?” Steadying herself, she raised a hand up evenly positioning with her shoulders. With a quick motion, the Druid Queen flexed her fingers, forcing all the titles of every book to leap out into the air in unison, forming a wall of titles before her. Slowly, she began moving them around with simple hand motions, as if she were orchestrating a symphony. As each title was manipulated through the air, it either shaded to black, or became as polished silver in color. Working the hundreds of titles before her, Vanessa throw out any that did not take on a silver sheen. After all of them had been worked through, only three titles remained, which began revolving and twisting, steadily forming a single sentence. Backing up, she shook her head, as if in denial.

“No,” she whispered as the door opened. Instantly the runes faded away. Backing two

steps, Vanessa sat down on the bed, and composed herself, not looking up before she had regained control. As Selman walked in, he froze in sudden suspicion, and looked about the room.

“What did you do, Mother?” Pulling her hair back, she stood.

“I cleaned your room.”

“You should not have gone to all that trouble.” Vanessa laughed as he stopped at the center of the room.

“And you should wear something other than black all the time. It’s depressing.”

“I’m glad you are here,” he confessed, sitting down beside her and pulling her into a gentle, loving embrace.

“Nice collection of books you have,” she teased, looking up at him, suddenly playful. Rolling his eyes, Selman began to slightly rock her.

“You know I read them to Tha`Shealin, don’t you?” Reaching up, she curled both hands about his arm.

“Yes,” she whispered, trying to hide her emotions.

“That’s not why you are here, is it?”

“No,” Vanessa whispered, her voice beginning to lose its battle with growing sorrow. Resting his head against his Mother’s, he sighed.

“You are not going to tell me, which means I have to guess?”

“No,” she whispered.

“It’s okay, Mother. You raised me, and showed me ultimate patience as I grew up to be a reckless fool. I am thrilled to be in your wonderful presence. Shall we leave it at that? We are in no hurry.” Gently he brushed the silver-white hair from the face of what common folk would deem as a woman in her latest of teens. In reality, she was nigh twenty Ages. Suddenly at a loss, Selman’s eyes widened as he discovered her eyes moist with tears.

“What’s the matter?”

“Selman, did it ever pierce that thick skull of yours as to why your last name is VanDrake?” Shaking his head, the Dragonlord blinked in confusion.

“Mother, why would you ask me that?” he stated with some difficulty. “This is the clan name I chose when I left you. When I left you,” he said again. “Mother, I know that Father was never thrilled at calling me son.” A confusion began to slowly revolve in Selman’s mind as he beheld a single tear begin to roll down from his Mother’s left eye. Reaching up, he ever so gently took the tear upon the side of his finger and looked at it.

“Behold, a Jahtha weeps. Should her son join her in mourning, or is there no reason to follow?” In silence, Vanessa stared at Selman until he - “Do not give me that look,” she quickly reprimanded him. Surprised, Selman shrugged, as though letting her know it was not his fault.

“What look? You are going to make me figure this out, aren’t you?” Taking his hand in

both of hers, she tried to smile.

“Like you made me figure out your design?” Selman’s eyes strayed to his collection of books, then back at his Mother.

“Not one person or creature in all of Utaemia knows. Mother, what do you wish to tell me? It must be something important, or you would not be so emotional about it.” Vanessa reached up and touched Selman cheek, giving him a look that broke his heart.

“Okay, okay, I will tell you.” She struggled for a moment, and then simply stated, “You are not my son, and I am not your mother.” Selman froze, staring at Vanessa, not knowing what to say. He had never known Vanessa to lie, or be deceptive. “Selman, are you alright?”

“Please, Mother, tell me more. When did you find out, and why are you telling me this?”

“Directly before I came to you, and you had to know the truth.” Selman looked at her, a void of expression in his eyes and face. A plaguing, nagging, reality began to set in; a scenario that played out in his thoughts as he stared at his mother . . . at the woman he had known his entire life.

“Then she never escaped that fire. She was killed, along with my father. You are not her . . . you are not my birth mother.” Selman's past was beginning to clear. She looked at the door, then to him.

“I know you, Selman. I should go. I know how you handle things. When you wish to speak to me - if you ever do - you know how to find me.” As she arose and began to walk toward the door, Selman quickly took her arm.

“I was bitter. They killed them all,” he whispered. “I thought the Jahtha were meddlers in the affairs of mankind. I hated you all for that.” Tears slowly cascaded Vanessa’s face as she turned to face her . . . son.

“Some are; most are not.” Seeing her emotional struck his defences down and shattered his will not to feel. Never, after the death of his adopted family, had he shed one single tear for anyone, anything. Now? Now, Selman could not help but join her in mourning the loss of his true birth mother – a dragon. His eyes began to glisten as he struggled to keep control of an emotion that pierced him deeper than any blade or arrow ever had – and there had been many.

“I don’t know what to do now. Now, everything in unravelling. I want to strike out and be rid of all trespassers. Moth – Vanessa, I’m not like that anymore, am I?”

Vanessa placed a delicate hand upon the center of his chest, and looked deep into his eyes, as if searching for something. For the longest time, Vanessa held the gaze of the man she thought was her son, searching his soul.

Selman remained silent, waiting for her answer; an answer he would trust wholeheartedly. Time passed between the two as they stood, facing one another. Finally, she reached up a hand, resting it gently on the side of his face.

“I have witnessed your anger in the past. I have seen you kill without remorse. I have

seen you incinerate your adversaries as you were hailed down upon by a thousand arrows. I have been a witness to you saving innocent people, because you had perfect empathy for them. I've witnessed an unselfish generosity in you that impoverished you completely. I've seen you hunt with shadows of darkness as your guide. Selman, I watched as you battled before the outer gates of Gaunten, risking life and limb for a King whose path you wanted to follow, but did not know how. You gave up the power of all you possessed to protect the Sardakk Elves, a people you have adopted as your kin. I see how you admire their unfaltering unity and honor. You love them more than your life, which you consider as nothing in comparison to the innocence of a child." Vanessa watched as the Deth Knell struggle to swallow his emotions, failing slowly.

"I am a raging horror. If I slip now, it will not be due to ignorant rage. Because of the Sardakk, and especially because of you, I know the light and power of honor and goodness, a life I thought was unattainable. Since I discovered you and those wonderful Wasteland dwellers, I've tried to keep an honor I suspected to be extinct." Wrapping his arms about the woman who raised him – or the woman who he thought had raised him – Selman pulled her into his arms, feeding off the comfort and solace she radiated. Her heart was so pure and innocent. Yet, he knew full well she was not ignorant in the ways of life. She too had killed, many times. He had witnessed her wrath a dozen times in his life, or what he thought was his life growing up with her. Laying the side of her head against his shoulder, Vanessa trembled.

"I have seen you as a horror, a terror, a monster. I have witnessed it. You can be scary, when you put your will to it, but I want you to think about something for me. As well, I too can be exactly what you were. Yes, you are one that can invoke terrible anxiety and trepidation beyond what many can bear. You have a personality that is also misjudged by so many, especially your closest friends and allies. But, Selman, they do not know you as I do. Even though we were thrust into a dream-life state . . . fabricated by a Wish . . . remember this: The memories we forged through that Wish were our own desires. I desperately wanted a son. You desperately needed your mother. We both forged all those memories, independent of the Wish's power. Those are our memories, our creations, our desires, wants and needs. They were natural feeling and yearnings. Selman, you are a horror, and so am I, against our enemies. Yet, when I looked deeply into your soul just now, I could not believe you would willingly choose evil, now that you know goodness, honor and truth. When you were gone into the Wastelands to hunt, to collect power, I believe it was fated destiny that took you there. Selman, I believe you were sent through those wastes to find hope." As she softly spoke those words, tears silently spilled down his face, though he showed no sign of emotion. His sorrow spread through her hair and slowly poured its way down, eventually mingling with her tears as well.

"Oh, what a hand that has been dealt. I now feel as though I have trespassed through your life like a belligerent dragon through a town of undeserving innocents. I am so sorry." Squeezing him tight, Vanessa looked up.

“I’m not. I would not trade the memories we have forged and shared for anything. Please do not regret what we have. One day, when I am blessed with a family of my own, I will, because of you, be better suited to nurture and raise them up. I am better for knowing you.” Parting from her, he began delicately brushing the tears from her face.

“I am committed to Asmond. He is my friend, and I will never abandon him. A man like that, who holds the Sword of Life, deserves loyalty in its utter completeness. Through the pain of my heart, you heal me just by being you.” He focussed upon her, sending into her mind a vision of his undying loyalty and respect, showing her he would never break her trust. “You make me happy. Can we start over, get to know each other better? I don’t want to lose you.” Breaking down, Vanessa laughed through strong emotions. She had been so worried about what his response to all this would be. It had never crossed her mind she was so fragile; on the brink of a meltdown.

As they both looked at each other, the power of that Wish, wielded against them long ago, melted away, revealing the truth of their relationship. They were the deepest of friends, and the most loyal of allies. As Selman looked upon her, his heart moved within, giving itself to her. It was not strange to suddenly love her; it was natural. The broken power of the Wish, forced upon them both, at the hands of a dark lord, fell into sudden ruin, releasing them from the illusion of their relationship. Speechless, Selman looked down upon Vanessa and caught his breath as her eyes widened in sudden wonder and hope.

“Let’s begin anew, Selman VanDrake. Maybe you would read some books to me. I would love to hear your voice, read into your dreams and hopes, share in wonder at a world you would forge. Would you allow me this honor?” Instantly, Selman answered, a bitter darkness creeping into his voice and across his countenance.

“Give me some time. I need to think and heal up this wound. After I heal, I’ll need to tie up some loose ends which need correcting. But, yes, we will do that, count on it.”

“Really? You mean that?” she whispered, suddenly concerned at the shadow overshadowing him.

“I do. If it would be acceptable to you, I will come for you in the very near future.” She smiled and ran her fingers back through his hair.

“Please, yes. Selman, I need to tell you something. If she hurts you again, I’m going to gather an army and wipe her from her own home. I will do it.” Selman knew she was more than serious.

“If you do, do not go without me. If you do, I will be very put out.” He glared at her for a moment. “Please, do not do that without me at your side. You cannot fall.” Resting a hand upon his heart, she smiled, tears still streaming her face.

“I promise.”

“I also promise to do what is right.” She grinned and sniffed. Reaching into an inner pocket, Selman retrieved a handkerchief and handed it to her. As she wiped her eyes and face, she laughed.

“I was so scared, Selman. I thought I was going to lose you forever. You have put to rest a terrible fear in me.” In amazement, she set her hands to both sides of his head, a look of wonder in her countenance. “It’s broken, it’s broken. We are free from the lie.” Raising his hands to hers, Selman VanDrake, Dragonlord, wept, then embraced her for the longest time.

“Go, do what you need to do. Can I stay here, in this inn, with you? I could rent the next room over, or across the hallway.” Pulling away, Selman composed himself and raised eyebrow at her, shaking his head.

“A Jahtha, renting a room? You are so far above all that.”

“Jahtha is a title, based upon the level of power and status one attains, you know that well. I am no different than an ordinary person. I merely have gifts and followers. I help them because I can.” A tinge of indignance raced across Selman’s face.

“You are not like them – oh, from the look on your face I can see this is going to be a losing argument. Of course you should stay, as long as you wish, but you will not pay any money for the stay. I built this inn; it’s mine and mine alone. I do not charge for the food, nor the rooms my guests lodge within. It is my great tool used to unite all into one common theme . . . the celebration of exquisite taste.” She grinned happily at him and folded the cloth in her hand, gripping it tight.

“Mind if I hang onto this? I think I’ll need it in the days to come. I know you. You are like a spider.”

“Whatever is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you will probably be gone for too long. I will be lonely, and in my loneliness, I will begin thinking . . . probably start talking to myself. When I do that, I will get emotional. I need this cloth.”

“Would you like another?”

“No sir. This one will do just fine.” Selman’s brows creased in concern.

“I will not be gone long.”

“So says the eternally patient spider.”

“No, I will see you by tomorrow night. If I am not back, will you please come looking for me? I will remove any veils and shrouds I have, but just for you. Otherwise, I may get a knife in my back.” She frowned.

“What are you going to do?”

“Read one last time to her. One last time.”

“Please don’t . . . okay, just be careful. She is more than you can handle.” Selman’s eyes

hardened.

“Perhaps. Perhaps. Will you stay here in my room? It has special protections and guards. In here, if you wish to see me – what I’m up to – merely concentrate on me and you will see.”

“I do not think I will need to do that unless you fail to return by tomorrow night. Thank you. I will stay here then, but only for a while. Then I get my own room.”

“Thank you for coming to me. Thank you.” Smiling up at him, she bent up and kissed him on the cheek.

“Behave yourself, understand?” Selman kissed her on the forehead, closing his eyes. After a long moment, he backed a step, bowed, then departed, leaving her alone in his room.

After he closed the door, she looked around at the simplicity of his living quarters and frowned at the plainness by which a man could exist.

Striding into the dark throne room, its even gate, coupled with a terrible presence, demanded respect. Flames arose from its body, as if it eternally burned. Its eyes of golden-red held purpose as did its unwavering arrogance. Rynox, The Great, stood as it approached, bowing in respect, but not submission. The Balamur halted before a throne master crafted from the bones of the sacrificed, and bent one knee to the floor of the central chamber of the Vuolg empire.

The floor upon which the Balamur knelt was crafted, but not with stone, or wood, or bones, but with the many bodies of the enemies Rynox himself had defeated. Each of his victims were covered over by a slab of the purist, cleanest crystal that could be exhumed from the earth. These crystal sheets were used to keep his living victims covered, and undisturbed as they lay beneath for all to see. What was more, an enchantment had been placed upon each victim to seal them into an eternal half-slumber as they suffered horrendous nightmares and perceived every movement from above. They were his personal, safeguarded trophies.

The Balamur was a rare creature, hailing from the bottom-most pits of Dark`Fel, a darkened plane from which only spawned the most lethal, heartless creatures known to Utaemia. Rynox looked upon this embodiment of terror with a piercing eye.

“Why did you come to me?” Annoyed, the Balamur snarled and shook its head, its fiery mane bristling.

“I felt your soul, and found it void of the holy.” Rynox stepped down from his throne, eyeing the Balamur without expression.

“Can you change form?”

“Only the form of a soul I have devoured.” Rynox thought for a moment as he walked about the throne room. Stopping, he looked down at a young man of no more than twenty seasons. This one had been a rather difficult hunt, but a specimen worthy of capture. Rynox turned, a thoughtful expression marking his face.

“How many can you change into?”

“Over three-thousand.”

“Can you change into a handsome young man, innocent to behold?” The long tail of the Dark`Fel dweller snaked to and fro upon the crystal floor.

“Yes,” the Balamur growled.

“Can you transform into a female, beautiful to look upon?”

“Yes,” it repeated with a cold look at Rynox, openly annoyed at the questioning. Looking down, Rynox shrugged.

“Lucky you. There is a tomb . . .” Rynox explained the location in great detail, as if he had been there himself.

“I need you to wait for her, hidden. She is on the very brink of completion.” The

Balamur's lengthy, forked tongue snaked out of its reptilian-like mouth, wiping the side of its head and eye. Rynox neared the Balamur and held out a black band of gold.

"I assume you need no such item to return here. Yet, she will. What is your name?"

"Drath," it coldly stated.

"Bring me the dark Gleighdor unharmed. She is ready for the last test. Any others with her, kill, with the exception of the Ardenoth . . . who ignorantly helped all this along." Rynox looked over at a vacancy in the floor and grinned. Drath nodded shortly, turned and walked over and stopped directly over the young man Rynox had observed. Pointing at him, Drath licked his face and eye once more.

"Is this one so special, I cannot have it as a gift?" Under the crystal slate, the young man froze in horror, unmoving, caught within a nightmarish dream, and the nightmare standing over him. Rynox thought about how long it had taken to capture that one. He was the third son of an Elven King; a bargaining chip he did not wish to part with. Perturbed at the Balamur, he returned to his throne, turned and sat down in silence. The Balamur looked down at the Elf, then bent close to him. Drath's tongue lashed out, licking the crystal just over his face. Standing, Drath approached the throne. Rynox flicked the ring to Drath.

"Payment will be discussed upon your successful retrieval of my Figment from the Earthen Plane." The flaming horror nodded, bowed, then departed, taking one last glance at the Elf screaming beneath the crystal slate. When Drath had departed, Rynox shook his head, as if bored.

"Bring me the next one!" Within moments, in through a side door, a girl with membrane wings, who seemed no more than seventeen years of age, was led in before him. Rynox never allowed anyone into the throne room unwashed and ill dressed, and this girl was no exception.

"Come before me, my dear." Waving his hands in annoyance, Rynox commanded, "Take the shackles from off her. What do you think she is going to do, escape?" Quickly, and without question, the chains holding her bound were taken away. Terrified, the girl rubbed her aching wrists and looked down, seeing Rynox's victims under her bare feet. At a gesture, she ascended the steps before the Vuolg King.

"You are a Fairy, though I am not familiar with your breed. Dark eyes, pale skin, black wings. Where did they catch you?" He waited for a response, suddenly bent upon her in great interest. "Have you come to offer your services to me?" Kneeling before the King, she smiled as she touched one of the skulls set into the great throne. Pleased by her reaction, Rynox was suddenly desirous to keep this one. Maybe she could grace his kingdom in some way.

"Tell me about yourself. What is your name?" Looking up, she bit her lip in submission.

"Syla. My name is Syla, milord. I have come to do a great service. Thank you for allowing me into your presence. I did not think you would have me." Smiling slightly, he looked down upon her with a curiousness he had never before felt.

“You are very beautiful. How old are you? You seem young.” Tucking her black hair behind one ear, she looked at his feet, seeming suddenly shy, yet bold.

“Forty seasons, milord,” she whispered, charming Rynox instantly by the music of her dark voice.

“Forty is very young for a Fairy; not even of age, are you. Tell me about you. I am intrigued.” She gave him a modest nod, thoroughly charming him.

“Thirty years ago you killed my entire village. I was the only survivor. I am alone, destitute. That is why I have come to you.” Instantly, Rynox leapt from his throne, drawing a black dagger as Sylva leapt back, throwing her hands into the air, she spun fine, black powder all about the area in a drifting cloud-like mist. All the guards within the area fell to the stone of the throne room, their screams cut short as they were slain. Pressing into her, Rynox buried his dagger into the center of her chest, driving her backward to the floor, even as a terrible pain gripped him. Ripping the dagger hilt up towards to her chin, he screamed in agony.

The dust slowly floated about the throne room as he ripped downward, cutting her deeply all the way threw. Without a scream, without feeling any pain, Sylva smiled up at him, laid her head back to the crystal of the floor and slowly exhaled her last breath, becoming still.

It was quite some time before Rynox could find enough strength to pull the black band of gold from off his finger. When the band slipped from his flesh, Rynox vanished to a nearby tower, wherein he was tended.

Once his strength began to return, the Vuolg king slipped the ring back on his finger and growled, “You failed little Witch! You failed! Now, all your kind will suffer the most!”

They walked the never-ending Golden Road. On they pressed, Raven less perplexed than Chrysalis.

“I wish I could know what you are thinking. Here, I’m cut off, like you are someone else . . . a stranger.” Raven smiled.

“I cannot tell you how to find El`Anara, Chrysalis. It’s not the same for you as it was for me. In fact, it is different for everyone. I am at a loss as well. I’m sorry.” Chrysalis approached the edge of the golden path and looked over the side.

“It doesn’t end. Look at the stars!” Raven grabbed Chrysalis and pulled her back to the road’s center.

“You can’t fly if you fall over the edge. Remember what the dragon said?” Chrysalis nodded.

“I was just curious.”

“So was I. I wonder how many are still falling because of the same curiosity?” Chrysalis thought about it and shuddered.

“Endlessly falling, with no place to go. It’s horrible to think about.” Chrysalis walked to the center of the path, looked up, and began spinning in slow circles.

“It’s quite beautiful really.” Raven did the same and laughed; one of the rare things she did nowadays.

“You know, I wish I could go back to when I was a child – do it all over again. Oh, I wish things could be different. You and I could play dolls together as sisters. We could go flying and hunting and exploring everywhere.” Chrysalis’s countenance brightened.

“I would absolutely love that! After this is over, I say we go have some fun, just no dolls, alright?” Raven quickly agreed.

“Deal,” she stated with a wink.

“Well, let’s keep moving, shall we? Come on, we have a future ahead of us.” Raven took Chrysalis by the hand, not concerned if they were heading back the same way they had come. Last time she was here, she learned it didn’t matter. Hand-in-hand, they walked, talking about their dreams and hopes for the future. Chrysalis squeezed Ravens hand and grinned.

“Do you remember the time you caught me hunting on your father’s land? You told him we were just playing; practising for the hunt that next summer?” Raven gave Chrysalis an odd look, rather confused. Chrysalis raised her eyebrows, prompting Raven to join her in story telling. Raven hesitated, until the snow-white Gleighdor rolled her eyes at her. Slowly, Raven caught on to what Chrysalis was doing, and joined in.

“Oh, yes, he was so mad at me. Because of you, he didn’t ground me. Do you remember what he told us?” Chrysalis nodded.

“I sure do. He said, “Now girls, hunting is for those who have passed the trials. You have

not. Now, I'll say nothing to your mothers, and I expect you to keep silent on this as well if you keep it simple, alright?" They both laughed and squeezed each others hand, not noticing the ends of their hair snaking together at the ends. "Your dad was the most awesome person I have ever met. He gave me the best gift ever, and I bet he never even realized it." Raven became curious.

"What gift? I can't recall. It has been a few years." Chrysalis laughed.

"You." Their hair began to glow that golden hue and steadily grew in intensity. Raven was flattered. "Raven?"

"Yes?"

"We should go visit your place of birth. Then we can go visit mine. I know it's all different now, but we should do it anyways, for closure. You never know, we may even find some pleasant surprises among our people." Raven thought about it.

"Together then?" Chrysalis nodded, raised two fingers and placed it over her heart, then reached over and touched Raven's chest, over her heart.

"Together." Raven returned the same, enjoying Chrysalis beyond measure. Being here had created a separation between them, and she liked her company very much. In fact, she was beginning to wish they would never be the same person again. She looked at her other self and grinned.

"You are my very best friend, you know that?"

"Of course I am. And I am the same for you, always." Chrysalis bit her lip, her eyes twinkling like the stars all around her.

"We've been through a lot, haven't we?" Raven puffed a breath of air out, closing her eyes for a moment.

"Yes we have. We have been through a virtual gauntlet, but we have been places . . . seen some things."

"Hey, Raven, when we return, will you remember that when you look into my eyes, see through my eyes, know my thoughts, feel my feelings, that I love you? Just remember this moment – that I was no longer you, and that I enjoyed your company and wanted to be your best friend forever. Please don't forget that, because, right now, I can't read your thoughts, and I like you." Raven laughed, embracing Chrysalis without warning.

"I will. And I need you, Chrysalis. Not because of my foolish plan for you, but because I really like you. You are so awesome." Chrysalis beamed happily.

"You are more awesome."

"Oh, I don't think so. I think it's you." Chrysalis cut in quickly.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, it's all you, and that's a fact."

"Well," exclaimed Raven, I'm awesome, and you are amazing." Chrysalis laughed for joy.

Both girls were so engrossed in their light-hearted conversation, they did not see a Kithillian Elf man in full golden plate armor standing in front of them until nearly running into him.

“Pardon me, ladies,” he said, back a step with a flourishing bow. “What brings you here to my home city of El’Anara?” Both Raven and Chrysalis abruptly halted. Chrysalis let out a stifled squeak as Raven stared at him wide eyed, a slight smile playing across her lips. Seeing Chrysalis attempting to gather her senses, he let out a joyful laugh and pointed at her.

“So, does the cat get your tongue often like this, or does your hair cause that? His finger lowered to the connected ends of their hair.” Very intrigued, he watched as they quickly parted their hair. As it separated, that golden light faded away.

“Now, I’ve seen a lot of things, but never that.” He grinned even more, if that was possible. “Raven, I know you. But this one, I have not had the pleasure of making your acquaintance.” He waited, watching her until Raven nudged Chrysalis with an elbow. Chrysalis raised a hand to her mouth as she looked at the Elf before her. He was slightly glowing, which highly distracted her. After a moment, Chrysalis lowered her hand, composing herself.

“Sir, why would I give you my name, when you have not given me yours?” Raven’s jaw dropped. The bright-eyed Elf thought for a moment, looked at Raven, then laughed.

“I see that cat never keeps your tongue for long. Aldean, miss. My name is Aldean. And may I ask your name?” Chrysalis bowed slightly.

“Yes.” He looked at her, confused for a moment, then laughed.

“What is your name?” he asked in all politeness.

“Chrysalis, sir.” She looked back the way they had come, then back the way they were headed. “We seek the city of El’Anara.”

“Then you have come to the right place!” He clapped his hands together. “Please, follow me.” Passing between them, he merrily began walking back the way they had just come. Chrysalis looked at Raven and twirled her finger next to her head.

“He’s adorable,” she whispered, “but a bit loose upstairs.” Horrified, Raven placed a finger to her lips, motioning her to be quieter. Chrysalis rolled her eyes, smiled and began following Aldean. Raven fell into step with her, throwing her a worried look. Leaning close, Chrysalis whispered in her ear.

“You know, you should have formally introduced me to him. I thought I should mention that little detail, in case it happens again. Raven instantly felt her face get hot and lowered her head.

“Oops. Sorry.” Chrysalis gave her a look that caused Raven to grin sheepishly. After no more than ten steps, Chrysalis jogged up to Aldean and tapped him on the shoulder. Aldean stopped and turned.

“Yes miss?” She pointed.

“We just came from that way. There was no city . . . just those huge gates.” Grinning, Aldean seemed embarrassed. Slapping his forehead lightly, he rolled his eyes.

“Oh, you are so right. You came through Dragon Gate. How could I have made such a mistake?” He threw Raven a wink, causing her to grin. Raven wanted to hug Aldean, but refrained. Chrysalis gave Aldean a little smile as she turned to walk back the way they were supposed to be headed. As she turned, Raven extended her left wing behind Chrysalis, not quite touching her, and braced herself. She was going to need some help in a moment.

Aldean snickered at Chrysalis as she turned. Abruptly, her amethyst-blue eyes shot wide open as she staggered back into Raven’s wing, her gaze ascending skyward. Raven steadied her balance, throwing Aldean a knowing look. The Kithillian Elf smiled brightly in return as he walked around Raven, stopped and turned to the speechless Sagen Gleighdor.

Before her stood a high wall that encompassed the entire city. A beautiful golden gate set at the end of the golden road; the only entrance to the city. Hundreds of spires reached up into the starry night beyond the great wall before her. Utterly taken by the site, Chrysalis approached the intricate golden gate as it opened. Reaching over, she rested a hand on Aldean’s arm steadying herself. Gladly, he aided her balance.

“Easy now, you don’t want to lose your balance here.” After a moment of taking in a view she could not have described in a full day’s time, Aldean guided her into a city of undescrivable beauty.

“My apologies, sir.” He turned and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“No apologies are necessary, child. Welcome to the grand city of El’Anara, the fabled city of legend. Few arrive in this wondrous city that are not of my race. Welcome!”

Out in the hallway, Taia looked upon the two guards to her right and left as they lay back against the stone wall of the dungeon, heads hung low, sleeping as if they had no cares in all the world.

Gagged and chained to a cold stone wall, Artemis stared in defiance at the door, behind which Taia was standing. He knew the signature of her heartbeat; it was unmistakable. He wondered at the particular reason for her visit. Slowly the door to his cell opened without a sound. Artemis looked up to see her silently slip into his prison and turn, shutting the door behind her with a casual wave of a hand. She then turned and approached Artemis, a look of sympathy in her demeanor.

“I’m so sorry for the grief I’ve caused you. I never knew it would come to this.” With a wave of her hand, the gag fell from his mouth. Licking his parched lips, Artemis looked around the cell.

“Why do you need me to change you, Taia? Had you come and simply told me, we could have had a better outcome than this. Why the set-up?” She sighed, produced a knife and cut her own wrist, causing Artemis flinch. It was quickly done. Even more quickly, she slashed him across the face, placed her wounded wrist against the open wound in his cheek, then quickly backed away. She then sighed, a sadness emanating from the beating of her heart.

“I’m so sorry I’ve hurt you.” After a moment of silence, she held up a hand, upon which was a black band of gold. Shaking her head sadly, she reached up and gripped the ring between her thumb and forefinger. “Forgive me,” she stated in a calm, sincere voice. Quickly, she removed the ring from her finger and vanished. After she had gone, Artemis shook his head.

“No Taia, it is I who must beg for your forgiveness.”

After three days, Raven and Chrysalis stood before Aldean. Chrysalis learned he was the Captain of The Guard of El`Anara. She would never have guessed he could single handedly slay an ancient dragon, and without the blade. Yet, even with all his power, he had the gift of spreading joy and happiness wherever he went. Just before leaving, he embraced her tenderly.

“Chrysalis, you are beautiful. You have a gift, so use it wisely. With tears forming in here eyes, she embraced Aldean.

“I hope we meet again, sir.”

“I hope so too. There now.” He squeezed her tight and then chuckled. “You okay?” he tenderly inquired. She kissed him on the cheek and sniffed.

“Yes sir.”

“There’s a good girl. You will be alright.” Aldean gave her the warmest smile, melting her even more. He then parted from Chrysalis and turned to Raven.

“Raven, come visit again, if you will. Remember what you have learned in the short time you have been here – two times you have been here.” She grinned and embraced him tight, squeezing and whispered, “I will miss you.”

“All the girls tell me that.” She laughed and let go. Raising a hand, he gently touched her cheek. “You are rare indeed. If ever you need me, I am at your service. All you need do is call my name three times, and I will hear you.” Taking both Raven and Chrysalis by the hand, he smiled warm as summer upon them.

“Now, it is time for you to go. Think of the destination you wish to go to, and I will send you there. Chrysalis laughed and begin to concentrate. With a touch of mischief, Raven squinted her eyes at Aldean. Looking at her, he shook his head, suddenly grim.

“Tell me when you are ready . . . my ladies.”

“Ready and thank you,” Chrysalis said.

“Ready,” Raven whispered, resignation in her voice. Aldean threw Chrysalis a smile, then turned his attention to Raven, giving her a serious look.

“Close your eyes.” Both girls shut their eyes. Chrysalis felt suddenly connected with Raven as she appeared just outside the porch of the guild. Panic spread through her as she realized where Raven was going, what she was doing. After a moment, she composed herself, as if nothing was amiss, and entered the guild . . . alone.

Raven stood on the road that led to the city wherein she had received her first gift from Artemis. A scene played out before her, taking her far back into distant years. She pictured a young Karritch Gleighdor crashing to the road leading toward that city so very long ago. Shaking her head, she recalled the dust of that landing half choking her. Holding her wrist, she smiled, lost in memory, her left wing drooping slightly.

The memory did not hold her attention long, and so, without looking back, she slipped off the road into the forest and began making her way toward her tomb; the place in which she suffered for centuries. She did not wish to do this, but she needed to return the items she had buried. To him, it had only been a few hours before she stopped him from entering back into that city. Whatever his perception of time was, Raven's was warped and clouded, as if she lived in a constant daydream . . . nightmare.

She had evolved to maturity, or so she imagined. She was lethal. Whatever it was that had moulded her to be what she now was, she liked it . . . very much. The dragon had lied to her, telling her she was not a monster, but she could feel the power of what she had become. Yes, she was more than a monster, she was a fiend. So, maybe the dragon hadn't lied after all. Maybe Rinn had simply underestimated her.

In silence, Raven made her way through the trees, eventually coming nearer to the one place she hated the most. It was, however, the one place she needed to be. Not only did she need those buried items, but she felt called there, as if something whispered her name within that dark grave. This had been going on for quite some time now, but now she heeded the seductive beckoning.

She knew what she had to do to become stronger. The soothing darkness within her soul caressed and groomed her, testing the boundaries of what she would do to gain absolute power.

As she made her way carefully through the woods, more memories open up in her mind; dark scenes within her tomb. Terrible things had been forced upon her; acts she would bury deep down within her dark soul and lock away forever, to be forgotten, if that was possible. Had they been merely dreams, or had they actually happened? She did not know for sure if it was all nightmarish dreams, but they were powerfully connected to her, and she dreaded they might have been real.

As the tomb came into view, she neared the entrance and stopped. Again, there it was, an inner voice beckoning her to enter in. Closing her eyes, she smelled the air, enjoying the scent of the moss layered thick upon the aged stone face of the tomb; the one thing she had always enjoyed. Taking in that still familiar scent, she relaxed, trying to enjoy it, if only for a moment.

Oh, how she wanted to sleep again! Just being here made her feel like the drink Artemis had shared with her long, long ago. Within this place, when she did actually sleep, it was deep and welcoming. Yet, even down within the darkness before her, undisturbed slumber was never

lasting, always interrupted – invading, encroaching trespass! Her thoughts caused her to shudder and slowly open her eyes. Looking down those familiar steps, she ever-so-slightly bared her teeth.

“No long, dark slumber for me,” she whispered. As she gazed into the dark, Raven perceived a presence, a presence focussing its will upon her. In hatred, her eyes narrowed as she hissed, a fury within her emanating, welling up within her soul. A stirring of wind within abruptly washed up the stairs and over her, carrying with it a shower of dry leaves, filling the air about her with a cloud of dust and dead overgrowth that slowly settled about the area.

“Interesting,” she mused, suddenly curious. Though the distinct feeling of being watched washed over her like a filthy breeze, she ignored it. She was not alone, but there was something she came to do, and it would be done.

Turning from the entrance, Raven made her way about the side of the small hill, all the while feeling that time was not on her side. She hated being pushed. Clearing her mind, Raven searched for a formation of hand-sized rocks. Locating her marker proved difficult until she began using her wings to clear the layers of fallen leaves away. At length, the stones were revealed, showing her the very spot where the items were buried.

Pushing them away, she began to dig, using nothing more than her bare hands. After ripping up soil and rock, she felt what she was hoping for. The leather skins which wrapped the items were rotted, but intact and undisturbed. Quickly, Raven tore through the weakened leather and withdrew her Storing Sack. She then began the task of placing everything into it.

As she steadily worked to complete a task that had been a haunting her conscience, the feeling of being watched played on the back of her neck, compelling her to continually glance over her shoulder. Even so, when she did look, there was nothing to be seen.

Soon, all his items were finally secured. It was surprising to see the items in the same condition as when she buried them. Reaching down, she gripped the hilt of her blade. Looking around, Raven sighed, a sadness washing over her. This was it; the time and place to be in. After burying the hole, Raven stepped back a few paces and used her wings to send a shower of leaves over the area, covering the signs of her passing. She then returned to the tomb’s entrance.

Standing once again before the opening, she looked down at the steps in silence. Within her once dwelling place, she recalled the location of seven Vuolg Rings, hoping they were still where she had hid them. If they were not, and had been discovered by adventurers with dreams - delusions - of grandeur, this would end up being a longer trip than expected. She would have to find those rings; a difficult task. Adventurers or not, whoever found them would be in great danger. If this was the case, if the rings had to be located, she would have one thing in her favor in finding them. She could attempt to use her inner power; the same power Aldean possessed. This gave her hope and determination.

Gazing down the moss-covered stairs of the tomb, she felt a strong reluctance to go in.

Again, she felt a call, a summons, a pull to go down. Bearing her teeth at the descending tunnel, she briefly closed her eyes and forced herself to take the first of many steps down into past memories of personal darkness. Drawing her blade, Raven descended into her tomb quickly, silently, entering into the central chamber and taking a left into an ancient stone hallway. As she crept through the corridor of hewn stone, she beheld the marks she had made, each signifying one day's time. Slowing, she stopped and ran her fingers over the deep scratches. She recalled being her for so long, she had no place to continue counting. Continuing into the next chamber, she spotted the corner where she had buried the black bands of gold. Quickly, using the point of her blade, she pried and chopped at the area until the stone broke loose. Feverishly, she pulled more stone away, until she removed the soil with her hands. Relieved, she pulled forth a small leather pouch and opened it. Looking in, she beheld seven rings. With a sigh of relieve, she closed the pouch and placed it in her magical sack. Once everything was secured, she headed back out to the main chamber, bent on leaving as soon as possible.

Raven did not reach the steps, for blocking the exit was a creature half again as tall as she. She knew what it was, and the sight of it not only sickened her, but startled her greatly . . . though she kept her composure and emotions thoroughly hidden. She stopped as flames burned over the surface of its skin. Sheathing the blade, Raven held out her hands.

“Now what?” Its lengthy tongue flicked out and wiped its left eye as it beckoned her near.

“Come embryo, it is time for your final test, before you become a greater servant with deep purposes, or one of the forgotten . . . forever dying in the Toraz Pits.” Calm as a snowy night, and as cold as hoarfrost, Raven stepped to the center of the chamber and stopped, instantly signifying her reluctance, her defiance. The Balamur stepped up, its tail cracking above her. Flames ascended slightly higher from its body in warning.

“I spent much time here,” she stated, smiling slightly at her escort. “Can you tell me anything about my dreams here?” The Balamur narrowed its slanted eyes dangerously as it began stalking around her, appearing as though it would strike her down. “I do not stall. If I did not wish to be here, I would not have heeded the call.” Prowling around behind her, it raised a finger through her hair and let it run over the edge of its talon.

“I know you are prepared for this end; to become glorious, Gorgonoth,” it replied in a more mild tone, completing a full circle about her, openly admiring her physique. Raven reached out and caressed the side of its face with the back of her hand. She knew she was courting disaster, and knew the legends of these terrible beings. In this, Raven knew well enough to play her game carefully.

“I want more than Gorgonoth. Will I have the chance to be what I yearn to be?” Drath flinched at her touch, but did nothing more than look her over, as if contemplating, calculating, scrutinizing.

“Raven, in my realm you are a mere fledgling. But, you do have more potential than a leader of chaos and death. Are you asking me to betray the trust of Rynox?” It was the one question she knew to carefully, wisely give a response to.

“I would have no one betray their duty. My curiosity is this: Is this all I will ever become? I am more than what you see. I was brought into Utaemia and given a body. I have evolved, yet no one knows I was inherently gifted with something very rare and special. Becoming Gorgonoth will be a beginning, but there is so much more to me, Balamur.” Bearing its deadly fangs, Drath instantly grabbed her by the throat, growling.

“I should devour you now. You would linger within forever. Do not call me Balamur one more time. That is a general term used by those greater than I, which you are not. That is the only warning you will receive.” Its tongue flicked out, tasting the side of her face and neck. Undaunted, Raven leaned forward, as if she was enthralled by the Balamur.

“What is your name?”

“Drath,” it responded hatefully. “Show me what more there is to you, Figment!” Raven flinched at being labelled as a Figment. It was not that she grabbed Drath by the throat any faster than it had latched onto her. Her hand was simply, instantly, there. As she found that space between her and Drath's throat insignificant, she simply bypassed the distance, discarding it as if it did not exist. Anger seethed like a sudden volcanic flame within her as Raven's claws pierced Drath's neck and spine, paralysing the burning fiend.

“Don't you ever call me Figment again.” She leaned in close, her face nearly touching Drath's. “It is a general term, laid upon me by those proud enough to deceive themselves into thinking they are greater! Unlike you, Balamur, I will not forgive you,” she whispered, drawing up against this lethal predator. She could feel its heart beating quickly. It was panicked and yet incensed. Incensed herself, Raven thought it humorous for one who was so undeniably helpless.

Every tendon and muscle in its neck were strings of communication to her. The way she felt them tense and pull told her Drath was struggling to take off the black band of gold it had about its smallest finger. Brushing her lips across its exposed fangs, she smiled and worked her way to the side of its head. Kissing Drath lovingly, she sighed, as if there were no other place she would rather be.

“I should let you take it off,” she whispered, nuzzling Drath, smelling his anger and fear, emotions so incredibly nourishing. “I should devour your soul and add all you possess into me.” Adjusting her talons through the Balamur's neck, she watched it reach for the ring. She let it grip the black-gold circlet and then gripped and twisted, playing Drath like a marionette. Slowly, she brought the flaming fiend down to its knees and kissed him again, an unnatural hunger beginning to dissolve her will to never feed upon the soul of another. Crimson tears filled her eyes, then began to stream her face, as she resisted the undeniable urge to feed.

“I made an oath to Vannar, my master, and I will not feed from your soul.” At the

mention of Vannar's name, Drath let out a dreadful hiss. "But how can I resist such a quarry, such power for the taking? With you devoured into my soul, Balamur, nations would fear me; bow to me as their queen. You are the answer I need to complete my goal." Raven hesitated, shedding tears of red, now mingled with golden splendor. Drath's eyes widened in sudden wonder.

Power filled her entire being as Drath jerked sideways and buried the tip of its tail into her back. Looking down, Raven the end of its tail pierce out through her chest. She felt no pain, no shock, nothing. But Drath's attack caused a deep enmity and rage to explode. Her eyes began to burn like molten gold as she squeezed the vitals within Drath's spine, forcing his total submission. Laying Drath back to the cold stone floor of her tomb, a burning fire ignited within her dead heart. With her wings, she pierced her enemy to the stone, each of her largest feathers nailing her victim to the surface.

The pain of its poison angered her more than being impaled. Shuddering, she drove her nails up under its jaw and wrenched its had back, exposing a well of opportunity and power. She moved in, then suddenly jerked back, gasping.

"Mother, mother, I need you!" she cried, yearning for Mitcheio to come and rescue her. "Mother, please help me!" she screamed, then shuddered once, as if trying to fight off the overwhelming need to feast and drink and become . . . more. When Mitcheio did not answer her call, Raven looked down upon Drath, and wept.

"Why shouldn't I?" she mourned. This is my right!

"Raven," a voice whispered from behind. She thought the voice was part of just another dream. Angry, she plunged the blade of her tail into Drath's eye, driving sideways out the other eye. Hunger, like never before, filled her mind. Blood-like saliva dripped from her fangs as she weakened from both the will to abstain and from the poison now torturing her body.

"Raven, stop," the voice came again as she screamed like the fiend she knew she always was.

"Help me, help me!" she raged as she seized into the Balamur with all her will. "Kill me!" Tensing, she moved toward the soft area, just under its jaw, then froze, shuddering as if suddenly cold, resisting with what remaining strength she possessed. As she moved in on Drath, its tail pulled out from her back and stabbed her again.

"Get out of me!" she raged in such fury that Drath cried out in terror. Tearing the Balamur's head, she wrenched her tail free and severed Drath's tail. Screaming in agony, Raven's hair coiled about her quarry's tail and pulled it free from her chest. With an unearthly cry, Raven ripped the Balamur, like a dragon mauling a mere knight who had made the mistake of challenging it. She scattered Drath about the chamber, slaying her quarry in an unbridled rage.

“Raven!” that voice came to her again, startling her. Turning, she screamed, lashing out at yet another enemy. But it was not an enemy she began to relentlessly strike with the knife-like feathers of her wings. It was Aldean! Raising a hand, the Kithillian Elf Captain warded off her blows, as he slowly backed away, focussing on her attacks.

Suddenly, it was over. All the hate, all the pain of what had happened vanished, leaving Raven screaming for a time until she was too exhausted to scream anymore. Drenched in blood and sweat, she slowly comprehended what she had just done . . . who this man was.

“Aldean?” she wept. “Forgive me! I didn’t mean to . . . oh, forgive me, I beg you!” Instantly, she retracted her nails, knowing she was in real trouble. Panicked, she looked around, seeing what she had done. Aldean shook his hand, as if he had just missed a nail with a hammer and got his thumb.

“Wow, that really hurt. Raven, I’ve come to help you. Will you let me help you?” Breaking down, she began to sob, nodding and crawling to him and up into his arms; the only safe place she knew at the moment. Enveloping her in the shelter of his arms, Aldean placed his lips against her ear as he glanced at Drath’s body, which was slowly coming back together.

“Shut your eyes. Do not open them.” She buried her head in his neck, squeezing her eyes shut, obeying him. Instantly there was a heat that washed over her, followed by a terrible wail that filled the chamber. The wailing rose to a scream, and then faded to a moan. Then all was quiet.

“You can open your eyes now. The creature is no more.” Raven did not want to look. She just needed to sleep; blessed slumber. She recalled the soothing darkness of her tomb and craved it once again. Into blessed slumber is where she yearned to go.

“Let me sleep, let me dream . . . please, please, please.”

“No, you cannot sleep now. Not yet, Raven, Knight of Vannar.” Raising a hand to the side of his face, she broke down in tears.

“I’m sorry I struck you, Aldean. Am I in trouble?” Aldean laughed, as if he had just been told a funny joke. Carrying Raven up and out of the tomb, he set her upon a fallen log, then settled down beside her, making himself comfortable.

“No, Raven, you are not in trouble . . . well, not with me. You just defied the King of the Vuolg. He isn’t going to like the present we are going to send him. Of course, I’ll be the delivery boy. By the way,” he abruptly changed the subject, “I absolutely love your hair. It’s enthralling, how alive it is.” She realized how disgusting she looked and tried to make herself presentable. Aldean chuckled.

“Don’t worry yourself about your beauty, it’s all there. With all the power I can wield, I used a tiny portion to clean you up. I must say, you look astonishingly gorgeous. Too bad Artemis married you before I could get to you. Oh well, my loss,” he stated, rolling his eyes. She looked at him perplexed.

“I have two holes in my chest, and you are flattering me?”

“No you don't, I fixed that too. Well, your regeneration ability fixed most of it, so I can't take all the credit. But, I will take full responsibility for the removal of the Balamur Venom - nasty poison, if I say so myself. Gives me a headache.” His comment provoked Raven to grin. Suddenly, she could not help but laugh. Placing a hand to her mouth, she watched him scrunch his face.

“Nothing gets you down, does it?” Aldean instantly looked at her, becoming dead serious.

“Of course there is something that gets me down.”

“Oh, what could that possibly be?” she ventured. Her dark eyes slowly sparkling like two lightless jewels.

“Proposing to a beautiful, wonderful Kithillian beauty, oh, and sleeping. Sleeping makes me lay down, which is getting down, I suppose.” Raven laughed at his humor.

“Did she say yes?” Aldean shook his head and grinned happily.

“No, but she was my sister, and I was practising for my future proposal to a girl that would one day grace me with companionship. We men must practice these sort of things, you know. Okay, all-in-all, I'd ask you to dance if the occasion was right.” Raven had never danced before, and it intrigued her.

“Are you saying, Aldean, Captain of the Guard, cannot make music play upon the wind about us?” Holding up his hands, Aldean shook his head.

“I would dance with you in a moment's time, but, Raven, have you ever danced before? I know that is probably a stupid question, but have you?” Raven shook her head, then nodded, remembering that she actually had.

“Only once with Artemis, but that was a thousand years ago.”

“Then, I suggest you save the next dance for him. I think that would be the appropriate thing to do. What do you think, Balamur slayer,” he jested.

“I do believe you have a point, sir. Thank you.”

“Oh, you are more than most welcome. One day, I may cut in, just so you are not surprised when I do.”

“On day, I would like that,” she replied, suddenly loving this wonderful man.

“Now, Raven,” Aldean said, rubbing his hands briskly together, “look at me, steady your mind and focus. It's over . . . you won. I'd applaud you for what you just did, but I don't want to seem patronizing. Really though, you don't have a clue as to what you just did, do you?” Wiping her eyes, she shook her head.

“Killed a monster?” Aldean laughed with glee, nodding enthusiastically.

“You just freed - get ready for this - about three-thousand or so trapped souls. If you ask me, that's saying something. You should be rewarded with honor. What honor would you

choose, if you were able to pick it for yourself?” Raven felt that dark feeling begin to lift, and Aldean was doing it. He made her happy.

“I would only ask you to cut in one day. I would love to have three dances with you. That is all.” A dark thought came to her, making her mentally shrink from this wonderful Kithillian Elf.

“Aldean, I almost -” “Now, don't think about the ifs' and almos'ts', alright? What is done is done. Frankly, I'm amazed. You are one of the most intense, emotional, incredible creatures - sorry - people I have ever met. Come on, give yourself a break here – this is what Knights of Vannar do, and you did it!” He seemed ready to explode with joy. And this joy was driving away all the shadows infesting her. Even though Aldean was right, she did feel tired and, well, almost down. Almost.

“Aldean, you are so amazing.” Laughing, he stood, pulling her up onto her feet, smiling brightly. “Okay, besides the dances, can I pick one more honor? Wow, that sounded so self-absorbed,” he laughed. Waving her away and shook his head.

“Didn't to me,” he argued. “What else do you need?”

“Really, right now, I would love an honest to goodness, from the heart and soul, hug. I don't feel to good right now. I feel warn out in my mind and spirit, not that you haven't picked me up by being here, and saying what you say. I just-” Aldean stepped foreword quickly, wrapped his arms about her thin waist, snatched her off the ground and twirled her around in circles, all in one motion. Letting out a shriek of surprise, she quickly gripped him about the neck for support. Pulling her close, he looked into her eyes and grinned, holding her tight for quite some time as a golden radiance emanated from him, flooding her entire being. It was healing he poured out upon her, with all the tenderness of the honorable man he was. She felt joy, love, peace and serenity fill her mind, spirit and body as she held on to him.

“Well done, honorable Knight of Vannar,” Aldean praised. “Well done.” Suddenly shy, she lowered her eyes, resting her forehead against his.

“Thank you most honorable sir. It is my great pleasure to be acquainted with you. Thank you for taking so much time for me. I am so flattered and blessed.” Raven grinned as tears of joy and happiness spilled down her face. All she could do was squeeze him tight as she lost the ability to speak, so precious and powerful was this moment.

After some time, she pulled back and began playing with his hair. “I will always choose the light, no matter what others think I am up to. Aldean, I have spoken.” He lowered her gently to the ground and pulled her close.

“I believe you. I also believe this Figment I hold in my arms now will always keep her word of honor. I believe you will not remain a Figment for long. Sincerely, I feel this test you are about to undertake, you will pass with ease. But, Raven, in all seriousness, do not underestimate the power of the unholy. It is seductive, and caresses your primal senses. Raven, it

feels right at the time, natural. Be aware of this, will you do that for me?" She nodded without hesitation.

"Aldean, can we be overheard right now? Can I tell you something in complete secrecy, with no one else to hear?" Aldean closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them, nodding.

"Yes, we are truly alone."

"I am going to pay a visit to Rynox, and I am going to slay him. I know I will succeed. When I do this, will it stop the Second Age of War? Will it?" Aldean thought for a few moments, his brow creasing as he looked deeply into her eyes. She felt he could see through her as if she was a mere window of perfect, clear glass.

"I believe it will damage their plans badly, should you pull off something of this magnitude. It would throw their generals and leaders into chaos. Yes, I believe it would. Now, Raven, that is my educated opinion on this matter. But, remember, should you fail, or succumb to the dark light of his power, you will lead a legion up against Gaunten. This is what those in Gaunten, and others, fear about you. This is why they want to keep you in their sight."

"But I cannot run from this forever. Another Balamur scum will be sent to take me, and this time it will not hesitate. I would rather go to Rynox, to show my faith and willingness to him. I need him to accept me. That will give me the opening I need to rip his diabolic head from his shoulders and spit down his neck." Raven growled as a darkness emanated from her entire body, a blackened mist that drove Aldean's golden light back. Aldean let go of Raven and stepped back.

"Then, Raven, if you are determined to do this thing, get to it. Show Vannar what you can do. You have the gift; you have spoken to the Gold and Black Dragons of Dragon Gate . . . twice. You are not ignorant of the ways of light. But, Raven, now comes the test of darkness, wherein you will experience the shadows of power and lightlessness. Those who embrace this path seldom return." Raven thought about it, then looked at Aldean, suddenly enlightened.

"Selman VanDrake made it back." Aldean raised an eyebrow at her, then winked.

"Clever girl."

Mitcheio stood before the guards, narrowly looking down at them as they slept on duty. Katcha stepped forward to awaken them, but was stopped by a subtle gesture from his Ward.

“Taia's workmanship, not them.” Katcha stepped back to her left side in silence, throwing the guards a look of disapproval. The black witch's eyes glowed a golden hue as she looked at the cell door.

“Stand to your posts, loyal Guardians.” Instantly, they both opened their eyes and stood, saluting she and Katcha with a fist to the heart.

“You are relieved of this post. Please return to your common duties. Thank you for the service you have performed.” Both walked away and began casually talking as they vanished down the corridor. Mitcheio looked at Katcha and smiled slightly.

“We deal with the extra-ordinary. They had no chance, not like you might have.” Katcha raised an eyebrow at her.

“Might have?” She dropped the conversation, touching his arm. With a wave of a hand, the cell door opened in total silence. They entered to find Artemis with blood on his face and chest, staining his undershirt. Upon the floor in front of him were blood stains as well. Quickly she snapped her fingers. The chains which bound him fell from his ankles and wrists. Standing, he bowed to Katcha, who nodded in return. He then bowed to Mitcheio.

“Taia has a band of black-gold. After infecting herself with my blood, she took the ring off and vanished. Mitcheio, there's something else. Taia asked for my forgiveness twice before leaving. She sounded sincere, and by the beating of her heart, I believe she was.” Katcha looked at Mitcheio, who pondered the news in silence for a time.

“I took her in and trained her. She was always so attentive, yearning to learn and grow. Whatever she is doing, or about to do, I need to know.” Mitcheio looked at Katcha. “I need to speak with her, alone. Artemis, I have put you through hardship. Thank you for your support. Your service was invaluable. Chrysalis has just returned. She is outside at the moment. Just thought you might want to know that.” Mitcheio turned to leave.

“Wait, please. How can you speak to her? She took off the Vuolg's Ring. She is now gone to the Receiving Tower at the heart of the Vuolg Empire within the Underworld.” Before exiting the cell, Mitcheio turned, a sly expression in her demeanor.

“Artemis, this is my guild, my house. What ring did she take off, and how did she obtain it? Artemis, this never happened; we were not here. Chrysalis needs you, sir.” With that said, Mitcheio left the chamber, Katcha escorting her.

Confused, Artemis ran out of the cell . . . ending up outside on the porch entrance to the guild, even as Chrysalis opened the door and entered in behind him. Hearing the door open, he turned. In wonder, the Ardenoth Vampire shook his head and headed for Chrysalis.

“I know a trick or two,” he muttered, “but this is getting very strange.” Opening the

door, Artemis saw her spin about, startled. Within a heartbeat, she grinned.

“Hello Vampire boy.” Walking up to her, he bowed. Instead of bowing, she pulled close to embrace him. With a hand, he stopped her.

“I’m rather a mess for affection at the moment . . . unless you wish to end up like Raven. Let me go change my shirt and then -” he stopped and looked down, staring at his shirt. It was clean, as if it had just been washed, dried and pressed. Chrysalis gave him a strange look, then laughed.

“Sometimes, you can be, well, just a bit strange, even creepy, you know that?” Shaking his head, he grabbed and pulled her to him, hugging her in great relief. She melted into his arms, content to stay right where she was.

“Artemis, do you know what I found out about you?”

“What’s that, pretty lady?” he asked, humoring her.

“You are one handsome Ardenoth with a wonderful heart.” He laughed, playing with her hair.

“And you know what I’ve found out about you?” She snickered happily and looked up at him. In silence, she shook her head and waited to hear something wonderful about herself.

“You are one beautiful Sagen Gleighdor with a heart of pure gold.” Grinning, Chrysalis stretched up and kissed his chin.

“Thank you sir. Flattery will get you anywhere, you know that, right?” He smiled.

“I hope so,” he egged her on, loving the social fencing.

“Oh, Raven will be along in a while, I hope. She is digging in the dirt at the moment.” Giving her a strange look, he was about to inquire as to why she was digging in the dirt, then simply shrugged and let it go. With Raven, he was learning to just accept the things she did, even if it seemed strange.

“Whatever it is Raven is up to, I’m sure she knows her business. In the mean time, is what you said, just now, true? That flattery will get me anywhere?” She nodded.

“Definitely”, she stated, as a matter of fact, adjusting her wings slightly as she waited for this part of the conversation to unfold. She was enjoying her Vampire more than usual.

“Alright. How would it sound if you and I go back to the room, get ready for a night on the town and dinner. Since Raven is gone, you are mine this evening, milady.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Yes. I know a wonderful place that serves anything you can dream up.” Doubting, she slipped away from him, quickly heading for their room.

“I need a bath first. My feathers smell bad.” Artemis followed Chrysalis to the door and opened it for her.

“No they don’t.” Placing her forefinger on the center of his chest, she tapped him three times.

“Yes . . . they . . . do. If you like, you can pull up that soft-chair of yours and read to me while you wait, or stand out here until I come out.” Smiling, she turned and opened the door, entering their room. Shrugging, he followed and secured the door. Without another word, she headed for the door to the back of the room where the water in the great basin never cooled down and never got dirty. Sitting down, he pondered dinner with Chrysalis. Grabbing a chair and a book, Artemis joined her. Chrysalis slipped into the basin and immersed herself in the splendor of a hot bath.

Clearing his throat, Artemis opened the book. For the next two hours he happily read to her, taking a much needed break from the plots and schemes of witches, monsters, fiends and heart-stealing Gleighdor.

As Chrysalis exited the bathroom, Artemis put down the book and followed her out with the chair. Setting it down by the table, he adjusted it just so, then adjusted it again. Satisfied with its placement, he set the book on the table and sighed happily, turning his attention to her. Chrysalis twirled, showing off her new dress. Throwing him a charming smile, she could see his open admiration for her. She wore a snow-white dress with half-sleeves. Her hair was perfectly set.

“You know, I would trade my living hair for instantly drying wings,” she stated, looking down at the water dripping from her feathers. She was creating two long puddles on the floor. He looked at her, struck speechless by her impossible beauty, which stole any reply he could have uttered. She stopped, waiting for him to say something.

“I think - no - I know you look absolutely stunning,” he said. Instantly, her eyes brightened by his words, even if he had to focus on talking. She moved in, resting against him.

“Can we go eat? I'm hungry.” Artemis immediately offered an arm, which she gripped tight, and let him escort her out of the room.

“You know, there will be many a jealous man in our wake tonight.” She blushed, but kept silent. “It's true,” he persisted. “You have to know you are impossibly perfect.” Chrysalis shrugged.

“That I am not, but thank you for the compliment. If you could see yourself right now, I think you would be self charmed.” Looking at her with surprise, Artemis feigned being caught off guard. Before he could reply, she continued. “I may start redoing my hair a hundred times, due to the ease of doing it, but, Artemis, I've never considered myself as beautiful as you describe me.” Laughing, he raised her hand and kissed it.

“Thank you for accepting me. Thank you for your patience with me. I am lucky and blessed to have a Herald as my side.” Her eyes narrowed with pleasure as she rested her head on his shoulder. He was beginning to make her crazy.

They both made their way down the lonely alley and into the busy street filled with unusually high energy. The inn was too far to walk to for time's sake, and so once they exited the lonely back-street, Artemis hailed a carriage. It was not long before Chrysalis became quiet, solemn, and far less social than normal. Artemis joined her on the top of the carriage as it made its way steadily down the street. As the carriage rolled along, Artemis watched her carefully, noting a change in her demeanor, which had gone from happy to intensely quiet and nervous. She began to focus on nothing in particular, a tinge of fear spreading into her amethyst-blue eyes. Touching her arm caused her to jump.

“Hey, where are you?” he whispered. Startled by his touch, she gave him a look that hatched fear in him. Grimacing in disgust, she wiped her face a few times, as if trying to get something off it.

“Artemis, I need to get away from people,” she whispered, beginning to panic.

“Stop the coach!” he called out. Quickly, the wagon slowed to a halt. Artemis quickly paid the driver, then ran down a side street after Chrysalis, who had launched into the air, flying low to the ground. He followed her into a vacant alley, and noticed her hands were raised, as if warding off a threat.

“Tell me, Chrysalis, “tell me,” he whispered, looking both ways to make sure they were still unseen. Suddenly choking, she grabbed at her neck, struggling for air. Artemis felt helpless as he watched her struggle. After a moment, she gasped, taking in breaths of air as if she had just come up from deep water.

“It's Raven,” she gasped.

“Where is she?” he inquired, a sudden intensity in his demeanor. Desperately, Chrysalis gripped Artemis by the arm.

“The tomb. Balamur! Oh no! Run, Raven, run! What are you doing? Get out, get out now!” she screamed. A cold dread washed over Artemis at the mention of Balamur, but all he could do was watch and listen to Chrysalis as she began to weep golden tears of blood. Her eyes widened as she lost balance. Artemis reached out and steadied her as he looked at his wife, suddenly afraid.

“What can we do?” he asked.

“Aldean, Aldean, Aldean!” She screamed, her face twisting into desperation. Staggering, she spun around, as if looking for something.

“Please, I need you, Aldean!” An Elf, suddenly standing at arms length from Chrysalis, took Artemis completely off guard. In an instant, his eyes shaded to black. He snarled at him as the man quickly advanced. Chrysalis pulled free of Artemis and staggered back, a pleading look in her eyes as she stared at the Kithillian Elf. Without hesitation, Artemis launched at him, daggers flashing. Even with the speed of his attack, the man simply waved him away, as if disinterested. As he did, Artemis stopped in mid-attack, frozen, as if petrified by the eye of Medusa.

Chrysalis abruptly arched her back and screamed, blood quickly pooling about her chest, just over her heart. As she fell to her back, she began writhing on the ground, gagging for breath, as blood steadily spread in all directions through her white dress. Aldean quickly knelt by her side and waved a hand over her heart, his eyes widening in astonishment. Instantly, the unseen wound and the effects of it reversed until she was healed. Wasting no time, Chrysalis gripped him by the collar and desperately cried out two words.

“Tomb, Balamur!”

“Think of the location of the tomb! Picture it in your mind!” Aldean urged as he placed a hand upon her head and closed his eyes. After a moment, he simply vanished into thin air, leaving Artemis and Chrysalis to themselves.

Artemis lashed out with, striking thin air as he staggered. Spinning about, he scanned the area, suddenly finding he and Chrysalis were alone. Coming to his senses, he fell to his knees by Chrysalis as she sat up, extending her wings to keep from damaging them further.

“Easy, easy. Are we okay?” he said, panicked. Clutching him, she sobbed.

“Raven!” She desperately called out. “Don't do it!” Holding her tight, Artemis rocked Chrysalis gently, trying to help just by being there. A terrible thought came to him then of Raven being killed. If she died, half his heart would die as well. He could not take it one more time. Never before had he felt so totally and completely helpless . . . useless. He could induce a dream upon her, but it would be inappropriate for the situation. Chrysalis was his link to Raven, and the events occurring.

After a time, Chrysalis relaxed, shivering as if suddenly cold. Slowly, she closed her eyes, falling asleep in the middle of a lightless alleyway. Gently, he cradled her in his arms, making her as comfortable as possible. Kissing her tenderly, he whispered, “We can have dinner tomorrow night.” Smiling, Chrysalis open her eyes halfway and looked at him.

“I'm so tired. Can we have dinner tomorrow night?”

“Yes,” Artemis replied, throwing her a fleeting smile, “of course we can.” Picking Chrysalis up, he carried her back to the guild house, managing to avoid prying eyes.

As he tucked her into bed, he combed his fingers through her hair.

“You rest up. I'll keep watch over you.” She smiled and mumbled something about a hug and a dance, then drifted into a deep, restful slumber. Not wishing to disturb her, Artemis quietly pulled a chair to the edge of the bed, sat down, and watched over her until she suddenly awoke halfway through the night, even as Raven quietly slipped through the door.

As she entered the room, her eyes fell upon her Vampire. Throwing him a half-smile, she stopped, controlling her emotions. Slowly, Artemis stood, walked over to her and embraced Raven without a word. For the longest while, he simple held her, relieved she was safe. After a time, she whispered, “I love you fangs.” Her words melted and pained him to the core of his soul. Loosening his hold, he looked at her, hoping she would fill him in on what had occurred. Truthfully, he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

“Your business is your own, Raven. I'm just glad you are safe.”

“I'll tell you everything, Artemis. I cannot keep anything from you.” Artemis shook his head and began fixing her hair.

“Raven, for now, try and rest. Dream of pleasant things if you can actually sleep. The point is, you need to rest.” Raven sighed heavily.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Focussing, Taia tapped into the Essence, instantly feeling it surge to life within her entire being, its brilliance escaping her eyes like that of the radiant sun in its zenith. Reaching up, she did not hesitate to pull free the black band of gold. As the ring slipped from her finger, she gave Artemis one last look of regret before the entire jail cell fell away beneath her feet.

The ring should have taken her to into the Underworld, to the Receiving Tower, yet that destination was simply not to be. A feeling of cold crept into her heart as the familiar scene of the Training Room came into focus. Turning a slow circle, Mitcheio's lead apprentice looked down to find herself at the center of a Circle of Containment. About the entire edge of the circle were set runes which burned as freshly refined silver.

Looking around, she took in the twelve Guardians with drawn blades facing her at every point, their attention fixed on her, ready to take her down. Instantly, Taia knelt in submission, not daring to challenge those she knew; those she had always considered family. Steadily, the burning fire of golden hue faded from her eyes, then vanished altogether.

"I submit to thy will, oh loyal Guardians. Let it be noted, I give no resistance." One Guardian held out her hand in silence. Without hesitation, Taia tossed the ring to her, turned toward the entrance doors, and waited in fear for her mother to appear. She had much explaining to do, and it panicked her to no end to face Mitcheio. What frightened her even more, was, would mother believe her. Above all, she knew she would be expelled from the only true home she ever had.

The time in which she waited was the longest moment of her life. As the moments crawled by, seemingly at a standstill, Taia braided and un-braided her red hair more than twenty times. After a while, Mitcheio walked into the large Portal Chamber, led by her personal Forever Guardian. At once, the Guild Master caught Taia's eye and approached, no readable emotion on her face. With a soft-spoken word, Katcha stopped and waited in silence as Mitcheio continued toward Taia. As she stopped before the runed circle, she looked at her intensely for a time, causing Taia to tremble and her eyes to cloud with emotion. At length, she smiled at Taia.

"Return to your posts my friends. Please give Katcha the ring." Without hesitation, all twelve Guardians saluted her and withdrew, leaving Taia and Mitcheio to themselves. Stepping into the circle, Mitcheio knelt directly in front of Taia, who began to softly weep. Mitcheio looked at Taia's trembling hands, a look of compassion filling her countenance.

"My wonderful Taia, tell me what you had planned." Without a moment to lose, Taia began to confess everything to her master.

"When I came here, I was so lost, void of purpose . . . out of control, mother. I've been listening to Raven ever since she came here. I know what she is," Taia whispered, the tears now flowing all the more.

"And tell me, Taia, what is she? What do you know of Raven? Taia, I feel a great

conflict raging within you, but I do not understand. Will you help me to understand?" Taia wiped her face, suddenly terrified.

"She is death. She is going to serve the dark one, and help strike Gaunten down. She doesn't feel she has any other option, but to go to that . . . monster." Taia grit her teeth, shivering. Mitcheio shook her head slightly, her demeanor softening all the more.

"Oh Taia, what were you going to do?" Taia looked up at Mitcheio, shivering.

"I was going to offer myself to him. I was going to infiltrate their ranks. Then, when Gaunten was attacked, I was going to betray and thwart their design." Caressing her cheek, Mitcheio shook her head.

"The moment you arrived, you would have been taken, and if not tortured and killed, enslaved to do a dark work for our enemy. Taia, even if I tried to do it, I do not believe I could succeed." Mitcheio pulled Taia into her arms, embracing her tight. "I wish you would have come to me and asked how you could help. But, now, here we are. I know what you desire. Taia, do you still wish to unweave the enemy? Do you yet yearn to weaken him?" Taia hugged her master desperately.

"Forgive me, mother. Yes I do," she sobbed out in desperation.

"Then, let me teach you more. Let me still be your mentor, and you will be my student. Let us move on and fashion a plan designed just for your abilities. Then, when the time comes, you may unleash fury and destruction upon an enemy that is surely coming. The King needs gifted servants like you. I need you." Taia gripped Mitcheio as if she were about to be torn from her forever. "Calm down Taia. I forgive you. Your heart was in the right place, though your method was reckless and unwise. Taia, I am going to tell you something, and I need you to keep it a secret."

"I will, I promise," Taia said as Mitcheio helped her stand. As the black Witch Guild Master wiped the tears from her students face, she began telling her all about Raven, and what she truly was. They spoke quite some time before Taia began to show signs of the vampiric change, first manifesting within her eyes. When Mitcheio finished telling her all about Raven and Chrysalis, she sighed, feeling emotionally drained.

"Raven needs your assistance. If you both call me mother, does that not mean you are sisters?" Taia nodded, understanding more than ever about the situation.

"Yes, yes it does. I see now," she stated as an unnatural tremor coursed through her entire body. "I am infected, Mother. I feel the change coming on." Mitcheio smiled.

"I understand." Taia shook her head.

"No, you don't. How could you? I'm sorry to be oppositional. Forgive me, but you cannot understand this." Mitcheio placed her hands on both sides of Taia's head, looked deep into her eyes and slowly whispered, "Taia, I know exactly what you are experiencing. I am not ignorant of the curse you have flowing through your veins. Now, do you wish to be rid of this curse, or

keep it? I will leave that decision to you.” Mitcheio noticed Taia's eyes were completely bloodshot, and the area about her eyes was darkening. Shuddering, her lead apprentice looked at Mitcheio as if helpless and lost.

“I'm scared, Mother. I don't want this. I made a mistake, and I fear I am to reap the consequences of my actions. How is it to be avoided now?” Mitcheio kissed Taia on the forehead, then began fixing her hair.

“Close your eyes, daughter.” Taia did as she was asked, shuddering and gritting her teeth. Mitcheio then pulled her into a firm embrace.

“Focus upon the infection you feel. Blend with it. Try.” Taia shivered, then began to breath more calm. As she did, a golden light slowly enveloped her. Soon that splendorous power washed over Mitcheio as well. Then, simply, it was gone, vanishing, as if it was never there. Taia opened her eyes, which were no longer bloodshot.

“I no longer see the dark change in your eyes,” Mitcheio stated. Greatly relieved, Taia sighed.

“Thank you, mother. Thank you for healing me.” Mitcheio grinned.

“Now, go back to your studies. Make amends to those you have offended. I will see you soon.” They parted, and as they did, Mitcheio raised a hand, making a sign.

As Taia left the chamber, each Guardian she passed saluted her with respect. Mitcheio watched her first apprentice leave the Portal Chamber. After she was gone, Mitcheio looked after her, as if she could see her still, a loving and well pleased expression burning within her dark eyes.

“I did not heal you, daughter,” she whispered. “You did that yourself.”

Zane arose from the dinner table, her plate of food untouched. Angry, she vanished from the chamber, appearing a few hundred feet from the Black Griffin Inn within the Earthen Plane.

“Why did you not come?” she whispered in controlled fury. Off to her left, among the taller grasses, a man's voice came in answer to her question.

“I could not.” Turning, she saw Selman VanDrake walking toward her. Her eyes glimmered red in open rage, yet only for a moment.

“In all the centuries you have asked for my hand, you back out when I will finally say yes?” Selman stopped before her, disappointment carved into his countenance.

“Tha`Shealin, look into my eyes and tell me you love me.” Looking at him, she smiled. But, slowly, her smile faded away. Selman bowed slightly.

“There are many factions in Utaemia, each striving for their own means to an end. You are one faction, I am another. I know what you want of me, and I will not do it. I just wish . . .” Tha`Shealin laughed, cutting him off.

“I wish also. Oh, Selman, I fear the next time we meet, I will have to kill you. I don't want to.” Shaking his head slightly, he threw her a faint smile. As he did, he witnessed a tear escape her eye. She might not love him, yet she enjoyed him more than any man she had ever met. Nearing, he brushed the tear from her cheek.

“I brought your favorite book, if you would like to throw away all the cares of the evening. We could go somewhere, just the two of us, away from everything, and read for a while.” He produced a book from his robes, showing it to her.

“No, I will go back home and eat dinner by myself. You know, I almost, truly, passionately love you.” He smiled, putting the book away.

“The next time I see you, milady, you might just kill me. But, I could never kill you. It would truly break my heart.” She smiled.

“You used to be ruthless, Selman VanDrake, Dragonlord, Dragonborn, High Warden of Wardenoth Keep, defender of this realm,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “What changed you?” He did not hesitate in an explanation she did not wish to hear.

“I noticed everyone and everything as unique, like each book we have read together. If we dominate all of them, we lose many treasure of knowledge and pleasure. It vanishes away forever. Then, all we are left with is a wasteland wherein unique treasures are no longer found.” Tha`Shealin stepped back, tears suddenly falling. Confused, she shook her head, her eyes suddenly burning with searing flame.

“I hate you, Selman. I hate you!” Selman advanced on her without notice and grabbed the Underworld's Dragon Queen, embracing her tight, though he felt her hesitate. Before she could push him away, he stepped back.

“You are always in my thoughts, in my mind and heart. I will never stop loving you.

Even if you kill me.” Growling, she put a hand to her mouth.

“Stop it,” she hissed. In reply, Selman ignited with searing white-hot flames, his demeanor changing to that of a terrible, menacing fiend.

“You cannot make me!” he returned, challenging her, his presence suddenly so dark and terrible as to cause the air about them both to fade to darkened shadow. About Zane's feet, the earth scorched and charred.

“I should do it!” she yelled at him. Selman leapt at her with such speed, she had no time to defend. Embracing her, he kissed her.

She could throw him away easily, and she knew it, but she hesitated, then slowly gave in, embracing her Dragonlord tight. Parting, she looked into his eyes without blinking.

“I do love you with all my soul, milord. I don't want to kill you.” Selman ran his hands through her lengthy, thick, black hair.

“Then don't. You are the queen. Make your own decree. Who is to stop you?” Calming down, she sighed.

“No one.” With that, she vanished, leaving Selman alone in the night, amidst a ring of smoldering, charred grass.

Looking down, he opened his hand and smiled at the blue silk ribbon he had stolen from her hair. Putting the ribbon in his pocket, he quickly drew out a small glass vial, unstopped it, then began running the open end across his face where Tha`Shealin's tears had mingled with his skin. He then sealed the vial and, along with the ribbon, placed them in his pocket.

Rynox waited in the Receiving Tower for his Apprentice Gorgonoth to be escorted to him by Drath. When the pedestal began to glow, the Vuolg King watched the runes on the floor come to life with growing anticipation. Yet, as the charred remains of Drath fell in a smoldering pile upon the pedestal, he growled, his eyes narrowing in fury and hatred as the image of a Kithillian Elf shimmered into being, his feet planted firmly within Drath's remains.

Aldean smiled brightly at the King of the Vuolg, enjoying the look on his face. Bowing formally to Rynox, the Captain of The Guard of El' Anara chuckled and pointed at the dark lord.

“You should see the look on your face. Oh, my apologies for not formally introducing myself. How rude of me. Rynox, my name is Aldean, and I am the cause of the failure in your feeble attempt to create a new Gorgonoth.” The smiling Elf sent Rynox into a fiery rage that left the two tower guards dead. When the flames of his wrath subsided, Aldean looked around and shook his head, feigning sadness.

“You know, you shouldn't do that. Your temper is why you remain contained within your dying world.” Panting, Rynox pointed at Aldean.

“Come to me, and let's settle this here, now.” Smiling happily, Aldean laughed, then kicked the head of Drath into the feet of Rynox.

“I should, but I have to find that Gorgonoth embryo of yours. She was not too happy about the death of that worm,” Aldean laughed, pointing at Drath's skull. Then, just as quickly as he had laughed, a seriousness moulded into his face that meant business.

“It won't take long to find her . . . it. You never know; maybe I'll bring your puppet to the side I serve. We'll see. She is very illusive. Either way, her evil dies this day, or her miserable life. I have to say, the Figment you found is worth ten of your pathetic Gorgonoth. Hey, like they always say: Finders keepers.” Aldean, shook his head in shame at Rynox. Aldean pointed a finger at Rynox.

“That was an incredibly long amount of time to get this Gorgonoth ready. Too bad for you, you wasted your time. Let's take a rain check on your challenge, shall we? Don't get me wrong, I do not decline your invitation to dance. In fact, I accept . . . just not at the moment.” Shaking with rage, Rynox reached down and picked up the Balamur's skull, as if suddenly interested in it.

“I am coming for her. Where is she? Tell me or I will lay waste to every village, town and city until I find her.” Aldean smiled brightly and burst into laughter, as if having a good time.

“I would let you guess where she is, but if you are going to wipe out the peasant population, in your token of your bravery, I will get right to the answer. I believe she has ties to Gaunten somehow, which is a riddle I am trying to figure out. She has a boyfriend there. My guess is Gaunten, yes, Gaunten. I will precede her there.” Brimming with rage, Rynox spit at

Aldean.

“I am the true King! Fool, you would give me her location?” Aldean rolled his eyes and laughed at Rynox.

“Rynox, you are coming to attack Gaunten anyways, this is no secret. So, it doesn't matter if you know or not. I need to go hunt down my very own Gorgonoth in the making, because you bore me. Truly, it was . . . interesting . . . to speak with you.” Aldean bowed slightly, to which Rynox bowed in return.

“Let the games begin,” the Vuolg King stated, a sudden calm in his voice.

Raven and Chrysalis awoke and sat up at the same time, drawing the attention of Artemis, who was still reading.

“Good morning Princesses,” Artemis said as he sat foreword in his chair. “What's on the menu I can help you avoid today?” Raven laughed as Chrysalis looked at him, narrowing her eyes. Raven jumped out of the bed and half-crouched, stalking up to Artemis, her hair grooming itself instantly. Her tail coiled about her waist and vanished under her travelling clothes as she neared, her teeth clicking, her eyes beginning to glow with a reddish hue. As Raven neared, her Vampire slowly rested back in the chair, trying to avoid being touched. Chrysalis laughed in that musical voice of hers, enjoying the scene.

“Raven, play nice, or I'll have to put you in your place,” Artemis warned, trying not to smile. She stopped, almost touching his face with hers and breathed on him.

“Let's fight,” she whispered, snapping her teeth in his face.

“Alright, but not here,” he replied, his eyes darkening.

“Where?” she insisted. Artemis slipped up and over the back of the soft-chair in one fluid motion, somehow ending up behind her. Grabbing her arm, he spun her about to face him, then hugged her tight.

“Thank Vannar you made it back. Don't you ever scare me like that again. What if I lost you?” Nuzzling into his hold, she set her ear against his chest, listening to him speak with his heart.

“I Thank Vannar you still love me, she happily replied. Artemis gave Chrysalis an odd look, shaking his head.

“I will always love you, mischief maker. Always.” Tuning out his voice, she listened to his being, reading more into what he was communicating to her by her Blood Sense ability. Smiling with joy, she hugged him tight.

“Sorry to disappoint you, sir, but this moment of peace will be fleeting. He is coming for me.” Artemis instantly stiffened, like an alpha wolf being challenged.

“Who?” he whispered. Raven laughed, as if it was funny he cared.

“Rynox, the Vuolg King of the Underworld,” She could feel jealousy wash through Artemis, causing her to grin even the more.

“You are jealous,” she stated, feigning surprise. Artemis gently pushed Raven back, locking eyes with her.

“We will see if he can reach you.” Raven noticed a hint of something glowing within the depths of his eyes, something she had never seen or felt. She had to admit, he was beginning to scare her. On the bed, Chrysalis moved back, suddenly nervous.

“Artemis,” Raven assured, “no tyrant will ever win my affection and loyalty. I make my own choices. I call my own destiny, aided by those I call,” she touched his hand, “loved ones.”

Looking down, Artemis tried to smile, but only trembled.

“I have held a truth from you, Raven. I have even lied to you. Forgive this fool.” Raven gripped his hand tight.

“I forgive you with all my soul, Artemis.” She watched him without blinking, in silence, giving him her full attention. She could feel a debate battling within his mind, and it began to frighten her.

“My name is not Artemis. Artemis is an alias I use.” She took a step back, waiting for him to change into the Vuolg King, or something worse.

“Tell me.”

“All I do, all I have ever told you, is the truth. I do find those in need and take them to Sanctuary, as we have already done together. All is the same with the exception of two truths.” Raven felt a chill within her.

“What two truths?”

“My name and my true age. My name is Lothurian, and I am a Prince of my own nation. We are a quiet people who enjoy aiding others. For untold generations, we have brought those, like Krisha and Ogrin, who were cast off by their own, to Sanctuary. Slowly, Raven sat down on the soft-chair, adjusting her wings to either side as Chrysalis stared at Artemis.

“You told me about Ogrin, but what about Krisha? What happened to her that needed your assistance?”

“Raven, she is in the trial one presents to your kind. By helping me bring Ogrin and you safely to Sanctuary, she has gained her soul. She has passed The Test, and is now what she desires to be. Raven, she was also a Figment, as you are now.” Raven fidgeted, her mind in a sudden whirl of thoughts and questions.

“What is she? What did she choose, Artemis? Artemis laughed.

“She is . . .”, he stalled for a moment, “now taken the form of a wondrous creature known as a Janthina, a creature drawn to the loyal and good souls of those who need healing and nurture.” Raven's mind spun as she closed her eyes.

“Where is Ogrin?”

“Sanctuary. He is happy,” he whispered. Raven smelled fear steadily rising in Artemis . . . Lothurian.

“Why did you keep this from me?”

“I knew at the right time, you would know. I kept my true identity from you for the security of those in Sanctuary, as well as you. The thoughts of others can be deciphered, just as you can read me now, by your innate ability to listen to the heart, blood and soul of the one you focus upon. Yes, I know what you can do.” Raven abruptly stood.

“There is something else . . . something you want to tell me. Please Art - Lothurian, tell me, please.” Instantly he knelt and motioned her to kneel with him. Without any hesitation, she

knelt before him and looked at him, waiting, feeling an excitement building within him. This instantly caused her curiosity to peek.

“When Taia came the first time, I felt the Essence of Eternity within me. It was then, I knew not only why you came here, but why I felt drawn to this place as well. All my life I have felt it, though did not understand what it was. Now I believe I know, and I believe it is why I can so easily locate lost ones in need of Sanctuary.” He smiled a little at Raven, obviously nervous at her reaction. She could read the fear of rejection in him.

“Lothurian. Tell me about who you are. I don't feel I know you now.”

“I was born during the Age of War, when the insanity raged in the hearts of so many, and the stench of death hung heavily in the air upon every land, and within the winds coursing over every sea. I was trained as a Warrior, Empath and Dreamweaver, to gather in and deliver those who could not stand on their own. While I wanted to lead my people to victory, my blessed father taught me to lead people to safety. In the beginning, I grudgingly did so, until after three failed attempts to succeed. I felt their blood on my hands, and the weight of those stains awoke something within me. Never would I fail again. I created many lethal enemies, and so took on other names to secure my secrecy. When I found you, I had been Artemis for a very long time.” Lothurian stopped and took a few breaths, thinking before he continued.

“This is why I chose to keep my identity secret. That is really all there is to me, except that I am the third son of the King of the Ardenoth race.” Raven thought about Lothurian's story as he waited for her response. She thought about him, at this critical time, here in this guild.

“Have you told Mitcheio what happened to you when Taia came here?” Shaking his head, he sighed.

“I want to. She knows everything but my experience with the Essence of Eternity.”

“You need to,” Raven said. Lothurian nodded.

“I will today.” Raven reached out, placing a hand on his heart. It was filled with regret more than anything.

“Lothurian, being here in fear may impact your learning, should you ask it of Mitcheio. Do not fear, or regret. You did what needed to be done. I believe keeping your identity a secret was wise.” Throwing him a reassuring look made him smile and raise a hand over her hand upon his heart.

“Are we okay, you and I?” he asked in earnest. Raven bared her fangs at him.

“I'm sure we are, fangs. I know we are.” Leaning forward, she squinted her eyes in a sentimental gesture.

“Now it is my turn. I lied to you when I said your items were lost. They were not. They have been buried outside my tomb until yesterday. I have them here, now. I had to get them. I also retrieved seven bands of black-gold which once adorned the fingers of the Vuolg scum who whipped me.” Raven sighed. “Can I please keep calling you Artemis? I like that name.”

Lothurian laughed, his mood lightening.

“Please. Can we keep this between you and I?”

“That is an unspoken, sir.”

Disturbed, Mitcheio made her way toward Raven's door, carrying a scroll delivered to her, to give to her three guests. Katcha followed on her right, stone-faced and cold, a hand resting upon the hilt of his blade. The Essence Magician Guild Master stopped at the door to Raven's room and quickly knocked.

Within the hour both Raven and Chrysalis stood before the King. Artemis was permitted to accompany them into the throne room, in which the King sat at a table with his advisors. A number of Sardakk Elves were present, standing at attention to the left and right of the King who was looking over a detailed map of the Zurkel Mainland. Looking up, he stood and bowed, respectfully acknowledging their presence.

“Welcome Raven, Chrysalis, Artemis. I wish we could be meeting under more pleasant circumstances. I will get directly to business. Early this morning, a message was delivered to the castle in a cowardly manner.” He held out his hand toward Mitcheio, who handed him the scroll. Popping the end off the scroll-case, the King slid the message out, unrolled it and read the message on the parchment:

“Deliver up the  
Gorgonoth, and  
I will spare your  
city and the people  
in all your land.”

The King lowered the scroll and clenched his teeth. Looking directly at Raven, Nishane Asmond smiled.

“He thinks we have one of his. He thinks you are to be his Gorgonoth. What say you, Raven?” The Sardakk Warriors about the King looked at her in silence, stern and intimidating, instantly making her feel out of place and unbalanced.

“I don't know what to think of Rynox. I wish I had been given a choice in all this. He might have been surprised at the result. If I had accepted the Vuolg worm's invitation to be tested, to perhaps serve him in the capacity of Gorgonoth, I would not be here.” A man seated at the end of the table slowly stood.

“My king, if we do not hand her over to him, death will follow, and not just here at the center-point of your stronghold and realm.” His attention then fell upon Raven. “On the other hand, if we hand her over to him, he will use her to lead his armies against us. His promises are lies. Either way, Rynox will attack. It has been that foul serpent's plan all along. I don't know you, milady, except for what I am learning of you now. So far, it is not much to judge you by.”

Throwing her a half smile, he looked her over, studying Raven's dark demeanor, her hollow eyes of deepest night.

"Raven, the king informed me you have been called to the station of Knight of Vannar. That is all I need to know. I will not only fight and die along side you, but will fight and live along side you with pleasure." He then winked at her, a twinkle in his eye. "Of course living is far more desirable." He bowed to Raven, then sat down. Taken back, Raven looked at him, instantly liking the man. Again, all eyes shifted back to her. Even Chrysalis was staring at her, which was odd, but she had to play the part. Still it did nothing to relieve the stress of the moment.

"Thank you sir. I know you less than you know me, yet I hold your same view." Raven looked to the king, hoping he would speak. He did not, but nodded slightly, indicating he wished to hear her. Rather terrified, Raven looked about the throne room.

"I met a Sardakk Elf once. To tell you the truth, I tried to kill him." At this point, she made sure to avoid eye contact with any Sardakk Elf in the room.

"We defeated him, yet Artemis," she looked up, throwing him a brief smile, "called a halt to the fight, for he recognized not only his race, but that he was a Knight of Vannar. We spoke for a short time before he helped us escape his own hunting party. In the short conversation we had, I was so impressed with him, from that time forth, I craved the knighthood he served. It was this man who burned a pathway into my mind. It has been Artemis who has kept me to it. Because of this, I am now a Knight of Vannar, as well as my best friend, Chrysalis." Chrysalis glanced at the King, then lowered her eyes.

"It seems you all expect me to say something of consequence. I don't have a speech prepared. This is the first council meeting I've ever attended. So, I will just say this: If Rynox, or any other fool comes near my King, I will send him or her into the next world. My apologies if I am a burden or a nuisance to anyone. If, by my service, the Second Age of War can be avoided, I will do whatever my brother needs me to do. I have spoken." Raven felt awkward, being among such grim and determined heroes, whose presence threatened to unbalance her.

All within the throne room regarded her in silence, making her feel as though she was on display. Stealing a glance at the Sardakk Elves, she was shocked to see each and every one of them staring at her, their eyes burning with pride, their right hand over their heart.

Raven felt herself beginning to tremble and sweat. Her head hurt from the stress of, no doubt, weathered and mighty men and women putting her on the spot. As she wiped her face, the King gave her a look of concern.

"Raven, are you well?" he asked, suddenly standing and coming around the table. Raven looked at her hand, which blurred and then came back into focus.

"Oh, no," she lamented, looking up at the King as he neared. She threw Artemis a look of fear. "I need . . . I . . . oh no. Not now!" She turned to the King as he neared.

“Will I ever know peace?” she mourned, and knelt near the table. Artemis knelt beside her, supporting her. The King stepped back, holding up a hand to his guards, who became instantly concerned.

“Whatever happens here, now, understand this, Raven is my family.” In unison, everyone in the throne room saluted and observed Raven as she tensed, then laid her head against her husband’s shoulder, suddenly weeping tears of gold and silver.

“I’m scared, Artemis. Stay with me, please.”

“I am here. I am with you,” he assured her. Chrysalis shuddered and bowed her head, trying to keep control of herself. Seeing what was about to happen, Mitcheio quickly took Chrysalis by the hand.

“With your permission, I will continue her training, my King.” Asmond nodded and gestured to the exit doors.

“Please,” he stated in haste. Mitcheio pulled Chrysalis out of the throne room, Katcha following to best shield Chrysalis from the view of the others present. To Raven’s relief, Chrysalis was soon gone, and non-to-soon. As the doors to the throne room shut, Raven grit her teeth as a wave of intense distress washed through her.

“Artemis, I can’t take this anymore.” As she spoke, the feathers of her wings shaded to a darkness so intense, the light from nearby lanterns and sconces dimmed to the illumination of mere candles.

Groaning in agony, Raven felt her mind bend and twist into her own thoughts, dividing, as if a separate entity, a life form, separated from her, then called out to her. Knowing she had to pass through this, Raven turned inward, giving herself over to the evolutionary change . . .

. . . it was strange to find herself looking into the polished surface of what appeared to be a full-sized, oval mirror. Reaching up, Raven rested the tips of her fingers upon the surface of a mirror that did not copy her movement, and that was not crafted from glass.

“Who are you?” she whispered. In reply, her reflection blinked slowly, as if time had slowed to a crawl.

“I am you,” she replied.

“Then, why do you not copy my movements?” Her reflection's eyes darkened even more as a faint crack began to run from the top of the mirror downward.

“Because you do not believe this mirror truly reflects you,” she replied. “Raven, you must accept the fact that you were born to darkness. You will never be Chrysalis. You are the mid of night.” Growling, Raven struck out at her reflection, clawing the mirror. Upon impact, the mirror began to chip and fragment at the very edges, though no damage was done to its center.

“I will not be darkness. I am not evil!” she screamed. “I am Vannar's servant!” Reaching up, Raven's reflection placed her hands upon the mirror as if by so doing she could hold it together.

“Raven, all that is darkness is not evil, and all that is light is not good. Meditate upon my words and you will know I am right.” Seething in anger, Raven thought about it.

“So, I am not evil?” Her reflection lowered her head slightly, locking eyes with Raven.

“Are you?” she returned, then glanced nervously at the mirror that slowly began to fall apart, piece by piece.

“I never was, I never will be. I am the captain of my own ship. I sail wherever I wish, and to my own choosing. I am not a slave!” Her reflection withdrew from the mirror as it began falling apart more rapidly, its outer edges crumbling and falling without sound.

“Are you sure?” she inquired, giving Raven a stern look, mingled with doubt. Raven placed a hand over her heart, feeling nothing. Nothing.

“Though my heart is stilled, I feel love for others. Yes, I am sure. I know what I want.” Shaking her head, Raven's reflection pointed at her.

“Have you seen the side you are rejecting? Have you tasted the power it offers?” Raven watched the mirror lose more pieces, now more quickly. She hated her reflection.

“Seen, yes. Felt, yes. I also felt the whips as they seared my back. I felt that thing's blade pierce my dead heart. I know, and I choose what makes me happy.” Her reflection screamed at

Raven, lashing out, trying to get to her as the mirror fell to pieces before her eyes. As the last piece fell into darkness, she looked around, seeing only blackness . . . soothing darkness. Pondering the dead of light within this place, Raven spoke her thoughts aloud.

“I am darkness. I am night. I am the void beyond the light of the moon, the stars, the sun. Black as a burnt and wasted forest, I am truly void of the glimmer which gives mankind hope to take sure steps in the night. But even, in all this, I am Raven, and I am who I am, with no outsiders telling me what I should believe or do. That is my choice . . . mine!” she screamed.

Raven opened her eyes to behold pain filling her Vampire's countenance. As her eyes caught his, she tried to smile, but failed.

"I am Raven, and you are Artemis. I know you, and I deeply, sincerely, honestly, eternally love you." The open pain she witnessed in him instantly melted away.

"I love you more," he mouthed. Raising to her knees, she kissed him, feeling the goodness and honor of the man she loved more than anything in all the worlds.

"Never," she whispered, defying him. "Not ever." Taking her hands, Artemis stood and lifted Raven to her feet. Looking around the throne room, she noticed all eyes were yet fixed on her.

"If you want to know if I am good or evil, I will tell you this: I am a deep and lightless void. I am truly darkness. Yet, in my darkness, I can love. In my night, I can be a friend." She looked at the King, drawing her blade. Nishane Asmond shook his head at one guards who instantly drew his blade and began to step foreword to defend his king.

Raven closed the distance between she and the King, flipping her blade so the point of it faced her own chest, over her heart. Kneeling before him, she looked up, pride burning in her countenance. Her entire being began to illuminate with the Essence of Eternity as she gazed upon her brother.

"Sire, in my darkest thoughts, in my lightless existence, within the hands of night which do uphold and caress my soul, I can be loyal," she whispered with such a passion, the King began to shed tears of joy.

"Even with no heart beating in my chest, I love you with all my soul. You are my friend, my comfort, my King and my brother. If I have not said it before, I hereby give all I am, all I think and feel, all I possess to your service. I serve the High King of this land, and I pledge myself to you as long as I shall find even the smallest spark of life remaining within me. Vannar bless me to bless your people forever." The King abruptly laughed for joy and pushed her blade away, then held out a hand to her. Dropping the blade, she gripped his hand. Lifting Raven, Nishane Asmond embraced her.

"Well met Raven, and well spoken. I accept you as you accept me." He released her, then ran a hand over her hair, smiling happily.

"Are you ready to help us turn this enemy back to where it came from?" Raven snatched up her blade and looked at it. Slowly, she shook her head, baring her teeth.

"Never was I given the choice in what I would be, until you. Therefore, the power I harbor as Gorgonoth will be turned upon their own heads. I will wreak confusion, chaos, disunity and death among them, as is my ability to do. That Rynox did not see the gifted power within me was his fatal mistake. Forever, I will hunt them." Raven began to pulse, but not with light, or the golden illumination of the Essence of Eternity, but a shade deeper night; a darkness none present

had ever beheld. Even the King stood in awe as he witnessed all sources of light within the throne room extinguish.

A murmur arose among all those present. One voice choked out a plea for the King to save him. In answer to his plea, the King drew forth his blade, the Sword of Life, holding it high. Instantly, the shadows of Raven were chased away from about him, yet only him.

Bending his will upon Raven, the King grit his teeth and focussed on her until she could be seen facing him with the most grim countenance. Truly she looked as though she were a blackened apparition in the midst of a company who suddenly feared her. The King locked his attention upon her as she placed two fingers to her own heart, then reached out and set her fingers upon Nishane Asmond's chest, over his heart.

“All that I can become in the service of Vannar, I recommit this day to all who hear my voice. I am Gorgonoth. I am a Knight of Vannar. I am darkness complete. I am Raven. I am the enemy of Rynox,” she stated with conviction.” Sheathing her blade, she stepped back, taking in a quivering breath, then let it out, closing her eyes. “I have spoken.”

The darkness began to recede from the edges of the large chamber, allowing the light of the torches and candles to once again shed their illumination as before. All darkness flowed into Raven, who trembled and shook as she received it back into her being. When all night had passed back into her, the King sheathed his blade and looked upon Raven for quite some time, deep in thought. All were silent, unmoving, waiting.

“I do not believe Vannar has ever enlisted a Gorgonoth, nor knighted such. Yet, here I stand - here we all stand - witnessing such a moment. Raven, one step at a time. One step at a time. Be patient, control and mask your emotions, lest you open yourself to suspicion. For your sake, bridle your passion for justice among those who have earned your wrath.”

Raven staggered slightly, using her wings to balance until the throne room ceased bending and warping in her vision. After gaining control of herself, she threw him a slight smile.

“Thank you for giving me a choice. In giving me say in what I desire, I see more clearly now. A Figment I am, but a Figment I will not be forever. Thank you, brother.” The king bowed formally to Raven.

“It is my great pleasure, Raven.” He smiled upon her, his countenance burning with pride. Nearing her, the king embraced Raven. “I am honored to make your acquaintance.” She wrapped her arms about him tight and laughed emotionally.

“I am lucky,” she whispered, glancing back at Artemis, “he found me.”

Raven was introduced to every person in the throne room that day, spending a few minutes with each, so she would know them by sight and name, if ever their paths crossed. Chrysalis was brought back in and also introduced in the same manner, which helped Raven to

remember more information about everyone she met.

At last, all had departed but Raven and the King. He had requested an audience with her, and so she remained behind. Alone, the two found themselves at his table once again.

“Raven, I have a task for you.” Instantly, she perked up.

“What would my King have me do?”

“I need you to go into the Vermillion Forest and hunt.” At his request, a sudden chill struck Raven in the chest, quickly turning to dread. The lashes on her back suddenly burned to life, causing her to flinch.

“Of course I will. When do we leave?” The King smiled and reached across the table, taking her hand.

“You will leave today, as soon as you get back to the guild. Raven, you must go alone. The reason is due to secrecy. Tears formed in her eyes as he spoke.

“Did I do something wrong milord? If I did, I will repent of it.” Shaking his head, the King squeezed her hand.

“No. All is right between you and I. I cannot tell you more, so you must trust me. I will not make you go, and will send you on a different path if you find yourself unable to do this. No shame will be laid upon you for declining.” Raven stood, instantly pulling her hand away.

“No, I will do what you ask. If you say there is a reason, yet you cannot reveal it, then there is a reason, and you need say no more.” The King stood and bowed to Raven.

“Thank you, Knight of Vannar.” She bowed in return.

“You are welcome, brother. Shall I go now? I am ready,” she stated boldly, throwing away the cold clawing at her chest and mind. Smiling, he nodded. Without hesitation, Raven turned and left the throne room.

He watched her go without blinking, or moving, as if he was a mere statue. After Raven was gone, and the doors to the throne room were shut, the King sat in silence for a while, a troubled look crossing the features of his handsome face.

“Do you think she can get through this? Do you believe she can, or will?” the soft voice of a woman whispered through the large chamber. The king sighed, slipping in deep thought for a time.

“She must be given a choice, void of ignorance. What she is, is not who she is. She needs to know, or we may bring disaster down upon many, including ourselves.” The King lowered his head. “In this, I do not fully understand. But, if you say this is the way it must be, then this is the only way. In the few short days I have spent with her, I have grown very fond of Raven. I believe she is stronger than she knows.” A silence followed for a time. Then the smooth melody of the woman's voice flowed through the throne room one last time.

“She is much stronger than she realizes, and, in this, if she discovers it, and chooses the diabolic path, she will be the key that opens the door to the Second Age of War. If she chooses the holy path, she will be the key that locks away the darkest Age the Earthen Plane would have ever known. What gives us all hope is that she has slain one of her own kind, and has travelled through Dragon Gate . . . twice. In this, I have hope. Aldean has mentored her to some degree. I have faith in his ability to bring out the best in every soul he nurtures. I believe Aldean is the counter-weight against the evil of this day. Have faith, my servant and friend. Have faith in the power of good.” King Nishane Asmond watched the doors through which Raven had departed.

“Always and forever, milady,” replied, a look of conviction etched into his countenance.

Returning straight to the guild, Raven went directly to her room, where Artemis and Chrysalis waited. As she entered, Artemis turned to her, seeing an unmistakable look written in the features of her face.

“Keep my belongings; the ones you recovered. Use what you need, then return them to me when you come back.” It pained her to see his worry and fear. She quickly ran into his arms, holding him desperately.

“I wanted to be Vannar's Knight. He knighted me. I want to help.” Artemis held her tight, like never before.

“Stay low if you fly. Be quick to hide and remain unseen at all times. Do what you must to quickly win each confrontation. Above all, Raven, come back to me.” Raven kissed him, then turned and departed, not looking back. She feared if she looked into his eyes again, she would falter.

Soon, Raven ended up before Mitcheio. Standing by the portal, she felt it come alive with energy. With a pit growing in her chest, Raven nodded, then leapt into it, her mind set on the place in which she had been tied and whipped so long ago.

As the Vermillion Forest materialized all about her, she slowly looked about the area, recognizing the very roots she had been strapped to. Though time had continued in its course, the searing pain of the many lashes laid against her back began to burn, driving her to her knees, nearly causing her to cry out. Crawling to the very spot where she had been tied, she slowly brought her trembling hands up and gripped the roots where the ropes had secured her, feeling the strike of each whip, one by one as before.

The first strike:

She gripped the roots of the tree, digging the tips of her fingers into it.

The second set of strikes:

She growled, lowering her head. The pain was excruciating, unrelenting.

The third set of strikes:

She heard the sound of each lash as they travelled the distance from the wielder to her flesh. As they landed upon her back and shoulders, she flinched, bloody tears beginning to stream from her eyes.

“Why . . .”

The fourth set of strikes:

She cried out as they landed down her spine. She screamed, her nails piercing through the roots, making them bleed and drip a dark-red pitch.

“ . . . won't . . .”

The fifth set of strikes:

As each struck the base of her neck, searing down her shoulder and back, she convulsed and twisted. Again, she screamed, wishing to die. She began to crush the roots within her grasp, and as she did the tree swayed slightly. A groan ascended from beneath her, as if coming up from the earth. Snarling like a caged animal, Raven felt a strength begin to fill her.

“ . . . you speak . . .”

The sixth set of strikes:

Unmercifully each sliced at an angle, from her left shoulder, down to the right side of her hip. Her tears of blood quickly darkened to black as she jerked and tensed with the strike. Falling forward against the spider-like roots of the Vermillion Tree, Raven gasped in shock, sucking in ragged breaths, then sobbed, feeling her heart breaking, as if Artemis had just rejected her. Her

tears of black, blood-like pitch instantly ignited, burning away into thin strands of shadowy, darkened, flame.

“ . . . to me!” she screamed.

#### The seventh set of strikes:

The last came down upon her, searing into her flesh as tongues of unbearable, shocking pain and torture. Like an animal, Raven snapped, instantly flying into a rage against the pain she knew only once before. Ripping the roots of the Vermillion Tree asunder, Raven hacked and slashed and tore every root until the tree wavered unsteadily, then fell with a crash to the auburn earth that once supported, nurtured, and gave it life. Screaming in a froth of rage, Raven killed the first thing that had ever aided her enemy to bring pain into her life.

After it was over, she looked at her trembling hands, seeing them stained crimson with the blood of the tree. She stopped dead cold, as if frozen. Gazing down at the pitch dripping through her fingers, curiosity struck her.

“What is this?” she whispered, reviled at the sight of the dark blood on her hands. Raising a hand, she smelled it, suddenly taking in an aroma she soon wished she had not. Instantly, hunger filled her, and she tasted the liquid on her fingers. Instantly, she craved more. Eagerly, she dropped before a broken, twisted, root and fed from it, turning her head so her mouth caught the crimson sap, drinking her fill. What she needed now was water, rest and healing.

The crack of wood to her left instantly brought her to high alert. Raven dropped to the ground on all fours and listened, throwing out her senses to detect the beat of a heart and the song of every soul within the area. As she lowered, she could see web-like threads slowly drift down past her, gently splaying out onto the blood-sap stained earth. She listened and waited, wondering at the cause of the sound. As she waited the earth rippled and shifted beneath her hands. Quickly, she moved back, staring at the ground.

“Who are you?” she whispered, and heard her question whispered back to her repeatedly in the sound of her own voice. Suddenly angry, she growled out a challenge, to which she was challenged with a growl like her own.

“No,” she stated, her voice echoing unnaturally. “I am drugged.” She looked at the bloody pitch of the Vermillion Tree, pouring like cold honey from every broken root.

“Self inflicted,” she whispered, and heard herself whisper the same a dozen times. The sound of her own voice infuriated her. Slowly, she closed her eyes a thousand times, never opening them again, and focussed inward on cleansing her body of the sap. The thought caused her to laugh forever, and once her eternal laughter ended, she froze, stiff as stone, feeling the pain of seven thousand lashes dancing sadistically upon her back, beckoning her to come and endlessly die. Shadows began to dance and play before her as she felt the skin and flesh on her

back begin to fragment and lift with the sound of water being poured into over-heated grease. Raven groaned, feeling her bones being stripped of skin and flesh that rose into the air in a cloud of ash-like gore.

“Get out of me,” she hissed angrily. Out!” The blackened spider webs trailing from her eyes began to lighten, slowly spinning into a golden luminescence as she stared at her fingers and moved them, curious as to why her bones remained still.

Slowly breaking out of that unseen grip, Raven focussed a dozen times on her legs and feet until they reluctantly moved. She then turned her attention to her arms and legs, meditating on freeing them, followed by her chest and hips. Struggling against something, she knew not what, Raven began to pant, sucking air into her burning lungs, though she did not need to breath. Still, it was a relieve to be free from the effects of the Vermillion Sap. Slowly, she stood three times and looked around, seeing elusive shadows creeping at the edges of her sight.

Then, of a sudden, it was over.

Coming to herself, she gripped a broken root, steadying herself as she focussed on even, steady breaths. After a few moments of getting herself together, Raven slowly looked to the pitch oozing from the end of a broken root.

“Never drink the sap,” she whispered. The golden hue of Raven's eyes slowly diminished, and she was left to herself, standing amidst the wreckage of a tree that had nothing to do with her life of pain.

“I killed it for no purpose . . . anger, anger.” Again, behind her, Raven heard a sound off in the thickness of the forest . . . the slightest cry of a twig as it snapped.

“Who's there?” she whispered. “Show yourself, please.” Why she had asked please, struck her as odd. “I'm hearing things which are not there,” she whispered. If she knew she was alone, why then did she feel like she was being watched? Why did she feel as though doom drew nigh?

Crouching low, she spied the area about her, turning in a full circle. Finding the most spacious opening, she launched through the trees in instant, reckless flight. For a long while she sped before finding an opening in the canopy above.

Up and out of the forest's canopy she ascended, feeling relieved at no longer being closed in. This soothed her anxiety, even though above her in the heavens lay an azure sky, constantly streaked with silent black lightning.

As she flew, a man's voice came, as if upon the winds, warning her to fly low. She knew that voice, though she could not recall his name, and it frustrated her. Still, it was wise to keep low and out of sight. As she flew, Raven felt as though she had been here before. This forest, and the violet sky above, was familiar. Scanning the tree tops as far as she could see, Raven looked for anything she could remember. It was not long before she discovered what she was looking for. With all speed, Raven shot across the tops of the trees, yearning to discover an enemy she could punish for the crimes committed against her.

It wasn't long before she landed at the edge of an open field, bordering the forest. Quickly, she ran into the forest's edge for cover and turned, scanning the open area. There she waited for a time, beholding a field of bones, littered with the bleached remains of both beasts and humanoids. As she landed, Raven took in the macabre scene before her, all in wonder, disturbed by the site. It was familiar, so familiar.

As she waited, her attention was drawn to the center of the field in which stood a great pinnacle that reached hundreds of feet into the air. The only thing she could recall about this pinnacle was simply what she saw before her. However, there was something more significant here than just a natural tower of stone. Not far from the base of the towering rock formation gaped a great opening that descended into the earth. Raven's eyes widened at the memory of what dwelt within, though the history of this encounter was an illusive puzzle bouncing about in her head.

Staring at the opening to the lair, she reached into the depths of her memories and recalled what it was. She had been confronted by it long, long ago. Raven knew that once this creature focussed its attention on you, you would be put to the test to elude it, unless you could fly.

Taking in a deep, steady breath, she held it for a moment, then out a long quavering breath. Raven slowly, quietly began to make her way away from the edge of the forest, and into the field of bones, making her way toward the center wherein the creature lived. As she crept inward, she avoided disturbing the bones scattered over the entirety of the dark-red soil, carefully picking her way through a huge rib cage, all the while locking her attention upon the mouth of the lair. Skirting an area littered with an army of skulls, she made her way forward toward the den until she stood within a stone's throw from the gaping entrance. Closing her eyes for a moment, Raven recalled the name of the beast within the lair. Swallowing her fear, she softly spoke aloud.

"Kromjin, Kromjin," she called out as more memories of this place began to surface in

her mind. Almost instantly, a cat-like creature with eight legs emerged swiftly from the opening. It turned slightly, skidding to a stop, its ears pricked up high. Covering its entire body was a smooth skin of deep-red, covered with white, hand-sized plates of bone. Raven's slightest breath instantly caught its attention. Locking eyes with her, it crouched, its ears laying back against its neck as the claws of his many feet dug into the rock and soil beneath it.

“Well, you found me quick,” she muttered, then clapped her hands out in front of her. “Kromjin, it's me, Raven.” She instantly beat her wings, making a chittering sound. Lowering to the ground, the cat-like creature hissed frightfully, then leapt half the distance between Raven and the mouth of the lair, landing with incredible grace and balance. She took a step back, suddenly doubting her choice to approach a creature she recalled not having seen for a very, very long time.

“Kromjin, you remember me, I hope.” She clapped again and kissed at it a few times. Crouching was the inevitable sign of its attack. As its leg muscles tensed, a dread rushed through her stilled heart. She looked around, looking for an escape, but there was nowhere to go. As it leapt, she felt despair set in. Now she was going to have to kill or be killed.

In the split second it leapt at her, she abandoned the idea of harming this creature. Just before it reached the zenith of its leap, she roll under it, tucking her wings close, noticing its bone-white claws were not extended. This gave her hope as she came out of the roll, skidding to a stop as the eight-legged menace turned and began stalking toward her. Raising a hand, palm out, Raven focussed on its mind, willing herself to blend with a creature she had given the name of Kromjin so long ago.

“Kromjin, remember me,” she whispered as it stalked up directly before her, eyes narrowed, lips peeled back in a frightful gesture. It hesitated, then sniffed Raven's hand, tense and suspicious. As it sniffed her, she made a purring sound, as she had always done before scratching it under the jaw. As she hoped, its ears began to raise until they were fully extended once again. Stretching out, it sniffed her hand, then licked her fingers once. She waited, still as stone, making a clicking sound at it.

“You remember me?” she asked, even as more memories, more pieces to the puzzle, began to fit into place. She was much more than a mere Vampire now, and she suspected this might confuse the beast. The main concern Raven felt, was the hundreds of years since they parted. Still, it was not attacking. Raven knew, if she was a stranger to this beast, she would be hard pressed survive. Slowly, she slipped a hand under its jaw and began scratching her way toward its throat, continuing to make a purring sound.

“This has to feel good, now, doesn't it? Come on you big rock of a beast, lighten up, will you?” It took some time, but in the end she won over its affection and trust. Raven was relieved it had remembered her. This meant no death-duel, yet most of all it meant she did not have to be alone in the Underworld. She hated this place.

As she worked her fingers in-between Kromjin's plated skin, she absentmindedly began removing objects and insects. The insects were easy to remove, as all she had to do was will them to leave. This was helpful, for some were parasitic, and would have been difficult to get rid of otherwise. Ridding this large creature of the insects was the final key to, once again, endearing Kromjin to her. As she worked the beast over, her mind set upon hunting. What an odd thought, she mused. Why she had to hunt, she knew not. The idea and thrill of finding creatures to challenge pleased her highly. In fact, the idea burned instinctually within her, yet why?

“Kromjin, let's go hunting, shall we?” She looked to see its response, only to find it crouched to the ground, its cat-like head tilted upward, as if looking at the sky, though its eyes were tightly closed.

“One step at a time. This first, then we'll see what you think of the idea.” There was more work to do to create a loyal bond with this beast, and it was something she needed to have right now. If she could get it to adopt her as its own, she would have companionship; someone to talk to. Simply put, Raven had been here far too long and needed a friend. Kromjin would give her purpose. As she began working its front legs over, it lowered its head and began sniffing her wings.

“I know, I know, they are different. They are, however, better. Do I smell like bird to you anymore? No?” She nuzzled the eight-legged creature, savouring the pumping of its heart, the blood pulsing through every blood vessel in its body.

For the next three days, she spent all of her time with Kromjin, witnessing a steady progression in their relationship.

Kromjin's lair was nothing more than a wide opening in the ground, which led into a steep tunnel that leveled out into a larger cave below. The one thing she really liked about the cave was the absence of bones and carcasses. Kromjin never brought any prey down here. She suspected he instinctively left the carcasses up top to attract scavengers with the scent. Kromjin was not only a predator, but a predator killer.

Early on the fourth day, Raven opened her eyes, slowly stood and stretched out her wings, cracking a number of joints in them. Sighing, she felt the impulse to move on; a feeling that was becoming more insistent as each day passed. Folding her wings back, she looked down at Kromjin, who was watching her with an open eye. It was no surprise, as the beast always slept with one eye open.

“Want to go for a walk?” Raven coaxed. Its other eye opened lazily. Smiling, she sighed. “If you haven't already killed every creature in the vicinity, you could get some breakfast

out there.” She made a kissing sound and headed for the surface. Rolling over, Kromjin closed an eye and puffed out a breath, meaning it was not ready to get up yet.

“Okay, suit yourself.” Raven climbed up to the edge of the den and stopped. Warily looking in all directions, she spied out the area before stepping out into the Boneyard, as she called it. Looking around, she noticed how the trees did not grow in this area, and wondered why. There was a thick tree-line all about the Boneyard, but not one scappling past it’s edge. Kneeling, she pulled out her storing sack, now filled with many items. Reaching in, she thought of what she wanted, then withdrew a larger glass vial. She then stood, put the Storing Sack away and headed toward the edge of the forest.

When she returned the vial was filled with Vermillion Tree Sap. Putting it in the sack, she sat on the edge of the den, thinking just how nice it would be to sleep and dream again. No nightmares, just natural relaxing dreams.

“I don’t remember what dreams are like,” she whispered, talking to herself. “Maybe someday,” she continued. Raven could not remember beyond knowing Kromjin, and how they met, and it frustrated her.

“Well,” she stated absently, “at least I remember something. What else is there here for me?” Raven suddenly grew afraid. If she could remember the beast sleeping down in its lair, and if it had befriended her so readily, so easily, it meant a history went with it. Had she blocked out her own recollections, or had she merely forgotten them? If forgotten, it was probably due to the passing of so much time. Shivering, Raven banished where her thoughts were taking her.

“This is not going to be easy,” she muttered, and then stood. Turning, Raven descended into the lair, ready to leave. This time, she needed Kromjin to go with her. She did not want to be alone.

Gaunten lay under siege, hailstorms of arrows arcing over the battlements on all sides, never striking a target. The outer wall of Gaunten was built fifty feet high at its lowest point, and was manned mostly by Sardakk Elf Warrior and Elemental Magicians of no little power. Within the outer wall was the common part of the city, in which, on peaceful days, was the hub of economic trade and commerce. As of yet, only arrows had tested the security of Wardenoth Citadel.

All citizens had been evacuated into the center of the castle, where they pitched tents and nervously waited. Though food and water was plentiful, it was rationed out.

As he sat upon the highest tower, mounted upon a Silver Griffon, the King scanned the ranks of the enemy, shaking his head.

“Come on,” he stated boldly, “where are your real forces?” Mitcheio stood beside him, throwing up shields over the city now and then as Katcha watched the skies with rune-bound eyes.

“Nothing in the skies, my king,” he stated, his voice dripping with disappointment. Mitcheio glanced at Katcha, her eyes matching his.

“You love this,” she teased. Nodding, he continued watching, looking, searching.

“At this point, I do. We are committed to battle, and so I will make the most of it.” The King moved up to the precipice.

“Maybe they tunnel?” Mitcheio shook her head.

“No, milord. A worthy force is simply not here.”

Artemis consistently paced the room, accepting no food or drink from Chrysalis.

“Can you see her, can you see Raven?” Worried, she stepped in front of her Vampire, stopping him in his tracks.

“No, not for days now. But she is alive, or I would know it. That is what I fear the most, suddenly knowing she is dead. I'm afraid, Artemis. Looking down at his wife, Artemis let out a breath, trying to relax for her.

“I am too, Chrysalis.” She gave him a pleading look, provoking him to sympathy. Pulling her in, Artemis wrapped his arms about her, holding her tight.

“She'll be alright. She is strong . . . you are strong.” Melting against him, she began to cry.

Before leaving, Raven stood beside Kromjin. She needed to go, and she needed him to come with her. Kromjin, however, refused to budge.

“So, this is it then?” She knelt down by him, placing a hand on his side, briskly running her nails over the boney plates of his skin this skin. “Oh, come on Krom. I need to go, and you need to come with me. Kromjin, wake up lazy bones.” But the eight-legged cat-like creature only stretched slightly and sighed. Raven tried for a while more before finally giving up.

“I hoped you would come with me. I need you.” Sighing, Raven stood, turned and walked to the tunnel leading up and out. Before her eight-legged beast was out of sight, she looked back, hoping it had changed his mind. It had not. With a thrust of her wings, she ascended out from the lair and cautiously landed at its edge. Looking to the sky in all directions, she grit her teeth.

“Great,” she lamented. I just took the chance of getting my wings ripped off for nothing?” After scanning the entire edge of the forest, she crouched, then jumped into the air, flying just high enough to get a good view of the land’s layout. Besieged by an army of twisted trees, Raven looked to the Boneyard again, hoping Kromjin had followed. She flew toward the great pinnacle, touching down just before the ground began to slope upward. Looking back at the Boneyard, she shook her head in disappointment.

“I don't know what to do,” she said, becoming frustrated. Looking up, she noticed a spot that would give her a good view and launched toward it. Landing on a ledge just above the tree-line, she turned and she crouched, spying out the area. Sitting down on the ledge, Raven listened to all the sounds about the area. A grunt over there in the trees, a shriek far way, then a rumbling in the earth beneath the pinnacle. The rumbling was rather alarming, but she stayed on the ledge, thinking of where to go next.

She had just decided to fly up to the top of the pinnacle, when Kromjin emerged from its lair and looked around, raising its head to the sky. Mimicking the chittering sound she used with him. Raven grinned.

“Oh, now you wonder where I've gone!” she called out, instantly drawing its attention. Returning the chittering sound, she clapped softly, calling to him. Kromjin instantly bolted for the pinnacle, making its way with surprising speed up and slope and onto the ledge where Raven waited. Once it was with her, Kromjin lowered down on its belly behind her and bit her on the left wing.

“Ouch, hey!” She turned and tackled his neck, pushing on him with all her strength. Kromjin was so heavy, she could not budge him. This eight-legged creature was impressively balanced. Puffing a breath at her, it hooked her with two paws and pulled her down, trapping her to the ground. At this point, Raven knew the best thing to do was to simply relax. So she did, hoping he would not keep her pinned for long. After a while, Kromjin released her, allowing

Raven to sit up. She wrapped her arms about her beast and nuzzled him affectionately.

“I hope this means you will go with me,” she said, planting a kiss on the side of its head. Standing, Raven looked around, a feeling of relief setting in. Without warning, the beast wrapped its vice-like jaws about her lower leg. At first it startled her, but then she recalled it always did that when it did not like where she was headed. Kromjin's instincts were incredible. Placing the tips of her fingers on the side of Kromjin's face, Raven looked down to see it glaring at her, its eyes narrowing. Something was wrong, but the only way to find out was to head in any direction. If she headed away from the threat, she would be released. Looking down the steep slope, she decided to try going back down toward the lair. Pulling on the hold Kromjin had on her, Raven felt its jaws slowly release her leg.

“What's up there?” she asked her eight-pawed companion, pointing up to the top. Kromjin sniffed her wings, then moved in-between she and the pinnacle, pushing her back, as if barring her way. It was obvious he was protecting her from something, and this perked her curiosity.

“Is it the rumbling that's got you on edge, or what?” she stated looking to the precipice far above. As she scanned the pinnacle, an instant recollection of a spiralling path of sand flashed in her mind. The image of this path was fleeting, as if on the edge of memory. Sudden curiosity overwhelmed her. There was something either up on the pinnacle, or within. From its appearance, it seemed large enough to hold a dozen full-sized ships within its base, considering it was hollow.

“Sorry, Krom, I have to know.” She leaned against him placing a hand on his back between his foremost shoulders. As if returning to the den, she slipped off the ledge and flew, circling out and around. Kromjin watched her, then followed as best he could, leaping up on to the next ledge, then ascending a steep embankment with a bit of effort. Circling the pinnacle, she looked for an opening, all the while keeping an eye out for danger. What he searched for was plainly in view at the top.

“Of course it has to be all the way up,” she stated sardonically, catching sight of Kromjin's progress up the steep and traitorous side of natural rock. As she ascended, Raven wondered how this seemingly jagged formation of stone had come to be. It was as if a massive shard of stone had penetrated the surface of the ground from within the earth. Once at the top, Raven's curiosity peeked as she beheld a bowl-shaped summit with thick walls of jagged stone rising up like great knives about the entire ledge. Looking down, she watched Kromjin's progress up the pinnacle. It would take some time for him to reach the top.

Quickly circling it once, Raven spotted an opening, large enough for a young dragon to squeeze through. Hoping for no dragon, Raven landed on the ledge. Before she stepped through the archway of stone, a warning washed over her. Becoming still, she waited, listened, focusing on the indescribable feeling that soon became more clear. Something was calling out to her, and

it was the undeniable presence and communication of a rune.

Like a familiar bard's song, she studied the archway, searching for it. Looking back out over the area, she spied out the sky and forest. She seemed unnoticed as of yet, but that would not last long if she remained exposed in plain sight. Turning back to the opening, she once again felt that call; a beckoning. Closing her eyes, Raven sent out her will to the rune, wherever it was, inviting it to her. Not only did she want to get out of sight, she wanted the rune, for unlike any other, this one seemed overly anxious to find her as well. After a few moments of searching, an uneasy feeling began to nag at Raven, causing her gut to tighten. Irritably, she glanced back and quietly growled.

“This place is intrusive,” she grumped, then stepped through the rock archway, expecting something bad to happen. On the other hand, if she waited any longer, Raven knew she would inevitably be spied out by something that would have to deal with. Either way, waiting any longer would be courting possible disaster. She needed to remain unseen. As she stepped through the alcove, her foot sunk into fine sand. As she took her second step toward the center, a flash of dark energy formed, suspended above the sand before her. This phenomenon startled Raven, but she was committed to see what this structure of rock was all about, and retreating from it was not an option.

As she watched, tendrils of shadow began to creep out from its surface, probing the sand about the area. When one would near, Raven leapt away, avoiding contact with it. In the beginning, each tendril was slow and easy to avoid. After dodging each tentacle, they began to increase in speed. As she evaded each length of darkness, their speed increased. With growing difficulty, she avoided seven more. For fear of being caught, Raven decided to fly out. It was her only hope of escaping. Crouching, she raised her wings high just as Kromjin appeared in the archway and lunged at her through the opening. Without hesitation, Raven leapt forward, dodging Kromjin. The distraction caused a tentacle of dark to come in contact with her hand. The moment it did, it was as if time abruptly stood still. Every length of darkness probing the area suddenly shattered into flakes of dark ash which fell like snow to the sand all about her.

“Krom, no!” she commanded him, not believing he would listen. Raven thought she was in trouble, and expected to be dragged back down the pinnacle. Yet, to her surprise, Kromjin only turned and hissed at her. The great animal then began sneezing and wiping his face off with his great paws.

Raven’s attention fell back to the shadowy orb, witnessing it shift and mold, flattening and smoothing until it steadily transformed into a dark, oval, polished mirror. Within its now reflective surface, Raven beheld her own image, though it did not match her movements. Staring at it, she gave it a strange look.

“This is so familiar, Krom.” Glancing at Kromjin, who vigorously shook its body of the dark ash entirely layering him, she reached out and brushed his ears off, highly distracted.

“This is no trap,” she said.

Within the mirror-like reflection, Raven watched herself. She seemed in earnest, desperation in her appearance. As she watched in growing curiosity, her image began to speak.

“Raven, by seeing me, I have accomplished that which was my greatest hope. I needed to create a message for myself, and myself alone, layered with a trap. If discovered, unprotected, my plans would have been revealed to the enemy, and innocents would have suffered and died, or worse. If this happened, our love would have died, leaving us with only anguish and revenge for the remainder of our existence.” An image of a handsome man appeared within the mirror, and then faded. “Indeed, we would have become what we loath . . . darkened monsters. If you were not me, you would have been caught by the power I wove.” Raven watched the image of herself shudder. She seemed to be nervous and highly disturbed. She watched on in great interest as the image of her composed herself and continued.

“When you travel into the Underworld, the nature of this place makes you forget. Write it down if you have to, yet be ready in an instant to destroy that which you write. When I travelled here long ago, I began to lose the memories I once had. But through the many years, at times, I dreamed, recalling another life I once lived. I began recording my dreams, along with sketches and maps when they came to mind. Soon, I pieced together my once life. This revelation was, and still is, greatly disturbing. I - you - do not belong here. You are now experiencing the same. I suggest you begin doing as I did, or you will entirely forget. If you forget, Raven, you will adopt this world, then its ways. The nature of the Underworld draws you in to never let you go.” Raven looked at Kromjin, and then back at her reflection.

“Every time I sleep, I dream of a world of rivers, lakes and streams, a world where the beauty of green blesses the lands. I believe it is real; they have to be. This world is not the only place that holds life. Why would I dream of something that I’ve never before conceived of?” Raven looked and Kromjin. “Krom, I dream and see him, even if it’s only a daydream. He is my best friend – I think.” She pointed at the dark reflection. It is the same man.

“Raven,” her reflection continued, “when you go down, fear nothing, for it is all yours. I have gathered as much as I could within the base of this pinnacle. It is yours. Look for the diamonds, the diamond, Raven.” The mirror suddenly shredded, falling like blackened snow to the sand before her.

She felt Kromjin's head lift up under her right hand, and absently began scratching around his eyes. As she turned her attention to him, the center of the area slowly began to pour downward, as if it were the center hole of an hourglass that had just opened. Raven moved back, watching as a tunnel opened, slowly revealing a sand-covered stairway that spiralled down out of sight.

“Why would you not want me here, Krom?” she asked, leaving her beast and slowly

heading down into the opening. Reluctantly, Kromjin followed after, hissing dreadfully. For a moment, Raven could have sworn she heard Kromjin grumbling. Turning on the cat, Raven knelt and placed her hand to both sides of his thick head.

“Quit whining you overpowered brute. There’s nothing to fear in this place,” she scolded. “I wonder who the man was my reflection spoke of? Maybe, we’ll find out down below. Come on Krom.” Down the giant spiralling stairwell they both descended until they stopped before a huge archway. Spying into a rather massive chamber, Raven beheld an impressive treasure trove. Taken back by the piles of gold and silver, she took in the splendid reflections of a thousand sparkling gems mixed in with it all. Many pieces of various armors, shields and weapons set against the far cavern wall, all neatly arranged by types and styles.

“Kromjin, who belongs to all this? This cannot be mine.” Before entering, Raven looked up to the archway’s zenith where she beheld a single rune.

“That message was from me,” she whispered, feeling haunted by a past in which she had no recollection. Slowly she walked under the rune and into the treasure room. Briefly, the rune flashed a golden light. As it illuminated, her eyes mimicked the same golden hue. Turning, she noticed Kromjin was not following her. Looking up, she suspected why. This place was for her and her alone.

“Well, I don't like it,” she said and pointed to the rune, instantly linking with it, she knew not how. Instantly, she perceived its power.

“Sorry, Krom.” With a quick hand-pattern, the rune vanished from the stone. She looked at her hand, astonished.

“How did I know how to do that?” In answer, Kromjin stalked warily up and pawed her hand. Kneeling Raven took up the creature’s large paw. “I wish you could tell me more. I wish I knew more. What is with this place?” She looked back at all the riches, one of which was a full-sized ship - odd as that seemed - set deep into the piles of treasure.

“Oh Kromjin, did I get all this from you, or did I take it?” Dread stole over Raven as she mentally processed the possibilities, and then the outcomes, none of which were void of scarlet death. As she looked over the riches laying before her, Raven choked upon the thought of what one would have to do to gather and claim such prizes. Many lives would have to be taken in order to obtain all this. Nothing like this would have been free for the taking. Nothing.

“Who am I Krom? Who am I?”

The figure of a man, wreathed in shadow, stood beside a fallen Vermillion Tree, his hand resting upon the surface of its trunk, running his fingers delicately across deep wounds and lacerations in the wood. The voice of a man behind him hissed.

“If she is not phantom, I will find her.” The man of shadow turned slightly, as if intrigued.

“If you find her, what then?”

“I can restrain her.” His response provoked soft laughter.

“If she resists, or tries to escape, what then?” The tracker narrowed his eyes, which began to burn a deep orange.

“I will put her down. If she is not with us, she is the enemy.” Curling his fingers, the man of shadow lanced his fingers deep into the wood of the tree and nodded, once, quickly. In a rush, the hunter leapt through the trees, taking flight, vanishing through the trees in a blur of shadow. Before following, the dark one scanned the area, dark eyes feasting on the tell-tale signs of Raven’s struggle. Raising an eyebrow, he stooped, investigating the signs more closely.

“By the dark one, you drank the sap. You still live. Impressive. I do not recall a single tale of this happening.” The wood of the tree splintered and cracked as he clenched his fist into its surface. Like lightning, he followed after his hunter, a shower of splintering wood erupting from the tree as his hand ripped from it.

Quickly, Raven gathered every item that would fit into the Storing Sack and stuff them in. She didn't know what she would do with so many things, but maybe they could be used for something. Either way it was good to have assets. Stopping for a moment, she let out an exasperated breath and looked to her pet.

"Kromjin, why do I keep all these . . . things? I never use them, and I'm sure they are tainted with the curse of the blood you spilled in taking them," she accused, knowing full well she could have been to blame as well. She pointed at the eight-legged cat. "We, sorry. We." Her beast ignored her, suspiciously sniffing about the area as if an unfamiliar scent had come to its attention. Raven laughed.

"What it is boy?" Of course, Kromjin did not answer, but kept at it, seemingly interested in something. Looking around the massive cavern, she spotted a large mirror, cleverly concealed at the back of the huge chamber. Standing, she dropped a handful of gold and approached it. Standing before her own reflection, she grimaced.

"Why a mirror? Seems all I get now are reflections. I hate mirrors." As her eyes fell upon the woman in the surface's reflection, she wondered at what anyone could see in her. Bending toward the mirror, she scrutinized the dark eyes that stared back at her. Noting how they matched her wings, she frowned. Turning her head to the left, she examined just how pale her skin was - as pale as a . . . Vampire. There were no blemishes, but she needed some color. Opening her mouth she exposed her teeth. As she did so, her mind tantalized her, flitting like an elusive moth on the edge of her memory before dissolving into mystery, leaving her to wonder what it was.

"I wonder . . . oh what was it?" Closing her mouth, she looked at her clothes, which were a perfect fit and perfectly clean.

"Kromjin, I wonder if anyone will ever find me attractive," she lamented. She pictured herself walking into a palace with many suitors. The moment she smiled, she would be rejected.

"Krom, I'm ugly," she whispered.

"You are beautiful, pleasing to the eye," came the faint reply of a man's voice. Startled, she spun about as Kromjin leapt to her side with frightening speed. Looking toward the archway, she silently reprimanded herself for not activating the rune once they had passed into the chamber. Kromjin crouched and froze, still and unmoving, its head bowed to the floor as it hissed. Placing a hand on him, she peered about the cavern, trying to spy out who had spoken to her.

"Who's there?" she called out.

"Names do not matter here. Come out so we can talk. I don't want a fight. Please, can we talk?" Raven reached out to feel for the soul of this man who addressed her, but sensed nothing. Disturbed, she shrugged, her mind suddenly filled with many questions.

“I would like that, but how do I know you won't hurt me or my pet? Soft laughter filled the cave..

“Your companion? Do you even know what that creature is?” A tinge of curiosity passed through Raven as she caressed Kromjin.

“Sir, do I have your word that you will not harm me, or my companion? What he is, is more plain to me than what you are as you slink in the shadows. You, sir, are the one being suspicious.” Her mind filled with many questions, and she thought to give him some trust. As her mind set upon allowing him to speak with her, Raven's gut tightened.

“Fair enough. I give you my word, you will not be harmed, nor your companion friend, if you will come and speak with me.” Raven felt like fleeing, but being here in this chamber made it impossible to simply slip away. She had cornered herself, and cursed her wretched hide for a fool.

“Will you show yourself before we come up?” For a few moments there was a silence to her question.

“Your Valkyrin Cat will surely attack me.” She looked at Kromjin and stroked his long ears.

“Is that what he is? Why, if I am his master, are you afraid of him?”

“It is always wise to be cautious with such a legendary creature,” came the man's quick reply, a reply tainted with the feeling of deceit. Raven sighed, hating this sudden debate.

“So, you are frightened of him. Why?” She waited, hoping he could tell her more about the only friend she ever knew.

“It is a fiend, making it beyond mortal,” he stated. “When a Valkyrin Cat devours another creature, it collects and traps its victims within its own soul, feeding from them until there is nothing left. This creature is only good for one thing . . . to serve its master. That is what it was bred for. That is its single purpose.”

“Liar! Raven spit out, suddenly enraged, startling Kromjin, who flinched and hissed.

“You asked . . . I told you,” came the unseen's calm reply, smooth as silk.

“I hate you!” she screamed, knowing full well he was describing her. Kromjin suddenly screamed out a challenge. She hugged Kromjin tight, and wanted to kill the liar she was talking to.

“Get out now,” she threatened.” There was no answer to her command, and it enraged her even the more. Breaking away from her beast she flew to the center of the chamber and landed, her hands curled in rage.

“Vermillion Forest, lend me of your inhabitants!” she raged, kicking coins at the archway. She watched the coins fly through the air, witnessing one silver piece glance off nothing. With all speed, Raven pointed to the top of the entrance, quickly forming the rune again. Instantly, the intricate patterns of the rune blazed to life, filling the area with golden bolts

of lightning. An instant scream of pain and agony filled the air as a man with dragon-like wings staggered, driven back by the spell of the rune.

“You know nothing of soul-feeders!” she screamed, the sudden temptation to feed upon his soul nearly too strong to resist. She watched him lurch back out from the spell's reach and fall to his knees, smoldering from deep searing burns. Wracked with instant torment, he growled in pain and defiance, .

“I am not the enemy, Raven!” he screamed, forcing himself up and into standing position.

“Names here do not matter,” she growled sarcastically, sensing a cloud of insects swiftly climbing the pinnacle from the outside in a mass of swarming death. Without mercy, she willed them to devour the liar before her. As they descended the tunnel in a roar, she reached up and disabled the defensive rune.

“I never gave you my name. There, as you wished it, we have talked,” she stated, suddenly calm, then turned and walked away to Kromjin who waited at the center of the chamber, crouching, its ears laid back, snarling. As she approached him, she heard the liar begin to scream. Within a breath's time his screams turned to shrieks of misery. Two breaths more and his misery ebbed to moans . . . then silenced. Raven did not have to look to know what was happening to his body. With a wave of her hand, she sent every insect out of the pinnacle, bearing his remains up and out to be discarded among the collection of bones outside; another trophy collected. Kneeling before Kromjin, she wrapped her arms about his head lovingly, laying her head against his.

“He wanted me to kill you, and I could never do that Krom.” She kissed the top of his nose. “You are just a big kitten; my kitten. I already knew that. That bad man didn't have to tell me.” Kromjin puffed air in her face as she gabbed both sides of this face and wiggled his head back and forth a few times.

“You are much to cute to play in a boneyard, or be camped up here in this dried up cave of sparkling junk. Come on, let's get the rest and go find a place where we can be alone and have some fun, shall we?” It was either the tone of her voice, or Raven grabbing the side of his thick head that made Kromjin shake his head and swat her to the side, knocking her off balance. Teetering on the brink of a fall, Raven tucked her wings and rolled into a stance, facing Kromjin.

“Oh, you wanna' fight, do you?” Raven beat her wings and launched at Kromjin, just missing as she rolled over the top of him. As she passed over her beast, she noticed his right front paw up off the ground, and the back-right coming up. Wrapping her hand over his back, Raven hung on and swung down over him, unbalancing and toppling the Valkyrin Cat. Letting go, she hit the bed of coins, skidding backwards to a stop, sending money flying back behind her. The Valkyrin cat landed on its side with a grunt, then instantly flipped into a crouching position.

“Got you, Krom. One to nothing.” But Kromjin was not having it. Hissing dreadfully, her beast put a quick end to Raven’s playfulness. Raven crouched, pulling her wings in tight.

“Okay, okay, I’m done,” she whispered, realizing this was neither the time, nor the place for this. If there was one enemy, there might be more. Throwing up a hand, she activated the archway’s Warding Rune. Her beast approached, its head down, the unmistakable sign he was once again focusing on any present threats.

“Sorry, Krom,” she whispered, setting a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Bad timing.” Unmoving, both waited for a while before Kromjin nuzzled her, signifying he was satisfied of there being no present danger. Feeling a sense of ease, Raven rested her head against the side of Krom’s neck and let out an quiet sigh. Turning to him, she kissed its ear, grateful to have this beast for company. Kromjin wasn’t a handsome knight in shadow armor, or a dark wizard who could impress her by conjuring a dozen blood roses. Yet, truthfully, Raven would rather have Kromjin’s company over romance. Besides, there was something about this eight legged creature that instilled meaning and purpose into her existence. Not knowing why, Raven had the distinct feeling she needed this more than a faithful, loyal, honorable, handsome companion.

“I’ll learn, I promise. I’ll do better, okay?” To her surprise, the Valkyryn Cat turned and sentimentally nuzzled her neck and face, tickling her with its lengthy whiskers. Eating up its attention, she smiled and enjoyed every second of Kromjin’s attention. After such a rare and peaceful moment, Raven reluctantly stood and looked about the area, suddenly perplexed. Pointing to the massive water craft, she looked to her pet.

“Kromjin, how did this ship get in here?” The great cat-like creature leaned against her and looked up, catching her eye. “What?” she stated, suddenly exhausted. Shaking her head, she blinked the haze out of her eyes. “Why am I suddenly so tired?” Pushing Krom’s head away, she laughed. “Well, I should collect everything I can. You never know when this junk is going to come in handy. Why don’t you go and sniff out a big critter to chew on while I get myself busy.” She then began taking and placing everything she possibly could into her Storing Sack. Gold was all she collected, as well as all the gems she could possibly find.

During the time Raven spent loading her Storing Sack, she discovered six rings. She searched about the area for more, but found none. Far too curious to simply place them in the Storing Sack, she spied out a rather large pile of mixed coins and made her way to the top of it. Once at the top of the hoard of money, she knelt.

In wonder, Raven removed her glove and fine mesh armor from her left hand. As she looked at her hand, she noticed a small indent about her second smallest finger, which confused her. She looked at it, slowly turning her hand over, noticing it was fresh. For a long while she frowned at it, at times glancing at the six rings before her.

“Why am I getting the distinct impression that I’ve lost a ring?” She looked over at her beast. “You haven’t seen a ring have you?” Her cat looked up at her groggily, one eye half

open, the other wide awake, instantly informing her she had been at this for quite some time. As she checked the inside of her glove, she blew a strand of hair from her face.

“Sorry Kromjin, get some rest.” One at a time, she tried them all on, but none fit. “That is so odd,” she said to herself. “I don’t recall having lost a ring, or ever having owned one until now.” Tossing the rings into the Storing Sack, Raven began to feel as if something was missing.

She looked at her finger, she knew full well the significance of the finger it once set upon. Closing her eyes, she knelt in meditation, hoping to find some focus and rest, if only a few moments. Relaxing, Raven inhaled a steady breath in through her nose, held it for a while, then slowly exhaled through her mouth. Again and again, she continued breathing in this manner. As she did, Raven felt herself slip into a trance, which eventually led her into that familiar sleep-state, wherein she could build a world – a place that, until now, she had quite forgotten about.

The shadowy figure of a man watched the insects all about him take flight, heading toward a point at the base of the pinnacle of rock at the center of a field of bones. Curiously, he watched as the living cloud gathered into a massive column, then flowed, ascending like dark smoke toward the top.

“And if she says no?” he whispered. Within a short time, his cries of pain and agony increased to shrieks, echoing across the bone field. It was not long before there was silence once again. In the deeper shadows he waited, biding his time, unwilling to confront her. Instead he waited where he was, quiet, out of sight.

Soon, a droning sound filled the air, growing louder as the cloud of insects reemerged from the top of the pinnacle, carrying the remains of his Hunter. Flying out, his body was dropped into the boneyard, after which the cloud dispersed, and each insect returned to where it had come from, to go about its business as if nothing had ever happened. Looking to the area where his companion had been discarded, the man wreathed in shadow shook his head, shuddering.

“I’m glad I did not go in there.”

Walking amidst the growing sea of bones day after day, week after week, month after month after grueling year, her hope began to cultivate into a spiraling despondency. She needed a companion, one loyal and true to fill the increasing and gap in her life.

One night, as she lay upon the dirt, upon a ledge off to the side within her den, she wept. After feeling sorry for herself for quite some time, she became irritated at her own mood. This was nonsense! Rising up, she pulled her feet beneath her, wiped her face dry, then began to meditate. After thinking for a long while, an idea came to mind. Closing her eyes, she calmed and balanced her emotions, feelings which were guiding her, as if it were, to the edge of a great pit into which, if she fell, there would be no turning back.

Slipping into a state of mind she never before experienced, she steadied her breathing and simply let go. After a long moment of growing ease and balance, she felt herself rise from her physical body. Looking up and out the entrance of her den, she departed. Soon, she found herself flying amidst the countless bones strewn about her lair. Thoughtfully, she floated over a great many of the fallen, those she had brought down by the force of combat.

Here and there she moved across that familiar scene of the stilled remains of the once living. They who either ignorantly venture into her territory, bold enough to assume she possessed a weakness they could exploit to their advantage, fell in the ruin of their own pride. In truth, had any of them succeeded, her downfall would have granted them the wealth of seven centuries of accumulated treasure. Had she fallen to any of her challengers, they would have had her to thank for making them wealthy beyond most mortals.

In the beginning, she craved such challenges, eagerly engaging in the contests of mortal combat, savoring the scars of each victory for a short duration time before they healed and altogether vanished. She had to admit, in the beginning, many foes were a challenge, stretching her to the limits of her power. Yet, just as her insects devoured the flesh from each of her fallen adversaries, the challengers diminished.

Moving across and through the deathly-silent trophies, she stopped here and there, hovering over certain bones and remains. As she languidly wandered through her macabre collection, an idea came to mind that gave her hope. When a part of a carcass caught her eye, worthy of what she had in mind, she took it up and bore it back to the mouth of the den. One by one, she chose a skeletal piece, selecting each with patience and careful thought.

The head of a Drakkin Feline, a beast she had nearly falling prey to. This feline did not hunt alone, but in pairs. She recalled this encounter nearly being her undoing. Such a creature was now beneath her skills to deem a significant challenge. Yes, this head would do nicely.

Setting her will upon the sturdy spine of a Ranixx`Shimmorian, a voracious hunter that always soloed within the Vermillion Forest, she stripped it from the carcass and bore it back, setting it beside the skull of the Drakken Feline. The Rannix`Shimmorian had been incredibly

flexible and difficult to pin down. This had been one of her bitter sweet victories. She prized this one highly.

For the legs, she chose eight, taken from the remains of yet two other sturdy and sure footed felines called the Fel`Strath. These would be a perfect match to the slender and slightly lengthy rib cage of the Ranixx`Shimmorian. She gleaned the knowledge and history of this one by interrogating the unlucky Vuolg she captured. As much as she hated the Vuolg, she did not kill that one. Instead, she strapped him to the roots of a Vermillion Tree, laid eighty-four stripes to his back, sealed the misery of his wounds into his flesh, never to fade, then released him. He would never recover. She smiled wickedly at the memory of his screams and torment, relishing in his pain as his plea for death she refused. Taking the Vuolg far into the sickening wastes of Blood`Fen, she released him and returned, rather pleased with her own creativity.

Focussing, she looked at the skeletal parts before her. With a firm vision in mind, she continued, collecting every bone needed to construct the image she had conjured. She then put them together, using the insects fo the Vermillion Forest to fetch her the stickiest substance that could be found. Once she had the skeleton assembled, she drifted about it, looking upon her handiwork.

Closing her eyes, she raised her hands up high, feeling a power build within her. She did not fully understand what this power was, but it was there, waiting to aid her every beck and call. With all her will and longing, a portion of her own essence and being was sacrificed into the skeletal creation, so carefully crafted, filling it with the proper body parts to make it a truly functional animal. Once done, she felt weary, drained, yet refused to stop. She was not finished.

She then willed flesh and muscle, tendon and cartilage to form throughout the skeletal structure. After this, she took the rugged skin of a dragon's hide and covered it. Looking it over, she frowned. The final preparation needed was to give it more protection. If she wanted a companion, it had to be highly durable, or this might be short-lived.

Over its entire body she placed parts of a turtle-like creature she found to be the most difficult to kill by the deft use of a physical weapon. It had taken a full decade alone to figure out the weak point of this shelled creature. One day, she discovered its weakness, which was Vermillion Tree Sap. Wiping the sap on its feet would cause its demise when it cleaned itself. The challenge was not getting an arm or leg bit off when applying the sap. But that is what insects were for. Using them made it not only possible, but easy.

After carefully placing each shell over the entire body of her creation, she filled its body with purpose, and its own independence. She did not wish for a mindless slave, but a living, breathing soul. This final task would be the most difficult and final stage to perform.

Thoroughly exhausted, she refused to give into a weakness that washed over and threaten her will to continue. Now began the more excruciating and draining preparation of her creation; willing a portion of her being into the beast. Once this was accomplished, she would then set it

free. With all her fading will, she accomplished the task of building and brining to life a deadly and completely unpredictable creature . . . a fiend killer.

Stroking the beast, she stripped away a part of her own being, sealing it into the lifeless creature before her, running her hands over the entire length of its body. As she did so, a golden hue, in the form of a descending fog, flowed from her hand, absorbing into its thick hide, washing deep into her handiwork. As she finished, a terrible exhaustion washed over her. Even in astral form, she felt the dire need to rest, to sleep.

“You are free to choose what you will be,” she whispered, then willed its independence. She did not know how she managed to make it back to her body, yet soon settled into the comfort of her mortal frame. Within her body, she felt strengthened, though she needed to sleep.

After a time, she woke up, turned toward the opening of her den and made a chittering sound. Instantly a deep growl, followed by a terrible hiss, filled the air just outside the entrance to her den. Clapping her hands together, she once again made the chittering sound in the attempt to draw the beast’s attention. A moment later, she spotted the cat-like creature prowl down through the opening, its attention fixed on her. Purring as best she could, she nervously hoped she had not made the last mistake of her life.

“Kromjin, come, come,” she coaxed it. As the creature crouched and sprung, she knew she had made a risky choice. Kromjin tackled her to the earthen floor of the cave, pinning her down, then proceeded to nuzzle her as a deep thrumming sound filled the air. She had succeeded! Relieved, she felt an exhaustion come upon her that took her into a deep sleep, during which time her faithful creation guarded her with unwavering loyalty.

Raven opened her eyes to see Kromjin very near her face, intensely watching her. Reaching out, she touched him, running her hand over the protective plates covering his face and neck. She remembered now. This Valkyrin Cat was a unique, one-of-a-kind creature . . . and it was hers alone.

“I remember you,” she stated with sincere affection. “You are mine, and I am yours,” she stated, smiling at the memories they shared together. Now that she knew him, she felt more at home. Kromjin sniffed her wings, then nuzzled her, a thrumming sound quickly filling the air. Wrapping her arms about his neck, Raven squeezed.

“Well, there is one thing I now remember. Shall we go see what's out there Krom? Come on boy.” Raven stood and grabbed her Storing Sack. “I'm done here.” The two departed that day and headed in the direction that came to mind first. It didn't really matter which way she traveled. Making her way down the slopes of the pinnacle, she struck out across the boneyard and plunged into the Vermillion Forest with Kromjin. Relieved by his presence, she pressed through the sea of tortured roots, traveling non-stop for the longest while.

Raven could not distinguish just how long they pressed on through the endless army of half uprooted trees. It did not matter. During the long trek, Raven discovered a path with no overgrowth choking it, giving her the impression it was tended, or well traversed. Looking both ways, she bit her lip, curious to know what lay at either end of the road.

“This is wide enough for a full-sized wagon, Krom,” she whispered. She looked left, then right. Taking out a coin, she flicked it into the air. Catching it, she slapped it on the back of her hand then looked at it. It didn't matter the direction she would go, and so decided the toss of a coin would make the decision. Besides, she was bored out of her wits and needed something, well, different to amuse her. The result indicated she would travel left. Putting away the coin, she and Kromjin headed left for a time, even as silent, blackened lightning streaked the sky above. She had not seen such an intensity of power in the skies for some time, and was enjoying it, that was until the distinct sound of rumbling wheels came up from behind.

Raven looked to each side, making sure she could easily get into the trees. Worried about Kromjin, and his reaction to others, she placed a hand on him, watching his every move. His body language plainly told her he was getting anxious.

“Come on,” she whispered, then left the path, moving through the trees until she found an acceptable place to hide. It was a relief to see Kromjin follow her lead. Placing a hand on him, she nervously massaged his neck as the grinding of wheels, as well as the voices of people, grew louder and more clear. Not long after being concealed, Raven spotted the strangest wagon she had ever seen. It was not crafted of wood, as one would have expected, but of solid metal. Curiously she watched it rumble close.

“Wow, Krom, would you take a look at that,” she whispered. Even above the structure of

this wagon, the wheels caught her eye. They were broad, thick and made of solid steel, as was the wagon itself. Astounded at the make of this - seemingly - rolling fortress, she took in every detail as she gently glided her nails over the ears of her companion. As it slowly rumbled by, Raven noticed a hand-sized opening, similar to a sliding plate built into a prison door.

“Kromjin, this wagon is a fortress of its own,” she whispered. It was like nothing Raven had ever seen before. As it slowly rolled past, she spotted a pair of small eyes watching from within, wide with wonder and amazement.

“No honey, leave the window locked,” a man's voice gently commanded. “It's dangerous out there.” The eyes vanished, only to reappear once again, wide as ever.

“Like ghosts and giants?” the voice of a female child stated as the wagon began to pass by. For a moment, the child's eyes widened, just before a small hand slipped through the opening and waved. Raven raised a hand and waved before she realized what she was doing. Instantly, the door of the wagon flew open. Out onto the ground leapt a little girl of no more than five seasons. She dashed off the path and into the forest directly toward her before she could be stopped.

“I found a girl, daddy! A real girl!” she yelled as a man leapt out from the coach, sprinting off the road in hot pursuit.

“Stop the wagon!” he cried. Spotting Raven, the man skidded to a halt and froze. For a moment, Raven witnessed the unmistakable expression of fear. He then began walking after the child, hands held out to show he was unarmed. Wide-eyed and taken completely off guard, Raven stared at the child, at a complete loss as to what should be done. Slightly pulling back, Raven waiting to see what would happen next.

“Hello,” the small child greeted her, filled with open wonder as she drew near. Kromjin lay frozen, unmoving, head bowed to the ground. Not knowing what else to do, Raven slowly stood.

“Hello,” she returned. “Is that your father?” The girl nodded.

“Yep, he's my dad,” she proudly stated, pointing back at him. Raven nearly laughed at the child's audacity and fearlessness. Her ignorance, coupled with such innocence, was so refreshing. She could feel the child's life blood flowing through her entire body, and savored the melody of her heart's rhythm. To Raven, she was a most beautiful creature.

“Daddy, I told you! Look, a girl with wings!” Raven watched as the child's father stopped and held out a hand, beckoning her. Though he kept his composure, his heart screamed out in fear.

“I am sorry to disturb you milady. We will not bother you further.” He motioned to the small child, who nearly stepped on Kromjin. It came to Raven's attention, these two did not see her beast. Smiling without showing her teeth, she looked at the man.

“You both are no bother. I was travelling in your direction, and you overtook me, that's

all.” As she spoke the child reached out and touched Raven's feathers.

“Kesla, don't be rude,” her father admonished. Pulling her hand away, she nearly made contact with the Valkyrin Cat as Raven looked at Kesla in astonishment.

“Young lady, you should always obey your father. What if I was a bad person? I would have hurt you. Do you understand me?” Lowering her head, the girl nodded submissively.

“I just wanted a friend. What's yer name?” Kesla's father smiled nervously at Raven, but waited. Raven looked at him, raising her eyebrows. Letting out a sigh, he nodded, throwing her the hint of a smile. Turning her full attention upon Kesla, Raven adjusted her wings and knelt to one knee, noticing three fully armored men watching from the path, all with bows raised and arrows knocked. She had the distinct impression they would have shot her, were it not for the child and her father between them. Ignoring them for the moment, she looked at the small girl.

“Kesla, my name is Raven. I have a question for you.” The child's eyes brightened.

“Ok,” she said in all eagerness.

“What if a monster came? What would you do then?” The girl looked at Raven in full confidence.

“My daddy would use his sword and kill it.”

“Oh, hun, I wish it were that simple. Here, give me your hand.” Raven held out her hand and waited. While she waited, Raven looked up at Kesla's father, noticing the three men on the path had split up, slowly surrounding them.

“What is your name sir?”

“Durrik, milady.”

“Durrik, I swear to you, I will do you, and those with you, no harm. However, I cannot promise the same for my companion. Please tell your men to go back, at least to the road, or there will be trouble Kesla should not witness. Please sir, please. Easy Kromjin,” she finished, a growing uneasiness twisting into her gut. Durrik looked at her, but did no such thing.

“I beg you, Durrik, please.” Kesla placed her little hand into Raven's, startling her, though she did not show it. Durrik signaled his men back. Sensing the beating of their hearts, Raven did not have to look to know they were returning to the road.

“Thank you Durrik. Now, Kesla, would you like to meet a true and honest monster? He's a good monster to those he likes . . . and he likes you. He's not soft, but he's all I have as a friend. The tiny girl brightened.

“I'm your friend.” Raven felt an ache in her chest, and a sudden longing for what stood so innocently before her. She felt her eyes begin to sting with moisture as she bit her lip. Before a tear could slip from her eyes, she wiped it away, avoiding eye contact with Durrik.

“Okay, she started to say, then stopped. “I'm sorry Durrik, I get emotional with children and the purity of their innocence. Forgive me, please.” His answer nearly broke her stilled heart.

“You haven't had much experience with children, have you?” Shaking her head, she fought to control her emotions. Silently, Raven slowly placed the child's hand upon Kromjin's nose.

“I have not, sir. Kesla, don't be afraid. He likes you,” she whispered. As the child's tiny hand made contact with the nose of her beast, an instant, deep purr filled the air. Relieved beyond words, Raven softly laughed. Kesla's eyes widened in sudden wonder as she lifted her other hand and began to explore Kromjin, who shifted slightly, sniffing Kesla's hair, and coming into view. Pushing his great nose away, Kesla giggled, obviously - instantly - in love with Raven's creation.

“There, now you see him, yes?” Kesla grinned, as if she had just gotten a new doll. The father, however, stepped back a pace, then stopped, openly terrified.

“That is yours?” He stated, his voice suddenly laced with horror.

“Yes sir. I'm sorry if I startled you.” He looked down at Raven and shook his head.

“What is the specie?” Raven wasn't sure how to answer his question.

“Valkyrin Cat,” she whispered. Durrik looked at the great animal, then back at her, terror twisting into his face.

“What, Durrik? Please, what is it?”

“I know who you are,” he stated, instantly prostrating himself on the ground before her. Confused, Raven looked down, feeling a change in the flow of blood coursing through every vein in his body, screaming at her in no uncertain terms at what Durrik was about to desperately attempt to save his child. The sensation of pure loyalty and love this man shed for his daughter completely took Raven off guard. Enthralled by his devotion, she stared at Durrik, admiring him. The problem was, Durrik was slowly reaching for the hilt of his blade. His love for Kesla overwhelmed her senses, and instantly carved a deep respect in her heart for this man, who was about to chance everything in his world to save his daughter.

“Durrik, please, don't do this. Please, just talk to me, I beg you.” Raven kept her voice even and calm, for all their sakes. She wouldn't hurt any of them. On the other hand, she did not know what Kromjin would do. Looking up, Durrik simply laughed.

“I'm a deadman either way. Why not?” Gripping his sword, he tensed. She could tell this was going to happen, yet there was one more chance to stop this.

“Because, your Kesla cannot make it to safety alone, and I cannot take her there, for I know not the way. Please, I beg you, Durrik, please, please don't do this.” Durrik froze. She could sense mixed emotion in him. “And, Durrik, I won't harm any of you. You came to me, not I to you. I'll pay you in gems, many gems, if you tell me who I am. Please get up, you are embarrassing me.” Durrik slowly stood and let go the hilt of his blade as Kesla played with Kromjin.

“Okay,” he said in a voice shaking with doubt. “You come from - ” A black dart

whizzed past Raven, striking Durrik in the chest, instantly cutting him off. In shock, he gripped and pulled it out. Without hesitating, Raven grabbed the girl, pulling her close, and stepped in front of Durrik, spreading her wings out to shield him. Blood spilled from his wound as he looked at the dart, then into her eyes. Slowly he buckled as he placed a hand on Kesla's head.

"I knew it," he coughed as he crumbled to the earth before her. Looking at Kromjin, she noticed he did not move, and continued to purr. Time seemed to slow as darts whizzed through the air all about her. Looking down, Raven witnessed black ooze erupting from the stilled chest of Kesla's father. In a desperate attempt to save the child, Raven hugged her tight, pressing her little body against her own, and launched toward the path, landing hard into a protective roll. Looking up, she saw the three guards manning the wagon in great haste. Struggling to her feet, she made sure of the child's safety as she broke into a run toward the wagon. Once at the open door, she shoved Kesla in and slammed the door as darts showered the area, glancing off the steel walls of the coach.

"Go, go!" She screamed to the guards. The center guard grabbed the reins as the guards on either side took up tower shields and drew swords. A moment later, the coach lurched forward, steadily picking up momentum as Raven looked back, eyes filling with instant hate. As she was about to launch at her attackers, Raven heard Kesla scream. With all the speed she could, Raven leapt to the moving coach, opened the door and slipped inside. Once in, she pulled the door shut. To her astonishment, Kesla was holding a single dart in her hand, shock spreading into her eyes.

"What is this?" Raven cried. Quickly she took the child and located the area of the body she had pulled it from. It was her foot. A single dart must have slipped past her defences as she tried to save the girl. Shivering, Kesla began to go limp in her arms.

"No, no, no, stay with me Kesla!" Closing her eyes, she focussed on the child's being, her eyes suddenly filling with a golden light as tears of gold began to fall. With all her soul, she willed this foul poison to vanish from her little body, even as her next three failing heartbeats warned Raven of the child's demise. In such a short time, she had grown to love her, and now she was about to lose her? As her mind caught upon this thought, a feeling came over Raven that no words could have stated more plainly.

"To save her life, you must give up your own." Sobbing out, Raven lowered her forehead gently to Kesla's.

"I agree, I agree, I agree . . . please spare her, please. I will give my life to spare her," she desperately whispered as her heart broke for Durrik. "Let it be so," she sobbed. "I will take her place." Then words, in the strongest of feelings, came back to her as her heart split, ripping her life away.

"It is done." Darkness instantly assailed Raven, tearing her from the only world she ever knew, and threw her down into oblivion. Feeling her life shatter, Raven let go of the child and

fell back against the door of the wagon in a last effort not to land on the child. The last thing Raven beheld was the astonished look of that little girl as she screamed for her father.

Raven opened her eyes and looked around to see herself standing upon an unseen surface, veiled by a trailing mist that slowly, gently, flowed about her knees. Looking up, she beheld a gray sky, illuminated as if it were by the moon. As she looked around, a small girl slowly approached her through the mist, smiling happily.

“Hello,” Raven said, smiling down at the child. “Where am I?” The child took her hand and looked up at her.

“That doesn't matter.” Raven's smile vanished.

“Well, young lady, if it doesn't matter then what does?” The child giggled at Raven.

“Again, you have been judged, and have been found worthy.” Startled by her words, Raven knelt before the child.

“I know you, but from where, when, I can't remember. Can you tell me who I am?” Throwing her arms about Raven, the child squeezed her tight.

“A hunter of Knowledge,” the girl child whispered. Embracing the child in return, Raven closed her eyes.

“I wish I had my - ” Raven opened her eyes and stood, letting go the child. “I will find a way.” The child laughed and slowly spread out a beautiful pair of black wings, adorned with the feathers of a raven. In a sweet, innocent voice, she grinned and stated happily, “Mommy, look what I can do?”

Snapping her head up, Raven startled Kromjin, causing the beast to flinch. Grabbing her beast by the shoulder, she gasped as the sound of a wagon clearly rang through the trees. As it drew closer, she panicked.

“Kromjin, we have to get out of here,” she whispered. Looking behind her, she knew there was no escape unless she abandoned her companion. She could not do that.

“I wish we were far away from here, Kromjin.” Instantly the ground beneath her vanished, pulling her down into a spiralling sense of confusion.

The Shadowed man looked about the area, suddenly in a panic.

“Where is she?” he whispered, “and where is that Valkyrin Cat?” Two shadowy, winged hunters approached, abandoning their positions.

“She has simply vanished into thin air, sir. There is no scent of her leaving. Shall we kill those in the approaching wagon?” The shadowy man thought for a moment, then shook his head.

“They are of no consequence. Leave them to their pathetic lives. We have work to do. After the wagon has gone, we will search a few of her favorite places. For all our sakes, we need to find her.

Raven staggered, confused, not knowing where she was. All about her came the constant sound of water rushing again and again, like a pleasant dull roar that never ceased in its rhythm. Looking about, she beheld Kromjin staring at her as if all this was her fault. Slowly, Raven's head cleared as the water of a sea lapped against her feet. Inland from the ocean, Raven layed eyes on a great cliff of black rock that towered high into the sky above. Looking both ways, Raven beheld a seemingly endless span of white sand as far as the eye could see.

How did she and Kromjin end up here? Maybe she was dreaming, still snug and safe in her den with Krom. Looking out over the sea, Raven wondered what was happening to her. Everything was so confusing and pointless. Without answers, she looked out over the great waters and closed her eyes. The sound of the constant rushing of water comforted her, soothing her nerves. Taking in the scent of the salty air, she listened to some birds calling out as they crested the cliffs from behind.

"I know this place now," she whispered. She bent her focus toward Kromjin, smiling. "Finally you get to see it, not just me." Memories unfolded in her mind like the petals of a thousand flowers opening to the rising sun. As she remembered, her mind set upon something, something she knew to be deep within the opening of a cave at the base of the towering cliffs not far from where she stood.

Raven was entertained by Kromjin, as he sat watching the water as it nearly touched his front-most paws, again and again. After a while, she turned and headed toward a destination she knew all too well. The Valkyrin Cat turned and watched Raven approach the cliff, its ears slowly laying back. Hissing dreadfully, Raven's beast waited until she was nearly out of sight, then loped after. Upon reaching the natural opening in the rock, Kromjin found Raven gone. Silently pacing back and forth, the Valkyrin Cat stared at the opening in silence. When it heard her call to him, followed by a clicking sound, Kromjin reluctantly followed in after.

Raven passed through the myriad of tunnels within the Black Cliffs. As she picked her way through tunnel after chamber after cavern, she recalled the exact layout without err. At one point, she stopped within a small chamber of rock that gave her the choice of three tunnels. Here she waited for Kromjin. While she waited, Raven's thoughts turned to the girl child, who had called her 'mommy'. Smiling, Raven slipped into a daydream in which she ran her fingers down Kesla's left wing. She longed for a child of her own. She recalled how small, fearless and beautiful Kesla was. Raven was tempted to go back and find Durrik. Shaking her head, her smile melted to a frown.

"I'm being hunted," she mouthed. Had she stayed in the area, Raven would have invited disaster upon Kesla, her father and their guards. That, she could not do, no matter the longing that now burned in her heart. Thinking back, Raven recalled taking that first leap of faith into

the sky. She could not recall a birthday, a first crush, a date, or the rising of the sun.

“The sun,” she said, confused. “There is no sun. What am I thinking of?” she whispered. Focussing her thoughts on the here and the now, Raven looked at the center tunnel for a moment, and then without hesitation, walked through, making her way through yet another series of forks and cross-tunnels, travelling into a much deeper area within the Black Cliffs.

At one point, she came upon three bodies of water, the last she knew to be fresh. After dunking her head into it, she shook her hair out then stood. The pools looked familiar, so familiar. As she stared at them, a the sudden feeling came to her . . . she was being watched.

A large regiment of Sardakk Elf Fighters and Casters stood at the ready, waiting for the command to charge the enemy. Up on the highest battlements, the king's sword shone white in the evening light for all his people to see.

“Is there any news, Shaylan?” A white-robed Twilight Elf bowed to his King.

“I have the dark relics of Shaxx, our long since fallen enemy. They are secured beyond the reach of our foes.” Shaylan looked haggard. His shoulders slumped, his usual inner vibrance spent. The King returned the bow.

“Thank you, my friend. Now, please, get some rest. This enemy is weak, strange as it seems. I will call for you if things change. Shaylan smiled fondly, then turned and made his way back into the castle. Concerned, Mitcheio watched him go.

“Milord Asmond, I've not seen Shaylan spent since he wielded the Staff of Light during the Dark War. I am worried about him.” The King agreed with a nod and moved his Griffon to the other side of the ledge. Looking down at an enemy, the likes of which he had never encountered, he grit his teeth. They were not strong, but endless. It was strange.

“Mitcheio, will you check on him now and then? I must be ready to act.”

“Of course, milord. I will let you know if there is a need.” The King smiled at her, then looked to her Guardian.

“Katcha, are you ready for another run?” Saluting, Mitcheio's Guardian readied himself, then threw his Ward a quick look in silence. As he did, she signalled her approval with a simple gesture.

The shadowed man stopped and pointed at several Hunters individually sending them out in all directions.

“Do not let her see you. Bring me news. Go!” Within a moment, he stood alone. Gazing out as far as he could see, he scanned the horizon of the Saklith Plains, a place of constant death and conflict.

“Where are you? Where are you?” Raising a hand, he focussed on the horizon all about him.

Lethtura,” he whispered, then threw his hands to the sky. Instantly, what appeared to be a column of black birds shot from his hands a thousand strong, whirling and gathering in a cloud above him. Looking at them, he whispered.

“Raven.” As one, they separated, flying out in all directions. Once again, the man of shadow was alone. There, he waited in silence for any word that would lead him to the woman he sought . . . the monster he hunted.

Staring at all the pools in the cavern, Raven froze, her eyes widening, a memory flashing in her mind of two others locked in a confrontation of intense violence. The scene was blurry, yet she perceived enough to know one was a man and the other was a woman. What was more, the woman had the wings of a raven, and was bent on ending him. Raven could feel the violence of the scene and cringed, involuntarily taking a step back, recoiling from the situation.

The scene then changed to the woman with wings diving down the throat of a dragon, white as snow. Turning her head, she threw up her arms, and if shielding herself, suddenly feeling cold . . . so very, very cold.

Highly disturbed, Raven departed in great haste from the area, making her way through this strangely familiar labyrinth of tunnels and caves, ramps and ledges, until she finally stopped at an archway that led into a more familiar area of this underground. She looked back at Kromjin, who was cautiously keeping space between them. Looking up, she scanned the surface of the archway.

“Just a moment, Krom,” she said, noting the engraving of deep-set glyphs and sigils on the flat surface of the archway. Raven did not recall seeing or making these wards. Then again, it had been a long time since she had been here . . . no, it had not. Raven was suddenly confused. Studying the symbols above, she slowly discerned the first glyph on the far left.

“These are not glyphs, or sigils,” she whispered. As if in answer, she heard a voice echo something from behind, deep from the paths she had just traversed. Startled, she quickly moved to the side, taking up a defensive stance. It was a great comfort that Kromjin seemed to take no notice. His senses were more than keen, and if he did not hear anything, it was more than likely what she heard was in her head. As the great cat watched her, it whipped its tail about, displacing sand from side to side. For a time, Raven listened, waiting, worried. Then, once again, she turned her attention back to the archway.

“Now I’m hearing things. Great,” she muttered quietly. “Hey, Kromjin, these are letters. V, A, N, N, A, R. Vannar?” Her brows wrinkled as she thought about it. Turning her attention to the cave beyond, she cautiously walked through the entrance, her eyes fixed on the letters above, ready to retreat if necessary. Nothing happened. No explosive bolts of lightning, or balls of flame, nothing. Once inside, she turned and made a clicking sound while softly clapping her hands, trying to coax her reluctant friend to follow. It took some time, but soon her loyal companion entered through the archway, ears laid back as if expecting something.

“You are such a skull brain, Krom,” she whispered in response to its reluctant approach. Kneeling down, she received him into open arms, gripping each side of his head. Gently she pulled him close, and as she did, Kromjin lowered its great head, as if bowing to her. Resting her forehead against his, Raven could not help but smile at the rare sensation of security this monster instilled within her.

“You with me, it's not so bad, the insanity that rages within this sunless, boring world. There I go again, Kromjin, confusing myself with the foolish things I say.” Gripping him more firmly, she held on to the only anchor in her life; a prefatorial horror that sought out and laid low other predators.

“There is something about you I cannot recall. I don't know if you only perceive the tone of my voice, or sense my emotions. Maybe you do, maybe you don't, yet what would I be without you? You are faithful, and I return your loyalty with mine undying. Krom, that little girl stole my soul away; I cannot forget, she dances in my head so . . . I would keep her for myself if she was not already another's.” As if understanding, Kromjin simply wrapped a great paw gently about her and began filling the small cave with a thrumming that pricked Raven's more sensitive side. The resonate vibrations entranced Raven, like when her mother used to hold and rock her to sleep . . . before that vile monster had taken the study of her existence!

“My mother!” she whispered, her eyes suddenly wide.

Alone, with his hands upon the side of the ever-warm metal of the bathing tub, a pure-blood Vampire knelt, as if in the throes of pain, tears streaming his face.

“Oh, holy Vannar, I am grateful for thy hand in all that is good. Please, please, I beg you, bring Raven back to me. Strengthen her with thy power. Protect her, guide her.” Letting one hand slip from the edge of the large basin, he gripped his chest.

“I have ever given my existence to that which is good, upholding the weak, feeding the hungry, offering my protection and guidance to those who are in need. In all the service I struggle to render, I realize I am nothing without something greater. I realize I am nothing within the endless bounds of Utaemia. I know I am not worthy to hold any titles under thee. Even so, I beg thee to strengthen and bolster the one I love and cherish. I know she is impetuous, careless, reckless, often times unwise. Even so, she is mine, and I am hers. I cannot help her now, but, by thy power, thou canst. Please reach down through the planes, penetrate the ranks of the enemy to mantle upon her the strength and wisdom she so desperately needs. I am selfish in my supplication, for I am the one who needs her. I am not complete without my Raven. And so, I implore thee to guide thy Knight back home. I am becoming so lost without my other half. Truly, I am grateful for what I have.” Slowly, he stood, composed himself, then exited the bathroom . . . to find himself instantly enveloped in the arms of Chrysalis, who shed tears of joy as she held her husband tight.

“Give me a chance, milord, and I'll prove myself worthy to be called thy Knight,” she whispered, not realizing, nor perceiving, the words she uttered. If only she had heard the words, the supplication that fell from her lips, she would have been left in wonder and, no doubt, confusion as to how she learned to speak with the tongue of a Herald.

Chrysalis opened her eyes, not perceiving the light of pure, refined molten gold illuminating her eyes. Nor' did she perceive the radiance flowing from her entire being. She stood at the door of the bathing room, hearing the supplication of her husband; his plea. As she listened, a deep and profound respect and love filled her being. She waited in silence, listening, waiting. As Artemis walked out from the bathing room, she embraced him in all wonder, holding him with all her soul. In return, her Vampire enveloped Chrysalis with all his living being. And, as he embraced her, the mighty, unbendable Artemis broke down, threatening to unravel her heart as she wiped away his tears. With all her being, Chrysalis shed the Essence of Eternity into his being, comforting and strengthening her soul mate.

“Artemis, I love you with all my soul. Raven loves you no less. I know, because I am Raven. Look at me.” Slowly he looked into her eyes to witness the most charming smile any Vampire could be blessed by. “She is alright. She is safe at this very moment. Raven has also made a friend, loyal unto death, loyal unto life. I will tell you about this creature, because, you see, I created it seven-hundred years ago.” Artemis sniffed.

“I don't pretend to understand, but I will accept your words in faith. What is this creature you speak of?” The white hair beauty grinned, then told Artemis exactly what it was, and how it was made. When she was finished, Artemis sighed, seeming relieved, comforted.

“Good, thank you for telling me. And in response to what you said earlier, I want you to know, I love you so much more. I love Raven so much more. I have a bottle of Sovala Keenya, candles, a table cloth and some food, though it might be a bit stale.” Bursting with delight, the Sagen Gleighdor's eyes sparkled with pleasure, thoroughly charming her Vampire . . . undeniably charmed by him.

“Sir, are you asking me for a dinner date?” Her Vampire nodded, then shook his head, smiling for the first time in a while.

“An invitation, milady. And I hope you do not have prior engagements. You know, like disappearing to hunt monsters - bad ones - training, sudden calls to serve, a date with another man.” Chrysalis sneered at Artemis, making a face, and biting her lip.

“Sir, we are married.” Artemis laughed, as if to himself.

“Oh, about that married thing you just mentioned. Let's talk about that after we have dinner.” With joy, Chrysalis pushed his arms down, gave him a quick kiss, then quickly grabbed the table by the chair he always sat it.

“It's small, but it will do.” Artemis grabbed two chairs, then proceeded to set the table

with items pulled from his Storing Sack.

Locking the door, Chrysalis returned to see him lighting two candles. She looked at the food he'd set on a larger plate; cheese, wrapped in a waxy paper; full loaf of bread; a jar of strawberry preserves. In-between the burning candles was set a bottle. Looking at her, he shrugged.

"The bread is soft on the inside, and the cheese and drink are not chilled. It's the best I can do on the spur of the moment. As she neared the chair opposite his, Artemis quickly walked about the table, grabbed her chair and turned the back facing in.

"Thank you sir," she said, grinning.

"You are very welcome," he returned. As Artemis return to his side of the table, Chrysalis reached over and touched the cheese, the bottle of sovala keenya and the bread. Before he noticed what she was doing, she pulled her hand back and, with a mischievous expression, she bit her bottom lip. Artemis caught the look at once and became suspicious.

"What," he said, wondering why she was staring at him in such a manner.

"Oh, nothing, I'm just looking at the finest man I know." Lowering his eyes, he smiled, trying to contain his emotions.

"Well, shall we eat?" he happily stated, getting a hold of himself. He then grabbed the sovala keenya. "Hey, you made it cold. It's so nice to have a witch in the family," he jested. Artemis touched the cheese, then the bread. "Fresh from the market. Thank you." Chrysalis suddenly grinned from ear to ear, grabbed her cup and held it out.

As Raven felt the strong paw of her only companion hold her, it not only felt as if her heart softened, but that the hands of time came to a grinding halt. Not daring to shatter the silence of this moment, she reached out with her heart, yearning to link hers' with her beast's. After a sentimental moment, she stood and turned. Inside the cavern, Raven noticed a low-lying shelf of rock with a few gold coins scattered on the stone at its base. Upon it set a plate helm, a large broad-tipped spear and a silver shield. It was not necessarily those items which caught her attention, but a thin book, set open amidst the items. Four smooth rocks had been placed at each corner of the open book, keeping it open. Standing, she gave Krom a good scratching behind the ears. Looking about the cave, a gilded hue sparked and passed over her eyes. Scanning the area, she could perceive nothing more than a simple cave of stone.

“Odd,” she whispered, hearing the faint sound of her voice die without an echo. Turning her attention back to the book, she cautiously stepped up before it, distracted by the dust-obscured words upon a page so old and fragile. Taking in a full breath, Raven gently blew, slowly relieving the open surface of the book of a layer of dust bestowed by the passing of much time. As the dust gave way to her breath, she beheld the glinting of what she instantly recognized as diamonds, neatly set in a distinct pattern of words before her. She remembered the words of her reflection and took in quiet breath, all in amazement. The precious stones were set so as to form a short sentence:

'The pages are brittle'

Forgetting the diamonds, she turned her attention back to the open tome. Taking a deep breath, she bent forward, holding her hair back with both hands, and carefully blew on the pages again. Slowly, words scripted in golden letters began to appear. Twice more revealed the text. On the first page she read:

'He can control you with his will.

Wear the helm, or you will be forfeit'

Raven looked at the helm, noticing it was crafted from what looked to be solid crystal. Slowly, she rested a hand upon the top of it and blew dust from it. As the layer of fine decay gave way to her breath, tiny, intricate runes revealed themselves upon its crystal surface. Turning to Kromjin, she pointed at it.

“I suppose I have to put this on.” The only answer she got was a sniff of indifference as

he stepped up beside her. Smirking at her beast, she rested the razor-like nails of her left hand upon Kromjin's head and began gently massaging between the boney plates.

"A lot of help you are," she stated lightly, then turned her attention back to the helm as a strange sensation of dejavu hatched within her mind.

"I know this place, Krom. It feels so familiar." Sighing, she picked up the helm and slipped it onto her head. When it settled into place, it vanished. As it did, she felt her mind lighten, as if a sudden current of wind had blown away an obscuring fog she had not realized was plaguing her.

Raven smiled.

The shadowed man frowned. He could feel the link to his master sever. Something was happening, and he could neither pinpoint what it was, or, at the moment, do anything to stop it. Angry, he threw his arms out.

“Cathull ofeth Misinchifar Emiakeri.” As if stunned by a sudden blow, he bent, his body slightly shrivelling.

“Where are you, Gorgonoth?” he coughed, staggering as he spit up fragments of flowing shadow.

Raven sent a gentle breath over the open surface of the book, clearing the residue of dust from the second page. After blowing on it one more time, she began to read. Finishing it, she turned her attention to the spear laying parallel near to the top of the old, frail tome. Curious, she reached out, lightly setting the point of her forefinger upon the spear's shaft. Slowly, she extended her fingers and wrapped them about the weapon and lifted it up from the cold stone's surface.

Unlike the first time, Raven was less surprised to witness it vanish into thin air. As the spear vanished, a rush of energy filled and strengthened her, leaving her slightly shaken, even as her eyes faded from their normal pitch-black of night, to a ghostly hue.

Startled, the dark figure cursed and spat shadow.

“No!” he cried, throwing his hands out to either side.

“Vega Orin Gronshul Inaoth!” he forced between clenched teeth. Shadowy strands of sickened darkness spewed from between his blackened teeth as he doubled over, falling to his knees.

“Ravenoth, no! Stop!” he screamed.

After carefully turning to the third page, she ever-so gently set the four rocks down to hold the pages in place. Curious to know what was next, she read on, eager for more.

## ‘A shield for the pure in heart. Oblivion take all others’

Raven read it three times, pondering what it meant. She had never done anything to make herself impure . . . well not that she could remember. The fact was, she could not recall a larger portion of her life. Trepidation filled her mind as she stared down at the words. Reading them again and again, she became deeply troubled. Had she remained pure during the part of her life she had no recollection of? This thought scared her badly, for, as of late, she recalled many things she either did, or thought she had done. Still, was this all real? In her tomb, she had slept for many years - or had she? Raven could not tell what was dream, and what was truth.

“What is real?” she whispered, haunted by the sudden recollection of her past.

“I wish I had never infected myself with his blood,” she lamented. Confused at what she had just said, she shook her head, thinking on it. Finally, she came to her senses, letting out a breath of frustration as a memory illusively dance on the edge of her memory, taunting her. Staring at the shield, she began to truly doubt herself. If she was impure, why would she be doing any of this?

“Maybe I am my own worst enemy,” she whispered, throwing Kromjin an insecure glance. Krom was no help. Holding a trembling hand over the shield, she hesitated. Biting her lip. “Hey Kromjin, am I a good person?” The great Valkyrin Cat sniffed the air, but paid her no attention. Frowning, Raven looked back to see her hand trembling even the more.

“A lot of help you are, Krom,” she whispered. After a few moments, Raven closed her eyes, trying to think. Through all the twists and turns of her mind, a single thought broke through the chaos, as if another had given it to her. She recalled the words of King Nishane Asmond, as he stood, enveloped in the power of his Jahtha, the mighty Vannar. She then recalled the female child . . . her words. Memories of certain events opened up to her. They were more confusing than helpful, but it gave her hope.

“I have been judged worthy to stand,” she stated, a feeling of conviction and confidence filling her. “And they do not lie.” With no further hesitation, Raven took up the shield and slipped a hand and arm through the thick leather straps. No sooner had she done this than the shield melted away, absorbing into her arm. Instantly, she felt bolstered, protected, more safe, she knew not why. It was a welcomed feeling; a rarity in this dark world.

She bent over and looked at the fourth page of the book, lightly gliding a finger over it as

she read. After reading the first word, a vision of a farm house with a garden out back opened up in her mind. Beyond the garden was a large barn. A fence encompassed the entire property. A man waved at her as he exited a small corn patch, carrying a small boy on his shoulders. Raising a hand to her eyebrows, Raven shielded her eyes from the brilliance of the sun and waved back.

“Mommy, watch what I can do!” he hollered, excited beyond measure. Small wings extended from either side of his back as he grabbed the man's hair. Unlike Kesla, who had Raven feathers, the boy's feathers were white as snow. Waiting, the boy watched her, waiting for something.

“Mommy, what are you waiting for?” the boy cried out with glee. From the side of the house a white-haired woman dashed out into view, sprinting toward the two. Screaming with delight, the child scrambled up into standing position on the man's shoulders, then launched into the air in the attempt to get away. Up he soared as the woman took to flight after him. Raven watched, a smile playing across her face as she witnessed the white-haired woman quickly snatch the child in mid-flight. The boy screamed with surprise and delight as -

In utter astonishment, Raven snapped out of the daydream. Placing a hand to her head, she rested upon the edge of the stone, feeling emotionally drained.

“What is all this?” she whispered, trying to keep her mind balanced. After a few moments, she steadied herself and turned to the book. Carefully turning to the fifth page, she set the four stones upon the corners to keep it flat. Once again, she looked down, Focussing on the words of the fifth page.

‘Answer him not  
He is the Snare  
He is the Shadow  
He is the Night  
Black Heart  
Dark Lord Kin  
Prove yourself worthy to stand’

“I wrote this? How odd,” she wondered aloud. Raven then remembered the darts in both Durrik and Kesla's hands, the memory sparking a seething hatred for those who wielded such vile weapons.

After destroying the book, she gathered up the diamonds and departed from the cave, deep in thought, a burning hatred for . . . for . . . she had no idea for who her malice was intended. The only clues had come from page five. Still, it was a beginning, an understanding, if only in clues.

Once again standing at the shoreline, Raven steadily calmed her emotions. She knew Kesla and Durrik, as well as others like them, would suffer if she did not do something about this situation. Where to start, she had no idea. To here, this was like finding a specific needle in a huge stack of needles.

Raven looked at Kromjin, thinking about his stealth and prowess. It was good to have him at her back. Placing the tips of her fingers on the top of his head, she began gently massaging his ears. A black bird flew overhead and circled three times before landing down the beach. Raven watched it, listening to the gibberish in its chatter. At first, she thought nothing of it, but as she listened, a cold dread began to twist into her chest.

“Krom, I don't understand what it's saying. I should, because it is a crow. I can speak to ravens and crows.” She remembered something else! Astonished, she looked at the bird and frowned. “Kromjin, that's not a bird!” Launching across the beach, Raven drew her sword. Before she closed half the distance, it began to flop and spasm, shifting and stretching unnaturally. Behind her, she heard the distinct padding of Kromjin's feet as he followed.

Landing, Raven glanced back, waiting for her beast to catch up as the writhing blackness upon the sand before her began to rise, taking the form of a man, wreathed in shadow.

“Peace, Raven, peace!” he called out, as the Valkyrin Cat slid to a stop beside her, its ears laid back. The moment he spoke, she wanted to kill him. Suddenly, she knew who he was. He was sent to bring her to her Dark Lord.

“Peace?” she asked. “Where are your black darts? Will you hurl them at me as well?” The man of dark shadow held out his hands, as to show he was not here to fight.

“Of course not, why would I do that?” he returned. His question sent a chill into Raven's mind and heart as she recalled the words of the book.

“Why do you ask me that?”

“It was a simple question.” he replied. “Did it offend you?” Raven spit at the man, suddenly snarling as if she were no longer her, but a savage fiend.

“I know what answering your questions does. I need not slavery to know my place!” Surprised, the shadowed man shrugged.

“Will you come willingly then?” Raven growled, causing Kromjin to scream at the night-bound man before them and stalk forward.

“You simply cannot stop, can you?” she accused.

“Now, you are asking me questions?” Raven closed her eyes, Focussing upon the energy

within her; a well of power she had always harbored, even when she was a young girl. As she opened her eyes, a golden hue emanated deep within, quickly growing brighter and brighter as she focussed upon her enemy.

“Krom, kill him,” she whispered, a dire, lethal tone in her voice. The Valkyrin Cat instantly leapt forward, bent upon its prey with astonishing speed.

Rynox sat upon his throne, caressing the fleshless head of the Balamur. Taking up a cloth, he began polishing his prize skull. One thing he was grateful for, was that Aldean had given it to him. Like some precious heirloom, Rynox took great care in cleaning it. As he lovingly tended to every crevice and hollow, he thought about the Elf who had brought it to him. He would kill Aldean, yes. The Elf was brave, and he respected that. Still, he was an Elf and needed to be destroyed. Better yet - Rynox looked at a vacant spot in the floor of the throne room - he would make a significant trophy and bartering piece.

Holding up the skull, he gazed upon it, his mind bent on its placement. It was a shame he did not have the full remains of the Balamur. It had been damaged beyond the ability to have animated. This was a disappointment; Drath's raised skeleton would have been a worthy slave. Still, its skull would become a prized affect if properly enchanted. Truly, it was unnerving, even for him. It was perfect and undamaged.

As he finished polishing the bone, he reverently set Drath's skull aside. As he stood, a void within his chest suddenly struck him still. Raising a hand to his heart, he grimaced and then frowned and shook his head.

"Is there no one in all my kingdom that can do a simple task?" he seethed in sudden, deadly anger.

The eight Dark Knights within the extravagant macabre throne room - his most loyal - stood suddenly alert, waiting their master's command.

His screams were hollow and ghost-like. With the Essence of Eternity, it did not take long for the Valkyrin Cat to dispatch the shadowed man as she bound and paralysed him. It almost made her laugh, seeing him caught so off guard. He knew what she was, and still confronted her. It was foolish. Still, it seemed their way to act without fully preparing. What gave Raven hope was the thought that they did not know she harbored a terrible gift; a power that could be used to . . . take his place. Raven shuddered, her eyes widening at such a prospect.

As she looked down at his shrivelling body in the sand, Raven shivered, enjoying the fact that it had no doubt taken this man a lifetime to cultivate what power he had. This servant of horror had been lacking, and therefore not worthy to stand.

Raven watched his body shrivel and twist, as if atrophy had fully embraced it within a few moments. It was at this point when she realized something about herself, something she was beginning to understand about who and what she was. And this pleased her.

As the remains of this less-than-worthy opponent transformed into a dark mist upon the sand before her, she watched in terrible fascination as the last of her foe was swept away by the steady ocean breeze. In its place, laying upon the sand, Raven beheld a ring, crafted from what appeared as two raven wings, a white diamond set within the extravagant band. Slowly, Raven picked up the ring and looked at it as, like a flood gate, memories poured into her mind.

“Kromjin, I found the ring I lost.” She suddenly knew exactly where she was going, and she had some explaining to do.

Chrysalis flew about the ranks of the enemy, her sword biting deep into as many foes as she could get to. As she harassed their numbers, Griffon Riders, led by the king himself, tore directly through them, wreaking havoc within their ranks. She glanced at Nishane Asmond as he shot past her, driving back a regiment of archers who had turned their attention upon her. The King was watching out for her. His attention toward her had, no doubt, saved her from the sting of both arrow and sword.

Chrysalis kept her flight erratic and without a pattern so the enemy could not anticipate or predict her next move. Without a thought as to why, Chrysalis was beginning to crave killing. It was as if she was born to do this! The blade she had obtained from the treasure room of the castle was well balanced and more sharp than the edge of freshly broken obsidian. Chrysalis did not enjoy every wound she inflicted upon these silent, persistent soldiers. Did they have families back home? Licking the blood from her lips, she drove her blade through a large man, who dropped without a scream. It was justice that the terror they brought with them be reversed back upon their own heads. A sudden bloodlust overtook Chrysalis as her eyes faded to crimson-red.

“Let me feed!” she screamed as she gripped a Bowman by the throat, and launched into the sky. Clenching his neck, Chrysalis wrapped her legs about him. With a strange, insatiable hunger. In vain he struggled as she bit into the side of his neck to drink his life essence. Yet, as she did, Chrysalis instantly realized something was wrong. She was no Vampire, but could still feed from the freshly streaming blood pouring from his neck. Still, as she drank, it seemed wrong.

“Strange, she whispered in his ear. Placing the edge of her blade against his neck, she let him go, slicing his neck as he fell. It did not occur to Chrysalis that the man had not struggled, nor screamed as he fell to his death. Breaking off the attack, she headed straight into the air. The King had given the signal to return to the tower. As she ascended, she spiraled and moved out and away from the ranks of archers below, easily evading the bite of their arrows.

Three Griffons had been shot out of the sky. The most impressive acts she had ever seen, was the King himself diving into seemingly certain death to rescue two of the three riders. His movements were swift and sure, as he drove the enemy away, then, one by one, hoisted them onto his griffin. After another skirmish, which left hundreds dead, the King leapt onto his mount and returned to the tower, followed by a regiment of Sardakk Elf Guardians. Once there, the wounded were removed from his Griffon. Once down, he launched quickly back into the fight.

The King truly loved his people, risking his life to shield and save them. His fury was unmatched, even by Katcha, who was a terrible foe to face, his sword's energy rumbling across the ranks of hundreds, who fell before him like wheat before the scythe during a harvest season.

The king's blade shone like the sun at noonday and cleaved both shield and foe alike. Before his wrath, nothing could stand, and all enemies faltered, breaking into confusion.

As hungry as she was for blood, the silence of the attacking host was disturbing. Even as she killed her foes, she watched on, listening to the total silence that should not have been. There were no screams, no commands issued, nor did the enemy cry out from the wounds inflicted upon them. It was unnatural. Spinning through a group of swordsmen, Chrysalis extended her wings, severing in half most of their number. Still, no cries, nothing. Breaking off the attack, Chrysalis ascended, retreating back to the tower. As she landed, the king walked over to Chrysalis as she stood at the edge, looking down upon a now more numerous host. As he stepped next to her, she pointed.

“Brother, there are no bodies among the ranks of the dead. The numbers of the archers have increased. They have multiplied.” In admiration, he looked upon her.

“How's your sword arm doing?” She moved it a bit.

“Sore, but still good to go.” He grimaced.

“It will get worse before it gets better, I'm afraid. Keep moving it around, and stretch the muscles.”

“Thank you milord. I'll do that.” He laughed.

“It won't get rid of the pain, but it will shorten its duration.” Running her fingers through her hair, she looked out upon the army, suddenly fearing this outcome.

“As the Hydra, when a head is severed, they are growing in numbers. I believe, when we kill one, two more appear in the place of the fallen. If they continue to grow in number like this, it will enable them to build a ramp, the making of their own bodies, and overrun the first wall. The more we kill, the more that appear.” The sudden reality of the situation caused Chrysalis to stagger back.

“Milord, we are creating the real force by killing them. Even so, as of now, it is we who are bringing eventual doom to this city.” The King looked at Chrysalis, then out onto the battle field, then back to her again, marvelling at her insight.

“Your perception may have just saved this city, Chrysalis. Now I see. How could I have been so blind?” Turning to all upon the tower, the King looked to Shaylan, who had overheard their conversation. Quickly, the Magician approached, holding out a hand to the growing forces below.

“They are not real; they are a spell. Why did I not see this before? Send out the word to stop killing them, now!” he urged. The king turned to his personal guard.

“Do it, be quick!” At his command, dozens of Griffon Riders launched into the sky to do the king's will. Chrysalis looked dismayed.

“How do we fight such madness?” The King thought for a moment, then looked at Mitcheio in silence, as if waiting for an answer. Walking to him, the black Witch glanced at him, then looked out over the enemy.

“What is it milord?” she whispered.

“What can you do, Mitcheio?” She looked at the enemy, her eyes burning like molten gold. The heat that burst from not only her eyes, but from her being, forced Chrysalis and the king to retreat a few steps, for fear of being burned. Mitcheio watched on in silence at the growing host below. Katcha quickly came to her side and brought his left hand up into her right palm for support.

“There are so many now. I could attempt to dispel them. I would not be pitting my mind against the mundane upon us, but the one driving them.” She smiled as the notion. “Nishane Asmond, I am not all powerful. If I fail to pit my mind against the one who has created this sickening atrocity, I suspect their number will instantly double. I will then be forced to take my Guardian into the Underworld and wreak as much damage and havoc as possible before our end.” The king shook his head, but said nothing.

Chrysalis remembered the Deth`Knell, Selman VanDrake, and wondered if he would ever let her and Katcha attempt such a task alone. Shooting a glance at her, Mitcheio caught Chrysalis watching her.

***“Even he would be put to the ultimate test in such an undertaking. Yet, he would go with us, that I'm sure of,”*** Mitcheio gently stated within Chrysalis's mind. Even as gentle as she spoke into Chrysalis mind, she also felt a terrible feeling of grim, silent determination wash through her. The feeling caused Chrysalis to recoil, suddenly terrified, as if Mitcheio might turn on her. Instantly, she lowered her eyes, subdued by a level of power she never knew existed. It was unearthly, the power Mitcheio shed. Even so, she was grateful to have place beside her in this conflict.

***“Fear me not, my apprentice, for you have proven worthy to be counted among the ranks of the Knights of Vannar. Fear me not, friend. Keep watch for Raven to appear upon the battle field, if she does. If she comes, I need to know immediately. Do you understand?”***

***“Yes, Mother,”*** Chrysalis replied in her head, fully understanding what this meant. She was indicating that if Raven was a foe, she would have to kill her. On the other hand, if Raven came forth at the head of the opposing army, as an ally, her army would be weakened. If weakened, Raven would need support.

From nowhere, Taia appeared beside Mitcheio. Katcha gave a subtle glance her way as Taia looked out at the host.

“Mother, I will funnel all my strength into you, even as little as I have. I hope it will help.” Mitcheio smiled slightly.

“This will help. I'm sure we can do this.” Shaylan held up a hand.

“Before you attempt this, I need to tell you, Chrysalis, something you should know. This type of legion is precursor to the appearance of a Gorgonoth. If Raven was seduced by the darkness of Rynox, she will be the enemy. If she was rejected by Rynox, he will either kill her, or caster into pain and horror. She will be forced into the Toraz Pits to suffer unending.”

Shocked, Chrysalis thought of Raven.

“She wouldn't, I wouldn't,” she whispered in horror. “So,” her voice quivered, “we wait for Raven to take her place, then see what she does.” She found Shaylan beside her, a gentle hand resting upon her shoulder.

“Chrysalis, Raven is not the only Gorgonoth, and she may not have gone to the tower. I'll let you in on a truth not many know. When you pass through the planar barrier, and enter the Underworld, you quickly forget who you are. Raven would have to recall her memories, and that is not an easy thing to do, even for me.” For comfort, Chrysalis reached up and gripped Shaylan's hand.

“Do you think she'll figure it out?”

“I don't know,” came his quick reply. “Chrysalis, Raven was once a Figment, as you well know. Rynox has not forgotten her, and even though this might seem to bode ill for Raven, Raven will loath him, that I am sure of. All the servants of Rynox hate and fear him. If Rynox approaches with a gentle hand . . . that will be the grand deception.” Horrified, Chrysalis looked out over the swarming masses far below.

“Do you think she would join with him, if he offered her riches and kindness and power in his kingdom?” Shaylan chuckled.

“That, my dear girl, is something Rynox would never do, even though it would aid him. He is too greedy to share, and much too black-hearted to love. It is my sincere belief that Rynox cannot do such things. He is an unwise fool.” Shaylan chuckled and embraced Chrysalis. “He has proved that many times before.” Chrysalis gasped in astonishment as Shaylan embraced her. Strength, unlike any she had ever know, penetrated her entire being as he held her. Suddenly, she fell in love with him . . . perfect, flawless, love. She rested the side of her head against his chest, absorbing the being of this wonderful man.

“I hate Rynox,” she whispered. Shaylan tightened his embrace upon Chrysalis for a long while. Before letting her go, he whispered back, “So do all who have a heart such as you.”

Artemis had overheard their conversation. Immediately, he approached Mitcheio, who studied the enemy with great interest.

“Milady, may I have a word with you?” She looked at Artemis and nodded.

“Of course, Artemis, what is it?”

“Training . . . at your hand.” Mitcheio smiled, turning on him, giving him her full attention.

“It's about time you asked.”

For a long while, Selman had been slowly pacing back and forth behind the Black Griffon Inn.

“Where are you, my lady? Tha`Shealin, talk to me, please.” He was not surprised to hear her answer.

“Again, you leave yourself exposed and vulnerable. Did I not say I would have to kill you when next we met?” Selman stopped and turned, facing her. As he laid eyes on the dark queen, his heart melted.

“Zane, I will back you against Rynox with all the power and influence I possess.” Laughing, the beautiful Dragon Queen approached him, her eyes glistening like the embers of the hottest magma.

“Did you not just hear me?” Selman dismissed the threat with a wave of his hand.

“Did you not hear my offer?”

“Yes, and thank you for it.” She held out a hand. “You have something of mine. Give it back.” The Dragonlord reached into his robes and pulled out the blue ribbon. Turning her back on him, she pulled her hair back and held it with one hand. She held her other hand out in silence. Moving up behind, Selman pushed her hand away and tied the ribbon in her dark hair.

“Well,” she said, turning on him, “are you ready to die now?” Smiling, he nodded.

“If I . . .”, he faltered, becoming silent for a moment. Zane's expression changed from sly to curious. She reached out, slipping her hand into his, remaining silent, waiting for his reaction. Selman instantly wove his fingers through hers and squeezed.

“I can tell when you are playing me,” she stated, watching him close.

“And?” he whispered. She stared at him for a while, then looked down at their hands.

“Selman VanDrake, I should get back.” Gripping her hand tight, he shook his head.

“Don't leave me, please,” he stated soberly. Zane's eyes widened slightly. Drawing near, she looked at him, suddenly curious.

“You are not playing games here. You really want me to stay.” Tha`Shealin, Dark Dragon Queen, terror of the Underworld, mightiest of all evil dragons, sighed and shook her head.

“Alright, I will stay. Can we read some of that book you showed me a few nights ago?” Selman reached into his robes and pulled the book out.

“I have them all . . . every book we ever read. I collected them when I visited you.” His words brought on an instant smile to the most beautiful and deadly woman known to man.

“It doesn't sound so bad when you say it like that. Shall we go down to the shore and sit?”

“Is that what you want?” he asked.

“I would actually like to hear a new tale, if you have one.” Selman put the book away

and pulled out a brand new one.

“I always have a new tale to read to you.” Leading her down to the water's edge, he found a spot for them to relax and enjoy a new adventure. All through the night, he read to her as she laid her head upon his shoulder, just as she did so many times before. Deep into the night, he finished the last page and closed the book.

“Selman, you made me miss my part in the attack on Gaunten. She looked up at him sleepily. “I really should kill you for that.” Selman laid her back onto the sand and, with genuine affection, began playing with her hair.

“My apologies, I wasn't thinking straight. You made me miss out on the battle as well, if that makes you feel any better.”

“Thoughts scrambled? Must've been an excellent story.” He nodded.

“My favorite one yet. Besides, you are excellent company. Oh, how I've missed you. I need to ask you something before you kill me.” She wrapped her arms about his neck.

“Okay,” she whispered, her eyes half open. Reaching into his obsidian-black robes, Selman brought out the ring he had forged so long ago. Holding the ring up before her, he smiled.

“Will you please do me the great honor of marrying me?” He searched her eyes unblinking as she stared up at him, her eyes suddenly widening.

“Wow, you did better than kneel. Yes, I will.” Selman grinned, which openly shocked her. She had never seen more than a slight lift at the corner of his mouth. Sliding the ring upon her finger, Selman adjusted it. It seemed a perfect fit.

“I've never seen you smile like that, milord.”

“You caused it, milady . . . it's not my fault.” She grinned up at him.

“Now I can't kill you – you are my fiancé.”

“Lucky me,” he whispered, his eyes glistening. The sight of Selman becoming emotional caught her off guard.

“Lucky you, lucky me.” Selman gently kissed her, then laughed.

“Finally, you grace me with approval. When and where shall we be wed? Most importantly, where shall we have our honeymoon?” She laughed and kissed him again.

“Oh, let's just go somewhere simple and enjoy ourselves, shall we?” Selman grinned.

“Alright. Where no one can find us.” She nodded enthusiastically.

“Where no one will find us.”

Raven appeared within the circle of engraved runes, startling the two Elite Vuolg Guards, who instantly drew their weapons and advanced upon her. She could see the intricate circles of red upon the inside of their forearms and the band of black-gold upon each guard's finger. Raising her hand, she quickly spoke.

“Peace, Guards of the Receiving Tower. I am come to fulfill my task.” Both hesitated, looking at each other. In silence, one pointed at an archway with the tip of his glaive, indicating he wanted her to go through. The instant he motioned her through the archway, another memory flashed in her mind. She remembered a floor with people in it, covered by sheets of flawless crystal, preserved by a dark power she craved to possess. Slowly, she walked to the archway, stopping just underneath it. She felt a hundred runes cry out to her, like children begging a rich man for shelter. Looking up, she closed her eyes and silently welcomed them in. In an instant, the runes leapt from the archway and fell, raining down upon her. Each rune landed upon a different area of her body, searing into her flesh like a hot brand. The pain each caused was insignificant to the power she felt grafting into her being. New possibilities opened up to her in the manner of raw, unrefined abilities, spells and perceptions.

The point of a glaive pressed into her back, meaning she had to move, or be run through. Turning, she hissed, annoyed at the lesser touching her.

“Touch me again,” she invited. Narrowing his eyes, the guard pointed.

“If Rynox did not care, I would lay waste to your attitude, Figment.” There was nothing she hated more, than to be called that, and it caused her to tremble and shake as she stared at the Vuolg who dared disrespect her. Slowly, Raven took a step near him, keeping her senses heightened, should the other Vuolg join with this one. Yet, the other guard looked unsure, then lowered his blade, throwing her a slight bow to show he meant no ill will.

The problem was, she did.

“Don't bow to this female Figment scum, Vallyn. She is no more than a mere husk of what she might have been.” Turning his full attention upon her, he refrained from running her through.

“Rynox is waiting for you, and he is most unhappy.” He stepped up to Raven, looking down on her. “Move, earthen trash.” Raven fought the urge to feed on him, supposing the Vuolg lord might be angry with her if she did. Already, she had probably caused Rynox some complications within the faction of the Balamur. No, she better not push her luck by ending him. The problem was, this handsome boy guard had just placed a blade against her neck, further threatening her. Looking at him, she froze, her thoughts accelerating beyond normal. His ring, the Receiving Portal; she had an idea.

Focussing on his ring, she reached deep into herself and touched upon the power within. Bypassing the space between them, she touched his ring, released an energy into it, then yanked

it from his finger, then shoved the ring back on so hard, it cut deep into his flesh. As his blade began to slowly fall upon her, Raven did not move, nor attempt to evade the deadly stroke. She did not have to, for as it descended, he vanished and reappeared within the circle of runes she had just appeared within. His rune-etch glaive cut through the air before him, missing its mark.

Growling in rage, the Tower Guard leapt from the Receiving Circle and landed, just as his ring vanished, then reappeared on his hand once again. Instantly he appeared within the Receiving Circle once more. Again, he leapt from the circle. Again, he reappeared within it in a never ending cycle.

The other guard watched on in horror as his fellow Tower Guard fell prey to Raven's curse. After a time, Raven became bored. Looking up at the last guard, she gave him a look that plainly stated, "I'm ready to go in." With a shaking hand, the guard pointed through the archway.

"This way, if you please," he stated in formal politeness. Raven was more than self gratified. She had rarely caused such horror in a creature, and the aroma of it was intoxicating. Turning, she began walking, savouring the frustrated screams of the guard caught by her never-ending hex.

A short time later, Raven stood before the great double-doors, crafted entirely from the skulls of Rynox's victims. Every skull faced outward, their jaws set in eternal screams. The Receiving Tower Guard turned to her, bowed, and quickly departed. Politely, she bowed in return, pleased with the terror she inflicted him with as well.

"Well, let's see what toys we have to play with," she stated as she turned to face the doors. Two guards stood unmoving at either side of the throne room doors. She looked at them in silence, studying their physique in growing curiosity. They were not Vuolg, but of an insect nature.

"What is your race," she whispered to herself, not meaning to say it aloud. These creatures fascinated her deeply.

"Myotis, Gorgonoth." one stated with a deep, crackling voice. Admiring its eight legs, she had the desire to touch it, but refrained. As curious as she was, now was not the time to study insects.

Turning back to the doors, she looked at the skulls, feeling as though they were watching her. Slowly, she reached out a hand and touched one. Instantly, there erupted a chorus of screams from every last skull, filling the chamber with a terrible racket of chaos. Raven instantly laughed, enjoying the misery of the fleshless heads, eternally set within the throne room doors. She could sense the helplessness and horror of their situation.

"Well, this is unique, to say the least. Again, she touched the skull and listened to the strain of misery filling the air. Raven sensed how trapped they felt; how truly steeped in endless hopeless their suffering was. The spirit of the skull she touched had been trapped within the

bones of the person who now shared in the making of the structure all about her. Every skull shared the same fate together, reluctantly adding their fleshless souls to the making of this ghastly door. Again, she touched it, causing it to scream. In turn, hundreds of other skulls wailed loudly, snapping and clacking their jaws together for a time, until it once again ended.

“Genius,” she whispered, then jumped as the doors cracked open, slowly grinding outward. As they opened, Raven stepped back, hearing muffled cries, beneath the doors, filled with unlimited pain and misery. In sudden curiosity, Raven crouched down to discover what the grinding was beneath the door was. There were skulls, set within a deep-set track under the base of each door, serving to aid the doors in opening and closing with greater ease by rolling over them. Before the great bone doors opened wide, she stood straight. Her eyes fell upon the floor of the throne room, and as they did, she saw those, who Rynox had captured, lying within eternal, deathless, crystal coffins; trophies he now stood victorious over.

He was standing at the center of the throne room with no expression upon his face, with the exception of his eyes, which burned hard and cruel. As she looked upon him, a thousand memories flooded into her mind, like a sudden hail storm in which each piece of falling ice unlocked a memory of her past. Staggering, she now fully realized why she had been referred to as 'Queen'.

“It's coming back to you now.” Rynox coldly whispered. “But you, Raven, have been off the beaten path. Tell me, my dear, why would I allow you to lead one of my legions? Why now?” Kneeling down, she placed a hand upon the surface of the eternal, unliving coffin beneath her and grinned, recognizing the man she had helped Rynox secure within long ago. He was no ordinary Human, but the fourth son of a King. His name no longer mattered, nor the qualities he possessed before being captured. She caressed the crystal, just over his cheek as he screamed in silent horror.

“Shhhh, my young friend, “Shhh.” Raven smiled at him, a hunger growing within. “I have been within his inner-most chambers. I saw it all from the inside. I know where to strike to gain the best possible advantage. I know where the dark Witch's guild is, as well as no few secrets therein. I have seen the portal she harbors. I know where to recruit, and where to kill and lay waste. Where I have been and travelled will serve the goals of your kingdom. I have seen both sides . . . known both factions.” He looked up at Rynox, her eyes narrowing.

“So much more than this, I know. The advantage you need is my knowledge, which I will freely impart, asking nothing in return but to serve and aid you, master.” She looked up at the Vuolg King. “If you are to pike the high lord's head, my knowledge will aid you to his end.” Raven looked at Rynox, open admiration filling her countenance. Rynox dismissed her speech with a harsh wave of his hand.

“Do you think you are the only Gorgonoth in training? What truly makes you so

special?” Raven stood and walked boldly before Rynox, master of the Vuolg, and one of the cruelest dwellers in all the Underworld. This man had, in the course of his life, slain millions of men and women. He was merciless . . . truly a walking nightmare among the great ones of this realm.

“I am hungry,” she whispered. I have held back from devouring souls for a thousand years. I need sustenance. Let me feed on them now.” Again Rynox refused her answer by ripping a shadowy blade from the sheath at his hip. Almost touching her neck with its' keen edge, he asked again.

“What makes you worth keeping?” Raven laughed softly, noticing Drath's skull on the right arm of the throne. Then, slowly, her smile faded.

“It is a secret I will share only with you. Your guards are not worthy to know it. I will not enlighten them.” With a quick wave of his hand, Rynox dismissed all his guards. She could tell Rynox was becoming impatient. A thousand years of preparation was the only thing keeping her alive at this point. The thing was, it was not going in her favor.

The memories she recalled were of this very room. She recalled standing beside him many times as others were brought before him and forced to kneel. So many memories, so much experienced. She knew what was about to happen to her . . . what he would do next if she was accepted of him. Raven watched the last of the guards vanish. Rynox escorted the last one out personally, and as he did, he whispered to him quietly, confidentially. While the Dark Lord was distracted, Raven pulled open her Storing Sack just enough to get a hand into it and withdrew the vial of Vermillion Sap. Quickly, she opened it, heated it with her inner power, so that it flowed like water. In one fluid motion, she put the vial to her mouth and sucked the warmth of the Vermillion Tree's life essence up into the hollows of each fang. Using her inner power, Raven nullified the sap to have no smell and no taste.

As the dark lord finished speaking to his guard, she capped and dropped the vial back into the sack. Turning, he held up his hands.

“Now, we are alone. Show me why I should allow you to remain my servant, or I will throw you down where there can be no relief from misery.” Raven smiled fondly upon her master, closed her eyes focussed upon the Essence of Eternity, calling upon all the power she could. Like phoenix fire, she felt that blessed power fill her entire soul. Opening her eyes, she looked at her master as her eyes blazing gold.

“I am not only darkness, but light. I hold the knowledge of all my experiences, both here with you and upon the Earthen Plane. And I choose darkness over light. I am yours to command. I am no ordinary Figment, seeking to become Gorgonoth. I yearn to be more. I am more than the other Gorgonoth, and I am at your command. Before I was trained to control this rare and inner power, I slew one of your Gorgonoth's and his petty crew. I was then but a fledgling. Now? Now, I am true power, and I am at your service, my master. I remember everything now, and I

will say this one last thing: I love you. Use me as your Gorgonoth Herald of Destruction. I give myself to you freely, willingly.” At this point, Raven began to feel the effects of the Vermillion Sap flowing through her veins, effecting her mind. She knew she could not hold its effect at bay forever. Still, the power now brimming within her kept it in check. She knew she had to do something, and soon, or she might lose control. Focussing upon Rynox, she waited, conviction burning in her countenance as a feeling of darkness began to creep through her, tempting her to succumb to Rynox.

Rynox seemed fascinated by her and closed in, sheathing his dagger. Quickly he embraced her.

“I accept you.” Wrapping her in his arms tight, he passionately kissed her. The time had come for Raven to make the choice as to where her loyalties would be rooted. Rynox the great now offered her a place at his side, and this was no small standing within the Underworld. They had spent decades, centuries, together as he mentored and taught her many things. She was also a Knight of Vannar. Those whom she had been with were kind and loving, accepting of her, even though they knew what she might become. Even knowing what she might be, they did not slay her. Instead, they treated her with respect and honor, mantling her with the divine calling of Vannar's Knight.

Tears of golden liquid flowed from her eyes and she embraced the man she truly loved. For the longest moment in her life, so it seemed, she felt as though she was standing upon the brink of a narrow ledge. If she strayed but a little either way, she would fall.

As he kissed her, and as she desperately received his attention, she wrapped her arms tight about his neck and gladly returned his affection. Now, she knew where her loyalties were. He had brought her out from the Realm of Intelligence, and into his presence. He had given her a body, a mortal shell she had craved to possess for a hundred thousand Ages. He was her creator, mentor and her first love. How could she possibly resist him? There was no way. She yielded to him fully . . . until her mind set upon the ring. Artemis!

Her wrath instantly kindle as Rynox pulled her tight. Locking onto him as tight as she could, she sank all her fangs up into the hollow of his neck, biting down with all the force she could, then expelled the Vermillion Sap into the main artery of his neck. In a blaze of sudden wrath, he hurled her to the floor, cracking a plate of crystal that held one of his trophies.

“Fool!” he raged as blood gushed from his neck. Panicking, she moved away from Rynox, her eyes widening.

“I got carried away, forgive me,” she begged as she continued to hastily retreat.

“You bit me!” he raged. As he began stalking toward her, he ripped two daggers from their sheathes, intent on finishing her off. The door of the throne room stopped her retreat as her master stalked toward her, his presence darkening so intensely, it caused Raven to grit her teeth in pain. Panicking, she looked in vain for a way out. Seeing she was cornered, she turned her full attention upon him, hissing vehemently.

“You made me hunger! You made me what I am!” Raising his blades, he poised to strike her down, then hesitated, suddenly distracted at the flat of his dark blade.

“What is this?” he inquired. “Raven, what have you done?” Taking the advantage of his distraction, she slipped away from him and backed away, never taking her eyes from her mentor; the man she loved. Blackened tears began to flow like heated pitch, mingled with a golden hue, as she backed toward the throne. Pointing at herself, she cried in our misery and hope.

“You made me! You did all this! Why can you not say it?” Rynox dropped his blades and turned to her, staggering.

“Say what, Raven?” he slurred. She felt crushed by his question.

“That you love me,” she wept. “In all the time we've spent together, was there ever a time when you had feelings for me? Rynox, milord, please, did you ever love me?” If he would acknowledge he loved her, she could heal him and take away this memory. She could spend forever together with this wonderful, scary man. “Do you love me?” Shuddering, the Vuolg King grinned, then twitched, as if suddenly seeing something. Spinning around, he grasped at something she could not see.

“No. You are only a Figment. You know,” Rynox gasped for breath as he fell to his hand and knees, “nothing of love. You don't even have a heart.” Rynox froze, as if suddenly turned to stone. His words crushed her to the core of her soul, causing her to choke on his last words, devastated at his rejection. Looking upon him, despair filled her heart and soul.

“I could have saved you, my love,” she wept, slowly, cautiously approaching him as she drew the blade Artemis had given her. Taking him by the hair, she sobbed bitterly.

“No one loves a monster like me, not even a monster like you,” she lamented, then smote off his head with a single stroke. Sheathing her blade, she grabbed his daggers and back away from the body of the man she had loved for centuries, crying out in despair and regret.

“I am the darkness in a lightless void. Yet, not all that is darkness is evil, my love. Not all.” Turning, Raven leapt to the throne and snatched up the skull of the Balamur, keeping a firm grip of her love's head.

“I'm so sorry,” she bitterly wept as she focussed on returning to the Earthen Plane. Mitcheio had given her three spells; she remembered now. She had used two of them, saving this one spell as a last effect to retreat, should she need it.

As Rynox's guards burst into the throne room, Raven fled upon the wings of a spell that tore her from the Underworld and set her down within the Earthen Plane . . . at the head of a dark army, facing the main gates of a grand citadel.

Stunned, Raven beheld the gates of Gaunten as massive clouds of arrows rose up from the host behind her, filling the sky so thick the sun's light was blotted out.

Chrysalis watched the King gather up every Griffon Rider and launch into the heavens. Drawing her blade, she ran toward the edge, intent on following them. Yet, as she prepared to jump, she abruptly slid to a stop, freezing in place for only a moment before turning back to Mitcheio, gasping.

“Mitcheio,” she screamed, “Raven is back!” I am before the gates! I am confederate with the King!” Leaping from the tower, Chrysalis descended in haste to the front gates. It did not take long before she spotted Raven. But to land before her would be to invite death. She had to land just within the massive doors to avoid the constant barrage of arrows hailing down.

“She is confederate, she is confederate!” Chrysalis screamed in a voice like thunder. All upon the battlement heard the deafening of her cry as Chrysalis began flying back and forth between all who were in spell and bow range of Raven. In turn, they began raising their right hand, fingers spread wide as they looked down at Raven, stone-faced and without emotion.

As the Sardakk Elves, the protectors of the realm of Nishane Asmond, dived in on Raven’s location, they veered off into the thick of the enemy, wreaking havoc among their numbers. It was Raven’s presence that broke the spell; that made them mortal.

Broken hearted, Raven launched Drath’s skull at the mighty gates of Wardenoth Keep. Watching it strike the wood, she looked back and screamed as if she were something other than herself. In return, her army cried out in answer, clashing their weapons and gnashing their teeth, as they waited her instructions.

Chrysalis watched as hundreds of Griffon and Dragon riders descended from the sky, thundering over her and past the gates; the first defence of Gaunten. From both sides, both Raven and Chrysalis could see the gate between them.

“Hello, Chrysalis,” Raven greeted her, her voice filled with grief. The grin that formed upon Chrysalis’s face was so fully out of place, it caused Raven to scream in bitterness. Ignoring Raven’s mood, she pointed.

“Hello, Raven. What do you have hidden under that cloak of yours?” Raven spit, and bore her teeth in such a vicious display, it made Chrysalis back a few steps from the gate.

“Don’t back away, Chrysalis. Come to the wall, now!” Raising her free hand before her, Raven made a fist and pulled. Instantly, Chrysalis was forced directly up to the right-hand side of the gates, against the wall of the citadel.

“Stay where you are.” Chrysalis was paralysed, unable to move.

“I get it, I get it. Let me go, Raven.” Instantly, the overwhelming force that had seized upon her was gone, causing her to fall to her knees.

Instantly a battle broke out just on the other side of the wall Chrysalis was standing against.

Raven saw the gates from the inside, noting Chrysalis was safe. It was a beginning. Broken hearted, she turned, facing a legion that should have been her own. Unveiling the head of Rynox, she raged in the anger of one with a shattered heart. Lifting his head high, she beat her wings, screaming for all to hear.

“I can still be your Queen! I can lead you to another land, where we can begin anew! This man was a betrayer, and would sacrifice you all for his own design! I will not! What say you? Let us leave this land, and molest it no more. I have secrets I will openly share with all of you . . . and I deceive you not!!” her voice thundered, drawing the attention of the great horde.

For short time, all on both sides became deathly still and silent. With conviction, she gripped Rynox’s head, showing it to those who would be his slaves. They had been forced to do the bidding of a dark master. A golden luminescence filled her being, shining like twin stars through her eyes, as the host looked on in wonder . . . some in fear.

“Come with me, and I will teach you everything I can to make you successful. Come, and we will take you to Sanctuary! You do not have to die, or do the bidding of one who could care less if you moulder into the earth to be forgotten. I do,” she screamed and wept.

“Those of you who will follow me, throw down your weapons of war and head north. I give you my word as a Gorgonoth Knight of Vannar, you will prosper and live to see your families grow and flourish. I was also deceived! I also crave a family, and I will go with you! I will never stop protecting you. And one day, you will be empowered to protect yourselves. I will never leave you!”

To Raven’s astonishment, less than a tenth of her army abandoned their posts, cast down their weapons, and began heading north. The remainder of her legion began crying out for her blood, and for her head.

“So be it!” she screamed, and broke into a rage as a sudden storm of arrows rose and fell upon her. Gritting her teeth, Raven released that familiar power within, not only to shield those heading north, but to shield herself. As the hail of death came down upon her, and her people, she concentrated, turning every arrow to water to shower the area with rain. She could not believe what she was witnessing, but they had made their choice.

Fury instantly filled her, as she hurled into the enemy, tears of regret and sorrow streaking her face. She attacked, sorrow turned to intense rage as she cut into the ranks of what should have been her army. Hers! With her wings, she cut her archers down in great number, scattering them into discord and confusion as the King’s assault commenced from above.

“I should have been your Queen!” she shrieked, hatred filling her with such intensity, she began to hunger. In the beginning, she resisted the urge to feed, but by evening, she could no longer resist.

Through their ranks, she drove, taking them quickly, ignoring the space and time it took

to get from one victim to the next. With unearthly speed, she descended upon one after the other with an appetite that steadily became unbearable, unquenchable. With each man she devoured, her appetite grew until she broke into a crazed frenzy.

Into the night, the battle raged on as she broke through line after line of archers, ever feeding, never satisfied. Before the rising of the sun, as the gray of dawn began to chase the night into hiding, a Silver Griffon landed before her, scattering and smashing a group of archers in its fury. She paused as the rider leapt from the back of the great animal, even as a large ring of Griffon Riders landed in a protective circle about them, forcing the enemy back and shielding off the area.

“Raven! Let me take you back!” the King shouted, an arrow just missing him. Raven stopped and screamed.

“Don't you trust your eyes, milord, brother, I have committed the forbidden act, and now I am truly a monster . . . I am lost!”

“Raven, the archers are a spell! You are not lost!” Stunned, she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand holding Rynox's head. As she did, the King looked at it, shocked. Sheathing his blade, the King held out a strong hand as a number of arrows rained down all about the area within the circle.

“You feed unsatisfied! Am I wrong?” He was right, she was incredibly hungry. Sheathing her blade, Raven began walking toward the King as three archers broke through the line and charged Raven. Without paying them any heed, Raven waved a hand at them, her eyes blazing gold, instantly reducing them to a black ash-like substance that floated away on the wind. Stopping before the King, she wept, crying out in misery.

“I love you brother. I am a Knight of Vannar. I am a monster, and I have kept my oath!” she cried out an arrow struck her through the right shoulder. Growling in annoyance, she dropped the head of Rynox and screamed, ripping the arrow from her body as a group of swordsmen broke through the defensive line. In a rage, she screamed at them in the voice of a dragon. Instantly they were hewn down, as if suddenly chewed by unseen teeth. More arrows found their mark, striking Raven in the chest and hip. Without flinching, she knelt and picked up the head.

Raven forced herself to stand as the King stepped over her, raising a golden shield to protect her, even as more arrows hailed down upon them. From the ranks of the Griffons, Taia raced to her side, throwing up her hands, creating a shield of protection over the King and Raven. Looking at her, Taia wept bitterly.

“Forgive me!” Turning on Taia, Raven growled, suddenly feeling her wounds.

“We are family,” Raven replied, gritting her teeth. Weeping, Taia looked around as more of the enemy broke through the defensive circle. In an instant, they were reduced to liquid as Taia helped Raven to stand. Raven shuddered as a hail of arrows glanced from the king's shield,

two finding their mark, striking her in the side and hip. Without faltering, Raven saluted her king.

“I keep my covenant!” she cried out as another arrow struck her deep in the back. Raven would have fallen, if not for Taia and the King taking her up onto his Silver Griffon. As the battle raged all about them, hundreds of Griffons fell like comets to the earth, scattering their enemies and slaughtering them by the thousands as the king held Raven. Holding out a hand to Taia, he motioned her to mount up with him, but she bowed.

“Restitution, milord.” With that, she closed her eyes and began to quickly shift. Soon, she launched into a sea of enemies, fighting beside the king's guard in the form of a young Golden Dragon, desperate to overcome their ranks. Raven felt strong arms holding her steady as they launched into the sky.

As Raven was taken down from the king's Griffon, she felt heavy. She felt the peace of sleep overcoming her as she was laid upon the edge of the highest platform, on the highest tower of Wardenoth Citadel. Looking over at the battle raging on below, she shivered with cold.

“Insects of the mainland,” she whispered, then choked., “I call upon you all to aid us in this time of need. Destroy all the enemies of this free land. Leave those travelling north. Come, aid us now!” she choked, her vision blurring.

The last thing she recalled was a darkening in the skies as clouds of insects began to blot out the sun. She then overheard a deafening shriek from directly above. Before Raven fell into blackened slumber, she heard the sound of a great swarm of insects. She also thought she saw the silhouette of a great dragon descending from the sky, the likes of which rivalled even the great Golden and Black Dragons of Dragon Gate.

Raven turned her head, her eyes yet locked upon the image before her, throwing out a bloody grin. Coughing up blood, she rested her head upon what felt like another's hand, giving in to a death-like exhaustion. As her eyes dimmed, she drove her claws into the platform beneath her, then, slowly relaxed, exhaling her last breath.

Not far from where Raven lay came the distinct cry of Chrysalis, lamenting Raven's loss.

“Is it possible?” a voice whispered in the darkness. Another voice spit out an answer.

“What is, is. He was far too attached to the darkness. It is the consequence of allowing your feelings to get in the way of reason. This is what happens when you think you are beyond mortals. Now, we must begin again. Can you do this, or shall I find another?” The answer came quickly, and without hesitation.

“Yes, I can do this.”

“The Receiving Tower is yours. Prove to me you are capable by your actions. Do what you will to further the grand design. Go!”

“She has kept her honor, milord. But, I have a concern. She was the queen of her legion. A history has been set in stone. The girl wanted the offered position. Also, a tenth part of her army, she has saved for herself.” In reply came a stern voice.

“And yet she aided our cause unto victory by the giving of her life, and more than once. Had she struck out at a single stone of the citadel, the Second Age of War would have begun. She would have been the catalyst to issue in the true army of darkness. She did not,” a humbled voice replied. There was a silence for a time as a great breeze washed across the skies and lands.

“She aided him for a significant length of time, but never actually took the life of a single innocent. She was deceived by illusionary dreams. She is my Knight. She could not have endured the touch of the Sword of Life, and survived, had she become defiled. She is guilty of nothing more than being forced upon by the unholy.

“What is to become of her then? Her wounds overcame her mortal body. She has passed back into the Realm of Intelligence. Will this be her fate?”

“Bring her back into the body of Raven. Let her see I am true to my end of our covenant. She has fulfilled her promise, even unto death. Now, bring her back! Thunder rolled across the sky. Shaylan could not help but grin from ear to ear.

“Vannar, I truly love you.” Vannar smiled, pleased beyond measure at his words.

“I love you too, Shaylan,” the great king of the Seven Havens replied. “Now, bring her back.”

“Yes milord,” Shaylan said with reverence.

“Oh, and Shaylan, make it possible for Raven’s people to find a new Sanctuary. Stay out of sight.” The great Vannar sighed. “I respect the work of the Vampire. He is honorable.” Vannar paused, thinking for a moment. “One more thing.” Shaylan waited for his last instruction.

“Raven has earned the reward. Take her to the king and let her choose.” Vannar laughed happily.

“I love that girl.” Shaylan bowed, an expression of devotion and love filling his countenance.

“I love her too.”

Raven walked among the beautiful grasses and flowers of a place she had seen long ago. She recalled it when her master, the Locust Queen, had spoken to her. She felt at peace amidst the abundant wildlife all about her. Still, she was confused at why she was here. She should have returned to the Plane of Intelligence. Why was she here? Still, she felt comforted to know that she had kept her promise, and that was saying something.

“Well, we did it Chrysalis. We did it. Now, you can live your life with Artemis. I am at peace with that,” she whispered as a snowy butterfly landed on the back of her hand. She raised her hand up and smiled.

“So beautiful. I’ve never seen one like you,” Raven whispered, utterly intrigued. “So beautiful.”

“Snowy Monarch, is what that one is called. Very rare, even here in the Seven Havens,” came the sentimental response of a man. Raven turned to see a man clad all in black. Even his hair and eyes were black as ash. Directly in contrast to everything dark about this man, was his pale skin. He bowed formally.

“Forgive my intrusion, Raven. I am sent by my master to give you an option.” She watched the Snowy Monarch fly away into a sea of other insects, disappointed at its departure. Turning her attention back to him, she bowed.

“The contrast of your being stands out like fire and ice.” He smiled and neared.

“Have no fear. I am Bane, the Jahtha of the Dead. I am the master of death, and Vannar has given me the assignment to come and give you a choice. You can stay here forever in peace and tranquillity, where you will meet many who you will become friends with, or you can return to the Earthen Plane. Vannar highly favors you, Raven. His message to you is this: You have kept your end of the covenant. Thus, I will keep mine.” Raven looked around at all the beauty. One thing she noticed was her heart was beating within her chest; something she had not felt for a thousand years.

“So, I have to choose. I love this place, but I miss my husband. Bane, may I please return to him? Please?” Bane embraced her gently.

“It would be my great honor to escort you back to the land of the living. Tell me when you are ready, and I will take you back.” Raven looked up at him, suddenly enthralled by his presence. There was something about this man she wanted to know more about.

“Will I ever see you again? I love to make new friends, but they keep disappearing on me.” Bane nodded.

“Always, Raven, always.” Tightening his grip on her, he held her close.

“Close your eyes, and I will take you back now.” As Raven shut her eyes, she took one last look around.

“Now, wake up,” he whispered.

Raven slowly opened her eyes to Artemis holding her. As he looked away, she noticed his eyes were bloodshot and swollen. More than that, Raven could feel his heart broken, and suddenly shared in his sadness with tears of her own.

“Artemis, why do you mourn for me?” she whispered as she slowly wrapped her arms about him. Astonished, Artemis pulled back and tried to say something, but only choked in disbelief. Nearby, Chrysalis cried out for joy as she saw Raven through her eyes as well as her own.

“Raven lives!” She cried out. “I live!” Raven gripped Artemis.

“Help me up,” she said. Gently he placed a hand upon her shoulder.

“I think it best you remain in bed, at least until the Healer speaks with you. Raven,” he added, “once again, you were dead. No one here raised you. I was holding you. How - ” “Doubt not Vannar, for he keeps his covenants,” Raven whispered. “I did my part, he did his.” When Raven tried to sit up, her head instantly swam.

“Easy my dear,” an elderly woman soothed from behind. She looked back to see the kindest pair of eyes she had ever beheld. The face that went with those eyes was touched by many years. Artemis kissed Raven on the forehead, brushed her hair back, then left the room in silence.

“Why did he leave? Where am I? Who are you?” she asked. Raven asked many other questions as she mentally held tight to the man she loved more than anything.

“You are yet in Gaunten, at the Temple of Healing, no, you are not dead, and you already know who I am, though you may have forgotten. My my, Raven, you have been busy.” The elderly woman walked around the bed.

“There, now, would you like to take a few steps on your own, young lady?” Raven nodded, doubting herself. “Slowly now.” Raven looked into her eyes, a half smile playing across her face.

“How are the others?” The aged woman winked at her.

“Of two, you already know. Apart from her and Artemis, many defenders have fallen. But let us not set our minds on such dark thoughts. One of them, I persuaded to leave, until you woke up.” Raven squinted at the old lady, studying her eyes. Those eyes were so familiar, but she could not remember from where.

“Wait,” Raven whispered. “Where are all the people? There are no other healers, and no sick or wounded here. Where is everyone?” The old woman backed up and held out a hand.

“Can you walk?” Raven slowly placed her feet on the stone floor and stood, testing her balance by standing. She took a few steps countering the awkwardness of her equilibrium by adjusting her wings. Once she got her balance, she could not help but feel the pain in her back and side. “I think with a little walking and some rest, you will soon be good as new. Be patient.

Give it a few days.” Raven took an awkward step and caught the old woman's hand.

“They shot me with arrows,” she muttered, suddenly agitated.

“Yes, they did,” the old woman replied. “And those arrows were shadowbound. You are lucky to have survived them. But, my you had some strength in you. You know of what I speak. You know, young lady, you can do many wondrous things with such power. You know this, yes?” Thinking about it, Raven nodded, a sudden idea coming to mind.

“Rinn. You are Rinn, the Silver Runed Dragon. I know you,” she whispered, her eyes suddenly filled with sentiment. The elderly woman grinned.

“Yes, Raven, I am she.” Happily, Raven embraced Rinn, then doubled over in pain. Carefully, Rinn helped her back onto the bed, then tucked her in. “Now, get some rest. I will bring you something to drink.” As the dragon turned to go, Raven caught her by the arm, stopping her.

“Master, how long have I been here?” Rinn turned back.

“Do you really want to know?” Raven nodded, suddenly apprehensive.

“Please.” Rinn sighed, running an hand over Ravens' brow and hair.

“Seventy-seven days. By all that is natural, you should be dead. But, here you are,” Rinn whispered. “Artemis would not leave your side, and has barely eaten anything.”

“Monsters don't die so easily,” Raven stated, mild sarcasm dripping from her tongue. Rinn smiled lovingly at Raven.

“No, monsters don't. Now, get some rest. I will return shortly.”

“It was you that descended out of the sky, wasn't it?” Raven asked as Rinn began walking away.

“Yes,” she replied. “Rest now.” Not wanting to upset her first mentor, Raven closed her eyes. A slight smile played across her lips before she fell into a dream where she was being hunted by the most handsome man she ever killed.

Startled by a gentle hand on hers, Raven opened her eyes to see the Vermillion Forest all about her. She was lying in a bed and looking past her feet to behold one particularly large tree slowly pacing back and forth. Looking to see who had touched her, Raven turned her head to see Kromjin staring at her.

“Oh, Krom, I didn't mean to leave you. I thought if I touched you when I took the ring off, you would come with me. The Valkyrin Cat nipped her hand, drawing blood.

“Ouch, Kromjin, you are hurting me.” The great animal leaned forward until its nose nearly touched her face.

“Come . . . get . . . me.”

Beneath her lids, Raven's eyes rapidly moved back and forth as she lay upon the bed in the Healers Temple. Into another dream she slipped, to find herself watching and listening to the skulls of the Vuolg throne room doors wail and scream. The eye sockets of one skull began to glow a ghastly white as its jaw moved.

“Set us free,” they all screamed in unison.

Raven groaned and sat up. Looking around, she found herself upon the throne room floor amidst the trapped souls of the former Vuolg King, who had collected them, never allowing them to die. Looking down, she met the eyes of an Elf, who placed his hands against the crystal glass and called out to her.

“You were here,” he accused. “You could have released me!” Panicking, she looked about the area, suddenly wanting to hide. The thought of going back into her tomb seemed bearable compared to this.

“I didn't have time! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Forgive me,” she begged. “If I could come back and free you, I would!” the Elf pounded on the crystal desperately.

“You can still do it! You have the power, and all is in chaos here. Free me! Free all of us . . . please, free us . . .”

“. . . wake up, wake up little pigeon,” her father teased. She opened her eyes and blinked away the sleep as the chorus of happy birthday filled the air. Excited, she leapt out of bed and stared at a moon-shaped cake with pink frosting, and three candles, all of which were lit.

“I'm three, three, three!” she called out enthusiastically. Her father picked her up and headed for the living room, her mother following them with the cake. Setting her down, Raven's father ruffled her hair and poked her in the ribs while the cake was set down in front of her.

“If you blow out the candles in one blow, you can have a wish,” her mother said with a grin. With all her might, Raven excitedly blew all the candles out in a single breath. As the

candles extinguished, so did every spark of light in the room.

Slowly standing, Raven hugged herself, feeling the floor beneath her; cold and hard. Chilled, she repositioned her small wings about her, shivering. After the longest time, her bedroom door burst open to one year later.

“Get up! Just because you are four doesn't mean you can sleep all day! When I come back, you better have everything in this house organized and dusted! And just because you are four today doesn't mean anything!” Ice-cold water splashed across her face, snapping her to full consciousness. With a gasp, Raven leaped out of bed.

“I'm up! I'm up!” she cried.

“Good, now get to it!”

And such was the mood of her fifth, sixth, seventh, . . . every last birthday . . .

. . . opening her eyes to the daylight streaming down through the hole in the skylight, Raven slowly sat up, tears streaking her face. As she looked up, she witnessed the sun move steadily across the opening. As it vanished from view, the sky grew pale, then darkened, allowing the stars to come out. This repeated three times before she heard a voice softly speak.

“What is it you wished for on your third birthday?” She looked around to find the author of the voice, but saw no one. Remaining silent, Raven silently wept. Again, the same question was repeated. She looked around, curious as to who was speaking.

“Who's there?” In answer to her question, the same question was repeated. She thought about it, but only for a moment. She remembered that wish, so long ago.

“Well, I would be me, but without the curses. No tail, no spines, no anger, no regret - ” she choked on her words, overcome by emotion. “I would keep the bad things buried down deep within my soul. I would remember them, but only enough to keep me from repeating my past mistakes. I don't mind who I am. I just don't want – me – all the time.” Raven sighed. “Monsters can be good and bad. I choose to be a good monster. I love being a Knight of Vannar; it gives me purpose.” She sighed, feeling weary and still a bit heavy. Looking down at the blankets, she took a fist-full and pull them over her as she laid back down, desperately thinking of her mother and father.

“I want to start over. I want to be me. I want to be me, I want to be me . . . where is my Kromjin? I need him. In a deepening sadness, Raven shook her head, feeling empty and alone.

“I'm talking to myself,” she whispered, running a sleeve across her eyes. With a start, she leapt out of bed, a golden hew illuminating her entire being, filling the hall of healing with golden splendor . . . then vanished.

Chrysalis awoke, then quietly slipped out of bed. In haste, she dressed and slipped on her travelling boots. Artemis, who had been keeping an eye on her, arose from the soft-chair he was so well acquainted with.

“Where are you going?” Heading to the door, she opened it. Before leaving, she looked back and smiled.

“See you at the Temple of Healing. You better hurry.” In great haste, Chrysalis rushed out through the door. Artemis bolted after her, running out of the guild house just in time to see her launch into the air, laughing.

“Hurry!” she called back over her shoulder, then vanished over the rooftops. In all haste, Artemis sprinted down the lonely street.

As he approached the Temple of Healing, he saw two winged women fly up and out through the circle at the zenith of the temple's dome, soaring up into the morning sky.

Artemis skidded to a stop, a smile playing across his face. It was Raven! He watched as the two spiralled upward toward the last star in the morning sky. The sight of the two caused his heart to lighten, provoking him to laughter. He waited for a few moments, then jumped back as Raven landed before him, followed by Chrysalis. As they both stood before him, Kromjin emerged from the entrance of the temple, cautiously looked about the area, then silently padded down to stand at Raven's side.

Placing a hand upon her beast's head, Raven began caressing the area about his eyes. Chrysalis kneeled down into meditation position and held her hands out, palms facing up. She smiled as globes of light ascended from her hands.

"You are free. Go to your rest and find peace in your next life." The orbs of light circled both Raven and Chrysalis three times as Kromjin pawed at them. In all directions, they all shot out, vanishing into the gray of a beautiful morning.

Behind them, from the entrance of the temple, came men and women who seemed bewildered and confused, as if they had been suddenly awakened. Raven turned to them and laughed.

"You are free to return to your lands, and your homes. No longer will you suffer beneath the feet of our enemy!" Even as Raven's finished her announcement, a silver runed dragon landed before them and folded her wings back, instantly causing distress among all who beheld her.

"Fear me not, for I am come to aid you," the silver runed dragon assured them. "I will erase the horror of your memories, so you may live your lives without the memory of what you were forced to endure. No more will you live in such a state." Nearly all of them sat down upon the stairs of the Temple of Healing, most weeping, and some laughing for joy. All accepted Rinn's invitation to forget. After all were strengthened and cleansed of the memories of their ordeal, each and every one of them came to Raven, shedding tears of joy, thanking her for saving them. As they came, Artemis quickly gave each no small amount of money and gems to help them along. As he handed out his hard earned money, he looked at Raven, amazed, and shook his head.

"Well, well, Raven, I see you have been busy. What have you been up to?" After the last of Rynox's victims had departed, Raven turned and threw herself into the arms of the man she loved, kissing him with her entire soul. The kiss ended in a wide grin as she parted from him. Narrowing her eyes upon her Vampire, she laughed.

"Mischief," both Raven and Chrysalis whispered in unison.

"I see," Artemis said, shaking his head.

Raven took him by the hand and led him into the Temple of Healing. Once inside, she and Chrysalis found a room and entered in. Shutting the door, Raven turned on Artemis.

“In you, I am filled with joy, yet this darkness surrounds me at all angles. I feel as though I am camping alone with a dying fire. Wolves surround me, just waiting for the fire to die out.” Struck by her words, Artemis embraced her.

“What can I do for you, my lady. I will do anything you ask. Name it, and it will be done.” Chrysalis slowly walked over and sat down on a nearby chair. Artemis noticed something about her he never before felt. “Raven, Chrysalis, Raven, you are beginning to scare me.” Raven smiled up at him and laid a hand to his heart. Closing her eyes, she savoured the wonderful rhythm of his soul. At length, she sighed.

“It’s too much to be what I am. My purpose is fulfilled. Last night, I was instructed to bring you into this room and wait.” Artemis suddenly gripped her hand tight.

“Don’t you dare leave me,” he hissed. Laughing, Raven shook her head.

“Never, not ever.” Her answer confused him.

“Then why all this? What is happening her?” Raven placed her other hand over his and gently coaxed him to let her go. After her hand was free, she reached up and fixed his hair, throwing him a mischievous look as the door to the chamber opened to reveal the king, who walked in and shut the door.

“Are you ready?” he asked Raven, who nodded with growing enthusiasm.

“My lord,” Artemis said, bowing in respect, “if I may be so bold to ask, what is going on?” The king bowed to Artemis in deep respect.

“I am here as the spokesman of Vannar.” Turning his attention upon Raven, he smiled, a fondness burning bright within his eyes. “I am to tell you this: You have passed the trials. Now is the time to choose what you will be.” Raven laughed and turned to Artemis. As she did, Chrysalis arose and moved to stand beside her other self. In unison, both girls removed their wedding ring and placed each into his hand. Stricken speechless, Artemis began to tremble. Quickly, Raven explained.

“Artemis, I wish to do this the right way. Chrysalis as well.”

“Do what?” he choked, his eyes beginning to fill with tears. Throwing him the most loving look, both girls pressed against him, looking up.

“Start over my lord.”

“Please, Raven, don’t do this. Please don’t,” he whispered, a great fear engulfing him. The king held up a hand.

“Artemis, hear Raven out before you pass judgement on this situation. Please, my friend, let her speak.” Artemis looked down at Raven as she melted into him, thoroughly his.

“I miss my mom and dad. I’ve been given the privilege of a choice. Artemis, I passed the test. I am no longer a mere Figment, or I soon will not be. Artemis, you are honor. You are

the best man in my life. That monster took them from me, and I need them back. I'm going to start over, and even though my race is hated and shunned, I like who I am. I'm not leaving you. Do you understand that?" Artemis listened, stricken by her words. The king gently added some information Raven needed to know.

"My lady, you will not be going back to Feryl Mountain. You have awakened the eye of evil, and so you must be protected. Your mother and father will be taken to a new homeland. This design is already underway, and they travel. Raven eyes widened at the news.

"Where?"

"I do not know. Artemis, I cannot tell you. With the moving on of Raven and Chrysalis, Artemis, your memory of them must be veiled. Please do not inquire any further on this matter. It is a move I need to make to ensure the safety of you three, as well as others you have come in contact with. This is according to Vannar's will. I have spoken." The last three words Nishane Asmond said shocked Artemis to the core of his soul.

"What of Chrysalis?" he said, keeping his emotions in check. 'At his question, Chrysalis grinned from ear to ear.

"I'm going home as well. I will also begin anew within a region wherein my kind dwells." Artemis frowned.

"You were not born into Sagen Gleighdor society, Chrysalis. How is this going to work?" Chrysalis shook her head as if he had just asked the dumbest question in all the world. She could not help but laugh.

"Don't be so simple minded, Artemis. I will be born into a family of my species. This is the reward I happily choose. I choose to remain Chrysalis, and I will live and grow. Artemis, I will have a soul." Embracing his wife, Artemis kissed them both.

"Where can I find you?" Both girls shrugged, to which he shook his head.

"My lady, I knew you were trouble the moment I set eyes on you."

Author's note: To be continued . . .