

Fear

By

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This book is for Matt Levanowitz, the somewhat inspiration for the main character.

To Melissa, my eternal beloved. For every patience, kindness and goodness that is in you.

Rob

To Brandon, a great friend who's always willing to give our stories a read and grace us with his opinion. More importantly, he's willing to listen to me ramble on about our books. Thanks much, my friend.

Jon

Introduction

The old man greeted the rising sun with an appreciative smile. He was thankful today, as every other day, for what his life had taught him. He was equally grateful for all the people in his life, especially his son. His mother no longer walked this realm, leaving him as the only family the child had ever known. The old man gave thanks for the new day as he had done every day since his time in the company of the immortal siblings. He had seen countless days and never forgot to show his appreciation for his life and all he had experienced. He was preparing breakfast when his son awoke. Rubbing his eyes, the boy walked over to his father and sat down beside him.

“Good morning, son,” the old man said.

“Good morning father,” he said sleepily. “Are you going to tell me more stories today?”

The old man laughed and replied, “Why don’t you get awake and have something to eat first. I’ll tell you more once we’re packed up and moving.”

Knowing the sooner they were on the road, the sooner he’d get to hear more tales, the boy eagerly complied with his father’s wishes. His father wore the same smile that greeted the dawn as he watched his son wolf down his breakfast as fast as he possibly could. That same energy allowed the boy to get his gear packed up at a furious pace. The old man wasn’t sure if his son’s enthusiasm was necessarily a good thing. He wondered grimly if the boy would have the same fervor after what he would be told next.

After cleaning up from their morning meal, the old man gathered his belongings and they were ready to go. The boy was bounding with energy. They hadn’t walked a hundred yards before the child was asking his father to continue the tales of the siblings.

“Very well, my son. However, I will warn you up front. This is not the most pleasant story I have to tell,” the old man stated.

“I still want to hear it,” the boy pressed.

“Then you shall. I believe I left off with Aggression leaving his three siblings in Ireland. His sister Valencia was going to make the journey back to Egypt by herself but decided to stay in the area for a bit longer. Seeing her brother’s slain body had an effect on her. She felt sympathy for him. Here was a child that had no idea of his origins, no

idea who or what he was, killed before his time. Her pity made her stay in Ireland a while to keep an eye on him.

“Let us go back to the beginning. After Order and Chaos departed from the ethereal, Love and Hate were left to themselves. There were other essences present in the ethereal, but Love and Hate were not like them. Keeping to themselves as much as possible, Love and Hate grew to know nothing but each other. Eventually, the knowledge of who they were, their siblings Order and Chaos, the Aseraphim, the Ancients, all these memories evaporated from their minds. Thousands of years passed in the ethereal before Love and Hate were brought to bear on the earth. When they were, they were born as infants. This was done so they could grow into their bodies naturally and hopefully regain the memories they’d lost eons ago.

“Love and Hate were taken care of by the family McFaen in Ireland. Growing up, Allen and Nichole McFaen were the only family the boys knew. Love was named Maelduin, after Allen’s grandfather, while Hate’s name on this realm became Patrick. Hate’s name was originally intended for the child Allen and Nichole were to have themselves. Unfortunately, fate was not so kind as to bless them with a child of their own.”

“How do you know about their family without opening your book?” the boy asked.

His father beamed down at him and replied, “Because Maelduin and Patrick told me all this themselves.” The expression of awe on the boy’s face made the old man smile broader. Continuing on, “Maelduin and Patrick were brought to this realm during what was known as the Dark Ages. If only mankind knew then that the true Dark ages were yet to come. Wars raged throughout Ireland, warring clans massacring each other constantly. The McFaen family was able to avoid most of the fighting as their farm was well away from any large towns. The nearest neighbor was miles away. Being raised on an isolated farm allowed Maelduin and Patrick to develop without prying eyes. This was helpful as they grew more rapidly than regular mortals. By the time the boys were four, they were almost as tall as their mother and were able to carry heavier objects than their father.”

“Didn’t Allen and Nichole find this weird?” the child asked.

“Not at all. They knew who they were watching over.”

“They were clerics,” the boy surmised.

“Precisely. The boys took no notice of their rapid growth, having no one around of comparable age. They did take note of certain irregularities in their lives though. When they fought, as brothers have a

tendency to do, neither could gain an advantage for they seemed to know the other's moves in advance. Eventually, they came to realize their suspicions were true. They could indeed hear the other's thoughts. This allowed them to hold conversations without speaking a word. More importantly, when one learned something, the other gained the knowledge as well. Where Patrick never cracked open a book in his youth, he still knew how to read because Maelduin was a voracious reader. Maelduin wasn't naturally adept at fighting but could defeat anyone that dared cross him. This was because Patrick was a very proficient fighter. Due to their attachment in the ethereal, they had basically become one mind.

"The fighting in Ireland was growing by the day and eventually found its way to the McFaen homestead. The family took shelter in the barn during one particularly brutal battle. Regrettably, they were not far enough away. The barn was set ablaze by an errant flaming arrow. When the family tried to escape the growing fire, they found they were trapped by the ongoing skirmish outside. The boys were able to flee to safety but Allen and Nichole perished in the fire. All of this took place when Maelduin and Patrick were just six years old.

"The boys took shelter in the wooded hills near the McFaen farm. As they slept, some warriors from the day's battle stumbled upon them as they swept the countryside looking for any remaining enemies. They offered to take the boys in and give them shelter. Needing the help, the boys accepted their offer, unaware there was a steep price to pay for the privilege. This is where the next story begins."

The old man reached into his satchel and withdrew the book. The child, hanging on every word as it was, became even more excited. "Is this Maelduin's story or Patrick's, father?" he asked impatiently.

"I believe it would be best to tell you Patrick's story first," he replied as he open the book. "It begins when the boys were six years old."

Chapter 1

My anger grew more intense with every passing second I had to spend in chains. I could hear my brother's voice echoing in my head, begging me to remain calm. Having seen my temper, Maelduin knew better than anyone what I was like when I was angry. He was seated next to me in this dank, dark hole they called a castle. We were in what had to be the dungeon. And we were not alone.

After the fighters found us we were promised shelter. They kept their word by chaining us together and throwing us in this prison. When we arrived, there were at least thirty other children of varying ages already imprisoned in the dungeon. At first no one said a word to us. All they did was stare. Maybe they had never seen identical twins before. My brother and I both had dark black hair and deep blue eyes. Our height and build were the same as well. The only telling difference was our clothing. I preferred darker colors while Maelduin always dressed in silver and blue. Our parents were the ones that chose our clothing for us and I guess it was their way of telling us apart. Allen and Nichole were dead now, killed by the same people that found us in the woods. Though I tried, I felt no grief at their demise. I could feel Maelduin's sorrow and figured he'd grieve enough for both of us.

Eventually, one of the children approached us. Though chained to the wall we were still able to move about the room. Unfortunately, the chains weren't long enough to reach the door at the far end.

"You two are brothers?" our fellow captive asked.

"Obviously," I sarcastically replied.

"I bet you'll fetch a nice price for them."

"We're going to be sold?" Maelduin asked.

"Why do you think you're here, stupid?"

Without warning, I swung at him and clocked him square in the jaw, sending him crashing to the floor. "Never speak to my brother like that!" I warned.

"*Patrick, it's all right,*" I heard in my head.

"No, it isn't," I answered aloud.

"Who are you talking to?" the boy asked.

"Not you," I testily replied.

The boy stood up and brushed himself off. "You pack a fierce punch. How old are you? Ten? Eleven?"

"We're six," I replied.

The boy laughed and said, "No, really. How old are you?"

“He’s telling you the truth,” Maelduin answered. “We’re only six years old.”

“How old are you?” I asked him.

“Me? I’m twelve.”

His reasons for doubting our ages became clear. He was an inch or two shorter than Maelduin and me and not in nearly as good physical shape. My brother and I, having grown up doing chores on a farm, developed our muscles rather quickly.

“If he’s twelve, why are we bigger than him?” Maelduin silently asked.

I shrugged, for I had no answer to give him. In all our time under our parent’s care we never once met any other children, giving us no one to compare our growth to. Now that we were around other children, I was puzzled by the fact that we were so big for our age.

“What’s your name?” Maelduin asked the boy.

“Nicholas Doaty,” he replied.

“Where are your parents Nicholas?”

“They were killed in battle, fighting against the ones that now hold us captive. And yours?”

“Killed as well, but not in battle. They were just innocent bystanders,” Maelduin replied, a tear cascading down his cheek.

“They didn’t fight? What were they, cowards?”

I punched Nicholas in the face again with no hesitation. “Our parents are dead and you would sully their name by calling them cowards?” I screamed.

“Patrick, don’t!” my brother cautioned.

Ignoring his voice in my head, I continued to berate Nicholas. “Our parents were good people. They watched out for us and you would insult them, and us, by doubting their courage? I know what a coward really is, and I’m looking at one right now.”

“Are you calling me a coward?” Nicholas replied, feigning bravery.

“I’ve hit you twice now and you have yet to hit me back. And I can see fear in your eyes. Yes, I believe you to be a coward. If you’re so brave, why don’t you hit back at me?”

“Please, brother, stop this. You know what will happen if he does hit you,” Maelduin said mentally.

Thinking back to when Maelduin and I would fight with each other, I remembered hitting him and feeling the pain myself. The same thing would happen when he hit me. If Nicholas did decide to fight back, Maelduin would feel the pain, not I. There was no threat of that happening. Nicholas was shaking with fright.

"Please excuse my brother," Maelduin said as I silently fumed. "He has quite a temper and it has been a stressful day. He's just taking his anger out on you."

"These people that put us here, they will not believe you if you tell them you're only six," he said to Maelduin. "They may punish you for lying."

"But we would be telling the truth."

"That may be so. I doubt they'll believe you. Tell them you're ten or eleven. It may save you from a beating."

"I will not lie to them."

"I will," I noted. "I'll speak for both of us."

"If they let you," Nicholas pointed out.

The sound of keys jingling just outside the door abruptly ended our conversation. Nicholas swiftly returned to his place in the dungeon as the door opened. Two fierce-looking men entered, and the room fell instantly into total silence.

"All right, children, line up," the taller of the two commanded. He stood about six feet tall, with bright red hair and cold, dark green eyes that radiated hatred. The children scrambled to the center of the room on his command. "My name is Dominick Skinner. I don't care what your names are, so keep them to yourselves. Who you are, where you come from, all of this no longer matters. What matters is following my orders. If you can do that, everything will go smoothly. If not, there will be unpleasant consequences." With gloved hands, he withdrew a chain from his hip and swung it towards the nearest child. The end of the chain had been sharpened and glistened in the dim candlelight. The razor tip came within mere inches of the child's face before Dominick snapped it back, catching it deftly in his other hand. The small child whimpered at having come so close to getting hurt, causing Dominick to laugh at the boy's anguish.

"Let me do the talking," I mentally told my brother.

"If you think that's wise," he replied.

"I do." Maelduin's honesty wouldn't serve us well if our captors didn't believe him, and I didn't think they would.

Dominick and the other man started at the front of the line, asking every child their ages. Once the children had given the information Dominick wanted, they were unlocked from their chains and separated accordingly. Maelduin and I were at the end of the line right behind Nicholas. Once Nicholas had told them his age and went over to the others of his age group, he asked his question to me. Lying came quite easily as I told him I was also twelve. Then the trouble started.

“Are you two brothers?” Dominick asked Maelduin.

“Yes sir, we are,” I replied.

“Was I talking to you?” he angrily yelled at me.

“Yes, we are twin brothers,” Maelduin replied.

“So you’re twelve as well?”

Concern lined Maelduin’s face as he tried to figure out a safe answer. I’d never heard my brother lie and was hoping he would learn quickly. Unfortunately, he answered, “I’m six.”

Dominick let out a hearty laugh and said, “You are, are you? How is it your brother said you’re twelve?”

“He didn’t want to get into trouble by telling you our real ages,” Maelduin honestly replied. His decency could be a curse sometimes.

“And I’m supposed to believe that you’re really six?” Dominick laughed. His laughter abruptly ended when he slapped Maelduin across the face. “Get in line with the other twelve year olds, you lying piece of shit!” he demanded. I felt the impact and the sting of Dominick’s aggression towards my brother and began to growl. I didn’t know where it came from, but it was deep and menacing. Better still, it felt completely natural. Dominick glanced over when he heard the sounds coming from me. “You too. Now move!”

Dominick’s helper unlocked our chains and I escorted my brother to our group. There were no children present older than twelve, so that put us at the back of the line. I took up the last position of all the children, directly behind Maelduin. Dominick’s assistant ordered us to move and slowly the entire line began leaving the dungeon. The assistant was leading the children out the door when another man came storming into the room. With no hesitation, he went right over to Dominick, who was now standing by the door.

“He’s here,” he blurted out to Dominick.

“Who is, Shawn?”

“Graves. And he isn’t alone.”

“Who’s with him?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. I don’t ask him too many questions.” This Graves person and his companion had thrown Shawn into a state of near panic.

“I guess you aren’t as stupid as you look after all.” Though he looked relaxed his voice seemed to waver a little, revealing the uneasiness he truly felt. “Go look after Graves and his companion. I’ll be there as soon as I get these damn kids taken care of.”

Shawn ran out of the room as quickly as he’d entered. The line of children was moving out of the room at a steady pace. I noticed

Dominick staring at me as we got closer to the door and a smile crept onto his face as we neared. Once Maelduin was out of the room, and before I could follow him, Dominick put his arm in my path to stop me. I took a few steps back into the room as he quietly closed and locked the dungeon door. He unfurled his chain whip and began to pace the room.

"So, child, I have a problem," he said menacingly. "You see, you said you're twelve, yet your brother said he's six. One of you is lying. Care to tell me who?"

"Well..." is all I got out. He snapped his chain whip at me. The sharpened metal tip breezed an inch away from my ear.

"Be quiet!" he roared. He took a deep breath and regained his composure before resuming his pacing. "I'll do the talking. Personally, I think it's your brother that's the lying bastard. But when he said he was six, something inside told me he was telling the truth. When you answered me as well, I couldn't get over the feeling that you weren't being totally honest. Yet I still believe you over him. Why is that?"

I shrugged in reply. I didn't think he'd miss with his chain a second time.

"Maybe it's because of how tall you are," he continued. "You certainly look twelve. More so than six, that's for sure."

Dominick Skinner continued to pace around the room. I turned to follow his movements, never speaking a word. That didn't mean I wasn't talking.

"Maelduin! I need your help!" I cried out in my mind.

"I can't! There are men everywhere. Just stay calm!" he warned.

"I'll try. Meanwhile, think of something!"

"Are you listening to me, boy?" Dominick shouted at me, breaking my conversation with Maelduin. I nodded, hoping for the best. "Then answer my question," he demanded.

"What question?" I asked.

Dominick backhanded me across the face before I could move out of the way. I felt no sting from the blow. The pain I felt was in knowing that Maelduin bore the brunt of the attack. Dominick leaned down and got nose to nose with me. "What I asked was, why would someone lie about their age to begin with?" he hissed.

"I don't know," I softly replied, garnering me another slap across the face.

"I told you to be quiet!" he yelled. He began pacing again, this time much faster.

"Maelduin! Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine, but try not to let that happen too many more times if you could," he replied.

"I need to get out of here. Now! What should I do?" I pleaded.

Dominick was still pacing around the room, ranting about how children never listened and always lied. My mind was still and calm as I waited for my brother to reply to my question. When he did, I was mildly surprised. All he said was *"Defend yourself."*

This sounded like wise advice. Dominick was still circling, his chain whip unfurled and dragging on the ground. I gave his weapon a closer look and noticed it was mainly constructed of honed, razor sharp links. The portion of chain nearest his gloved hand was the only part not altered. If I was to get out of here alive, I was going to need to get it away from him.

"But aside from the lies, the interruptions and all the other ridiculous bullshit I have to contend with," Dominick ranted onward, "what really sticks in my craw is the impudence you showed by daring to try to intimidate me. Did you think I didn't hear you trying to scare me after I hit your brother? Did you actually growl?" He smiled and slowly approached. I decided to make my move.

I'd wrestled with Maelduin more times than I could count. I'd always been just a little faster on my feet than he was and, even though we could hear each other's thoughts, he wasn't always able to successfully attack me. It was time to use that speed to save my life. Looking Dominick dead in the eye, I replied with a smile, "Yes I did."

With a flick of the wrist, he lashed out with his chain whip. I stepped to the right, narrowly avoiding the razor sharp tip. As he was bringing the whip back, I darted at him. Before he could regain full control of his weapon, I sprung. I grabbed his right hand and twisted, opening up his hand as I bent his wrist backwards. I easily caught the whip before it hit the floor. I continued past him but was too close to the prison wall. I stepped onto the wall, hoping to be able to pivot off of it and scramble to a safer distance. Instead, I was able to seemingly run on the wall for a few steps, just far enough away from Dominick to regroup. I sprung off the wall and landed near the door. I turned to face my aggressor, this time with the upper hand.

"You want to give that back child," Dominick warned as he stalked closer.

I flayed the chain at him. I missed by a foot but proved I knew what I was doing. I had used a whip several times to corral the horses back on the farm. Suddenly, all the memories of Allen and Nichole came flooding back. These were the dogs that killed them. These were the

men that destroyed the farm and everything my brother and I ever knew. My hatred of these men caused my blood to boil. Dominick was inching closer, more cautiously now than before. I was going to punish him for his misdeeds and those of his brethren. I would show him what it was like to be chained up.

Ignoring Dominick's warning, just like he was ignoring mine, I lashed out again with the whip, this time finding my mark. I had roped many fence posts in my time on the farm, so I had no trouble wrapping the chain whip around his legs. The chain latched onto his legs just below the knees. He yelped in shock as he struggled to get free. I yanked on the whip, trying to bring him to the ground. I failed. Sort of.

The sharpened links had dug into Dominick's legs as he tried to gain his freedom. When I pulled on the chain whip, the links carved deep grooves in his legs, removing whole patches of skin in their wake. Large, bloody chunks of flesh splattered onto the floor before I could loose him from the whip.

He fell to his knees and howled at the pain. If his bellowing continued much longer, someone would come running and I wouldn't live to see another day. In a panic, I ran over and stood behind him. The quickest way to get a wounded pig to stop squealing back on the farm was to slit its throat and let it bleed out. This pig deserved the same. I wrapped the chain around his neck and pulled back. I tried to simply cut the vein in his neck and let him bleed out. Unfortunately for him, all the blood that had streamed from his legs had caused a large puddle to form on the floor. When I pulled back on the whip, I slipped on the blood and ended up pulling the chain straight up. The razor sharp links tore the skin from his neck. Worse, the chain continued up his face and violently ripped the flesh from his skull. The chain tore skin and muscle free, exposing his jawbone and teeth. Dominick Skinner was finally silent. He let out one final yelp and collapsed to the floor. The puddle of crimson rapidly grew on the floor as the remaining blood poured from his body. Surprised by the smile on my face, I dropped the whip and searched his body for the key.

I unlocked the door and left the dungeon. As I left, I locked the door and threw the key back into the room through the slits in the door. I ran down the corridor until I found someone who could tell me where the other children had gone. When the warrior asked me why I wasn't with the others, all I could think of was the old standby. I told him I had to use the bathroom. He escorted me to the other children and I ran over to Maelduin's side.

"You killed him, didn't you?" Maelduin asked.

"I think so. If he isn't dead, I almost feel sorry for him," I replied.

"Almost?"

I turned to look my brother in the eye. Staring into eyes I could read like a book, I shrugged and winked. Maelduin frowned slightly and turned away as the auction commenced.

All the children had been gathered into one cavernous room, making escape nearly impossible. Warriors manned every entrance and exit, closely monitoring everyone who came and went. There weren't as many buyers as I thought there would be. Slavery must not have been in high demand in this neck of the woods. Either that or no one could afford the cost. Allen and Nichole had told us of the slave trade rampant in the countryside. They found it totally disgraceful and instilled that belief in their children. To them, it was matter of freedom. Our parents believed in the freedom to choose our paths in life and to understand the consequences of those choices. We were never given chores growing up. We were given a choice. If we made the wrong one, we were scolded and sometimes punished, but we always had the choice. To succumb to the bonds of slavery was to give up the basic freedom of choice. I may get forced into those bonds but I would not go quietly.

The prospective slave owners were examining the younger children first. I guess they were a better investment. You could torture them much longer than the older children. My mind was filled with similar thoughts as I watched the slave owners and traders barter over these children like they were livestock. Anger clouded my reason and I wanted to strike out at every one of them.

"Remain calm, brother. There isn't much we can do right now," my brother cautioned.

"I don't want to be a slave," I pointedly stated.

"Nor do any of the other children here. I certainly don't. But for right now, our options are somewhat limited. Let's see what happens. I'm sure an opportunity will arise."

"I hope you're right, brother."

I was scanning the room as my brother and I chatted. When Maelduin began speaking in my head, I noticed a man in a dark robe turn to look our way. His face was hidden underneath his hood but something told me he was looking at us. I stared at him as my brother finished trying to get me to relax. When our conversation ended, the man in the robe approached us.

His robe was a dark blue, as if freshly spilt blood had changed from its usual red color. I could still make out nothing under the hood.

Shadows filled the area around his face. I thought I saw a flicker of light from behind the shadows but figured it must have been a trick of the light. Though I could detect no eyes, I knew he was staring at me. He turned his cloaked face towards my brother and examined him for a moment. Without a word spoken, he began to walk away.

"What was that?" I asked.

"I was hoping you knew," he replied.

The robed figure stopped dead in his tracks. Slowly, he turned back around to face us and walked over.

"My name is Nin-Gauble, young masters," I heard in my head. *"I ask that you not be afraid. It may not make much sense to the two of you right now, but this day has been anticipated for a long, long time."*

"What are you talking about?" I blurted out. My outburst caused one of the traders to come rushing over. It was Dominick's lackey, Shawn.

Without looking at him, Shawn asked the hooded figure if everything was all right. He was shaking at having to be this close to the mysterious Nin-Gauble.

"Everything is as it should be," he replied. His speaking voice was venomous, as if a snake had mastered the art of speech.

"Great. Good," he meekly replied. After a few seconds of silence, where I thought Shawn might shake apart, he added, "I have to go," and sprinted away.

Nin-Gauble faced us again. *"The meek. I have no pity for them,"* I heard in my head.

I looked over at Maelduin and hoped I wasn't wearing the same dopey expression. Alas, I could tell I was. When we turned back to look at Nin-Gauble, he had backed away a few steps.

"Stay here," he flatly stated.

"Where are we going to go?" I replied.

Cold laughter filled my head in response. Nin-Gauble turned and walked away as the laughter faded.

I grabbed my brother's arm and pulled him close. Before I could get a word out, he whispered, "What's a Nin-Gauble?"

"I haven't a clue," I honestly replied. "Are we sure we want to know?"

"Right now, no. I think we could be in trouble if he's the one that buys us."

"Something tells me he isn't a slave owner."

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Just something in the back of my mind."

"I could tell you were thinking about something but I couldn't tell what it was. Care to fill me in?"

"Not right now. Let's see if I'm right first."

I let go of Maelduin's arm and we straightened up. I spotted Nin-Gauble talking to someone and pointing over to us. The other man was about as tall as Dominick but that was the last similarity. He looked to be in his early thirties, with dark red hair that hung down over his shoulders. He appeared exceptionally strong as well, easily capable of fighting off any one of the assembled warriors. One quick look told you he was powerful. He reeked of it. He looked over at us and I felt Maelduin jump. At first glance, it appeared that this man had no eyes. A second look revealed the truth. His eyes were such a dark brown as to be almost black.

"So these are the two?" he asked Nin-Gauble.

"Yes, Nathaniel, they are," he hissed in reply. "Purchase and care for these two and our deal is complete."

"My deal with Nacht, you mean," he corrected.

Nin-Gauble bowed slightly and said, "Of course. My mistake." Following his remark, I heard in my head, "*Stupid jackass.*"

Maelduin and I both tried to contain our laughter. He succeeded. I did not. Laughing at a slave auction was one thing. Seemingly laughing at the person that might very well buy you was a whole other level of bad.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"*Careful,*" I heard Maelduin warn. Oddly, I thought I heard Nin-Gauble give the same advice.

"Nothing, sir. It's just this guy," I said as I jerked my thumb towards Nin-Gauble. "He tried to act so smart around my brother and me earlier and now he looks foolish. We've just met you and already you've had to correct him. He must not be very good at what he does if he can't even remember who he's working with and who he isn't."

Nathaniel smiled, obviously pleased with my response. He turned back to Nin-Gauble and said, "Do you think you can at least remember their names?"

"Certainly," he angrily hissed. My answer must've upset him. "The one in blue is young master Maelduin. The other is master Patrick."

Nathaniel surveyed us and asked, "That's it? Just Maelduin and Patrick?"

"Maelduin and Patrick McFaen," my brother replied.

Nathaniel pointed at my brother and shadows shot from his fingertips. They formed a cloud over his mouth, trapping any further words in his throat. He struggled to speak but was unable.

"That is not what I meant," Nathaniel said to my brother. Speaking again to Nin-Gauble, he repeated his question.

"All you need to know is that they are Maelduin and Patrick McFaen, for that is who they are and shall forever be." Nin-Gauble faced Nathaniel and added, "Nathaniel Graves, your commitment to Nacht is complete. Serve him well as he has served you."

"It shall be done."

Nin-Gauble appeared to float away to the corner of the room. Filled with shadows, Nin-Gauble entered the milky darkness and disappeared. Nathaniel waved Shawn over and paid for us. Thus began our servitude to Nathaniel Graves. After waving his hand at Maelduin and making the shadows disperse, he told us to stay put as he continued down the line. Maelduin's mind was silent, most likely from shock. I was having trouble getting my thoughts together too. Much had happened so far today and I couldn't help the feeling that this was only the beginning.

After Nathaniel had made a few more purchases, he herded us out of the castle to his waiting coach. More accurately, a coach was waiting for him. All the children got loaded into a boxed wagon. I hadn't attempted to talk to Maelduin, vocally or mentally, while we were still in the castle for fear of Nathaniel overhearing us. Since he didn't hear Nin-Gauble's insult I assumed he couldn't hear thoughts. Still, I wasn't going to risk it. In this boxcar I finally found my opportunity to talk with my brother.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.

"Fine, I suppose. Has all this really happened today?"

"You mean getting sold as slaves to a spellcaster who was told to buy us by some unknown, spooky robed guy?"

Maelduin looked over at me and smiled. *"Yes, that."*

I smiled back at him and said, *"Nope. Didn't happen."*

Maelduin let out an audible chuckle. *"Thanks for lying to me. I feel better."*

"Wish I did."

"You know, I don't care who Nin-Gauble is. I don't even care who this Nathaniel Graves guy is. But why is it the name Nacht sounds familiar?"

"I had the same thought. I wasn't sure if it was yours or mine at first. I believe it was the thing that had been creeping into the back of my mind earlier. Don't ask me to explain it, but when Nin-Gauble spoke to us, I saw in my mind an oncoming flood of darkness. That's why I couldn't figure out what it was. I was trying to see something in it instead of seeing it for what it was."

"And what do you think it was?"

"Evil," was my simple reply.

“Nin-Gauble?”

“Nin-Gauble. Nathaniel. Nacht. The whole lot of them.”

“We’re in trouble, aren’t we?” he asked dejectedly.

“Maybe. But if we look out for each other, we can get through this.”

A smile returned to his face as I heard, “I do not think that will be an issue.”

“Then we’ll be fine.” I wished I shared his confidence. I knew he could detect my unease with the entire situation. There were few if any secrets between us. We finished the remainder of the ride to Nathaniel’s castle in total silence. We would have much to discuss soon enough.

Chapter 2

Being a slave was actually easier than it looked. That's not to say it was easy, just easier than one would think. Nathaniel Graves was a cruel taskmaster, as my brother and I both suspected. Beatings for disobedience were common. Maelduin and I were fortunately spared from this particular punishment. More often than not it was because of my brother. He always did what was asked of him, no question. Normally, he would implore me to do the same. I complied, for any beatings I received would affect Maelduin more than me. I would've done anything to spare my brother pain, even if it meant I had to behave. I didn't always prevail, although I was able to limit my transgressions to the other slaves and the occasional guard. Nathaniel didn't seem to mind me beating up the slaves. In fact, he encouraged it on occasion. Beating up his guards, on the other hand, had a tendency to upset him. No matter how many times I pleaded self-defense, my pleas were always ineffective. I was usually denied meals as punishment. This was difficult at first. The food here wasn't nearly as tasty as what I'd grown up on but it wasn't bad.

Maelduin and I were only two of the thirteen slaves Nathaniel Graves had bought that day. When we reached his castle, he informed us he was to be referred to as Graves or Sir Graves. "Master" would also be acceptable. I listened to his speech that day and decided to call him Nathaniel. It wasn't much of a rebellion, however it did have the desired effect. Every time I called him Nathaniel, I could see the anger rise in his eyes. Maelduin didn't object to my disrespect, though had he asked me to stop I probably would have. He knew I wouldn't sit quietly while we were locked into servitude. Since I never got reprimanded for my insolence, Maelduin never said a word against my actions.

We were put to work helping the masons build a new section of the castle. Most of the younger slaves applied the mortar while the older ones carried the stone blocks. It wasn't long before Maelduin and I realized we were the strongest and the fastest of the bunch. The thirteen slaves were whittled down to eight by the end of the first year. The crushing labor Nathaniel forced us to perform was responsible for two of the deaths. Nathaniel himself was to blame for two others. He caught them in the act of stealing a loaf of bread from the kitchen. The sentence for this lowly crime was death. The first one he killed quickly by running a long sword straight through his heart. The other died much more painfully. Nathaniel cast a spell on that one, causing him to burn from

the inside. It was gruesome to watch, and Nathaniel made us all bear witness.

The fifth and final slave to die that first year met his demise at my hands, though I honestly didn't mean to kill him. Nathaniel had decided to see who really was the strongest of his slaves, all for his own sick amusement. That day, my hate and anger became rage at the thought of possibly having to fight my brother. This sadistic tournament wasn't a fight to the death. It only turned out that way.

Maelduin and I made short order of all that crossed our paths. We had very different fighting styles. Maelduin was agile and was able to avoid his attackers. He would wait until they had worn themselves out and finish them off. One quick blow to the head and his opponent was unconscious. I preferred the direct approach. I would come out swinging and tear apart my opponent. Maelduin had defeated his last challenger and was waiting to see if I would be victorious. The slave I had to face was of similar build as me but a few inches shorter. His name was Layne and he was a constant thorn in my side. This slave tried to get on Nathaniel's good side all the time, always volunteering for extra work and such. If he expected kindness or compassion from Nathaniel in return he must've been severely disappointed. All he did was make the other slaves hate him. I was always getting into arguments with him, normally ending in a fistfight. During this fight, I would let out all my pent up aggression. Nathaniel gave the word and the fight began.

I charged straight at Layne and hit him with a right cross to the jaw. He tried to throw his hands up to defend himself but never got the chance. I followed my first punch with the hardest straight shot I'd ever thrown. I caught him square in the nose and felt it collapse. Bone crumbled to dust beneath my fist upon impact. With all the power I put behind my punch, I thought I was going to drive my fist through his skull and out the back of his head. Layne slumped to the floor and was out cold. His face was a crimson mask, blood gushing from his freshly shattered face. His eyes had bruised from the blow and had begun to swell. Blood slowly trickled from his ears too. I didn't take that as a good sign.

"Very well done, Patrick," Nathaniel Graves shouted from his box overlooking the gymnasium floor. "That was most impressive."

I wasn't sure if he wanted a reply, so I stayed quiet. A whispered voice in my head finally said, "*Is he dead?*"

"*I don't know,*" I answered my brother.

Nathaniel sent one of the guards to check on Layne. He was indeed dead. "Remove the body so we can continue," he barked to his guards.

"Continue?" I asked.

"Of course. There's still one match to go," he responded with barely contained glee.

"I will not fight my brother," I emphatically stated.

"You do not have a choice."

"Sure I do," I countered, and sat down.

"Maelduin! To the arena!" he shouted.

Maelduin slowly walked into the arena. Without a word spoken, he came over beside me and sat down. As he got comfortable on the cold stone floor, he said, "*This might be a bad idea, brother.*"

"I'm sure it is, but I will not fight you."

"Nor will I fight against you."

"*Then we'll face whatever comes next together.*" I glanced over to Maelduin and smiled and noticed him smiling back.

Nathaniel, however, was not smiling. He was on a tear, charging down to the arena like a bull. He pushed aside two guards and stomped over to us. "Stand and fight! I order you!"

"We will not," Maelduin replied. My brother at least showed some courtesy by standing when he answered.

Nathaniel glared at Maelduin and then down at me. The fury in his eyes was as clear as the sky after a cleansing summer thunderstorm. The eyes themselves more closely resembled the dark rain clouds. While my gaze was locked with his, he suddenly swung his right arm, striking Maelduin in the face. Nathaniel was about to turn to Maelduin when he saw me react to his attack. My head had snapped back upon impact. The pain was bad but not unbearable. I felt my face and noticed blood trickling from the side of my mouth. Nathaniel always wore this large, garish ring on his right hand. When he struck Maelduin, I had seen the ring hit his face. The cut Maelduin received from the jewelry had appeared on my face. There were no marks whatsoever on Maelduin.

I jumped to my feet when I noticed the blood dripping from the corner of my mouth. When I did, Nathaniel Graves did something I'd never seen him do before. He stepped back. His eyes changed lost much of their brilliance and I saw a glimmer of fear rising in his stare. My fury was reaching a boiling point. Not only had he struck my brother, he cut me. I knew I could feel my brother's pain. I had no idea I could receive his wounds as well. On the farm, we'd never severely injured ourselves. Not once did we so much as cut ourselves. Sure, we got skinned knees

and such, but never anything serious. The thought of my own blood, now drying on my chin, fueled my rage.

I felt the ground beneath my feet begin to tremble as I yelled at Nathaniel. "What was that for? If you want to hit someone, hit me!" My arms tensed as I curled my hands into fists. This time, I really would drive my fist through my victim's skull.

Nathaniel, oddly enough, took another step back. The rumbling underground stopped when he retreated. "That's enough for one day, slave," he commented. His voice shook slightly, his confidence broken.

"I don't think it is!" I shouted back. "You wanted to see a fight. Why don't you see one up close and personal? Why don't you fight me?" Even though I was only seven, I was still taller than every other slave, except Maelduin of course. My brother and I weren't much shorter than Nathaniel. My mind told me I was making a mistake, but my heart told me I could defeat him.

Nathaniel let out a nervous laugh and smirked at me. "That is not wise, slave."

"My name is Patrick!" I corrected. "Patrick McFaen. Someday, you evil bastard, you will live in fear of that name. I promise."

Nathaniel glanced at Maelduin and told him to leave. Before he could object, I said, "*Go, brother. I can handle this.*"

"*Are you sure?*" he asked.

"*If I have to, I can kill this man where he stands.*"

"*Be careful.*"

"*I will.*" I nodded at Maelduin and he promptly left the arena. Turning my attention back to Nathaniel, I sneeringly asked, "So, are we going to fight or are you too much of a coward?"

"*You call that being careful?*" Maelduin protested. I ignored him, for nothing he had to say would be beneficial.

Nathaniel crept closer, regaining some of his usual swagger. "Child, the only reason you're still alive is because of my responsibilities to Nin-Gauble and Nacht. I was told to care for you and your brother and I will do as I was asked. But do not push me, boy. Though I am not to strike you down, I can still torture you endlessly while still leaving you alive to suffer."

"Believe that if you will. I still think you're a spineless, gutless, craven coward."

Nathaniel raised his hand and smiled. "I do not even have to touch to you bring you down. How can you possibly defeat me?" He recited an enchantment I'd heard him use before. A stream of shadows leapt from his fingertips and shot towards me. Instead of wrapping

around me, they hit my chest and soaked into my body. I think he was as shocked by that as I was.

I felt my face contort into a wicked grin. "Maybe you aren't as powerful as you think you are, Nathaniel."

"Maybe not. Majicks are always so unpredictable. But no matter," he said, waving his hand as if dismissing his failed attempt to subdue me. "Guards!" he bellowed.

On his command, three guards came rushing into the arena. I ran, trying to escape their clutches. I had almost made it around them and to the door when one of them dove at me. I stepped to the left to avoid him and ran headlong into Nathaniel. He grabbed me and threw me to the guards. They had their chains on me in a flash. The restraints engulfed my upper body, pinning my arms to my side. I fought to break free, screaming and cursing at Nathaniel the entire time.

I felt stronger than I'd ever felt before. I had stood up to Nathaniel Graves when no one else would. I hadn't seen anyone, not a servant, slave, scribe or guard, ever once question Nathaniel. I wasn't afraid of him. I felt like I was invincible. My spirits were high, though the cellar awaited me.

The lowest level of Nathaniel's castle was the cellar. The living area for the slaves was a cavernous room upstairs that reeked of misery and hopelessness. The cellar was many times worse. A long moldy, damp hallway leading from the stairwell to the cages greeted me. I had been thrown down here many times in the past. My first time I was disgusted yet adjusted fairly quickly. By now it was nothing new.

We walked the entire length of the mildewed corridor to the last cell on the left. Two of the guards stood next to me as the other unlocked the cage. He swung the cage door open and nodded to his companions. They began to unlock the chains from my body and prepared to toss me into my prison cell. As soon as I got one arm free, I grabbed the nearest guard and rammed his head into the metal bars. His head hit with a sickening clang and he dropped to the floor. Before they could remove the rest of my shackles, I was forcibly pushed into the cell. The guard that had unlocked the door swiftly locked me inside.

I still had some chains around me, trapping my left arm. "Aren't you going to release me?" I asked with a laugh. The two guards still conscious were kneeling over their fallen comrade, checking the extent of his injuries. Without acknowledging my question, they picked him up and helped him walk away. "Should I take that as a no?" I shouted as they continued down the dank hallway. I was still laughing at the guard's misfortune when Maelduin spoke to me.

"*That wasn't very smart, Patrick,*" he commented as I worked my way out of the remaining chains.

"I don't know. I thought it went well," I replied out loud. There was no one down here to hear me.

"*Since when is getting thrown in the cellar a good thing?*"

"Since it means I stood up to Nathaniel."

I felt Maelduin sigh before I heard, "*You really need to control your anger.*"

"And you really need to get some." My fury at Nathaniel was still raging and my brother just asked to have it directed at him.

"*What do you mean by that?*"

"I mean, at least I stood up to him. You just sit back and take it. That's not how we were brought up, Mael. Allen and Nichole taught us that slavery is wrong, no matter what. Or have you forgotten the words of our parents already?"

"*Of course I haven't,*" he replied.

"Then how can you do nothing? I've held out for as long as I could, believe me, but at least I did something. It may not have mattered much in the long run but this is the best I've felt since we arrived at this accursed place."

"*He'll find another way to punish us, you know that. If what he said about his obligation to Nin-Gauble and Nacht is true, he won't physically hurt us. His majicks didn't seem to have an affect on you either. But remember, they work on me.*"

"Let him do whatever he wants. You won't feel a thing," I said offhandedly.

"*Yes, I will. I'll feel guilty. I'll feel regret and remorse. Physically, I'm safe from him. Emotionally and mentally, that's different.*"

I sighed in frustration and said, "You need to get mad once in a while. Let some of your other emotions loose. It may be the only thing that keeps you alive while I'm down here."

"*How long do you think it will be?*"

"I have no idea and I don't care. If he's supposed to care for us, I'll go on a hunger strike until he frees me. This way, if I end up dying from malnutrition he'll end up in trouble with Nin-Gauble."

"*A hunger strike?*" Maelduin asked skeptically.

"It's all I can think of right now." Talking to Maelduin always calmed me down, even when we were arguing. I was beginning to feel a little more relaxed already.

"*Can I ask you one other thing?*"

"Ask away."

"*You felt the ground move earlier too, right?*"

“Yes, I did. I figured it was Nathaniel’s doing.”

“So did I at first. Later, I thought it was you.”

“I don’t think it was me.”

“Neither do I. I think it was something else entirely.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to do some reading and try to find out.

Nathaniel’s library is huge. I’ll ask to help organize it and read what I can while I’m there.”

“You think he’ll go for it?”

“It’s worth a try. Maybe I’ll be able to learn a few spells too. I’m sure he’s got some of his spellbooks in there.”

“Be careful.”

“I will. Besides, even if I only find a few spells I can use on him, I’ll at least be doing something, right?”

I didn’t say a word. I didn’t have to. Maelduin knew I was smiling.

Nathaniel must’ve been really upset with me. I spent two full weeks in the cellar before I was finally freed. My hunger strike wasn’t nearly as effective as I’d hoped for. I refused every meal offered, expecting Nathaniel to eventually release me so I would eat. This never happened. What did happen was much more noteworthy.

During my imprisonment in the cellar and ensuing hunger strike, I never once felt the need for food. I didn’t get any hunger pangs, no cravings, nothing. Maelduin, on the other hand, ate like a pig. I listened to him constantly complain about how no amount of food seemed to satisfy him. Every chance he got he’d sneak into the kitchen for a snack. The kitchen help was always willing to give him a little extra to eat. They just loved how polite and well-mannered he was when he spoke to them. He never resorted to stealing food. It could be because all he had to do was ask. Personally, I think he just couldn’t bring himself to steal even the most minuscule crumbs. What I found most intriguing was, even though I hadn’t eaten in two weeks, I lost no weight. To further compound my curiosity, Maelduin didn’t appear to gain any weight either.

My release from the cellar was only temporary however. I would spend several more occasions in the underground lair due to my tendency to solve disputes with violence. Maelduin was able to talk Nathaniel into allowing him to work in the library. It didn’t take much convincing on my brother’s part at all. If Nathaniel thought being nice to Maelduin would temper my hostilities he was sadly mistaken. My rage towards him couldn’t be so easily pacified.

Almost a year had passed since I'd stood up to Nathaniel that day in the arena. I had broken a guard's arm when he tried to take my plate before I was finished eating, earning me yet another stay in the cellar. Maelduin was toiling in the library while I sat captive in my cell. My brother had found a few spellbooks since starting work in the library and read them cover-to-cover. Most were in languages we didn't understand. That didn't stop Maelduin. If he didn't know the language, he'd find a book that would teach it to him. To our surprise, not all of the spells dealt in the black arts. There were quite a few spells for healing, salvation, light and other good and helpful things. Maelduin absorbed these spells with ease. The darker spells, the ones dealing with death and pain, he just skimmed over. The spellbooks were good to learn but we were looking for something else. Finally, Maelduin found it.

"*What's this one about?*" he asked me as he held the book up. Looking through his eyes, I could see that the book was bound in black leather and had the words "Of Day And Night" written in gold on its cover.

"I don't know. You're the librarian. You tell me," I replied, ribbing my brother.

My brother smiled as I heard, "*Who knows? Maybe I'll start a library someday. After we get out of here of course.*"

"Let's worry about getting out of here alive first."

Maelduin was turning the book over and over in his hands, examining every inch of the tome. "*Something feels weird,*" he commented.

"What do you mean?"

"*This book. It seems...*"

I waited a few seconds for more but he said nothing else. I tried to read the thought in his mind but got nothing. Impatiently, I asked, "It seems' what?"

"*You're going to think I've gone mad.*"

"Brother, you're the sanest, most rational person I've ever met. What could you possibly say to make me think you're losing your mind?"

There was another brief pause before he responded. "*The book seems like it's alive,*" he said with deep sincerity.

I would never question my brother's sanity. But when he said that, I must admit to having a sliver of doubt about his mental well-being. Pushing that thought away before Maelduin could sense it, I said, "You're going to have to explain that one."

"*I can't. It's something you have to feel,*" he began. "*I can feel a pulse, I swear it. It practically vibrates in my hands. Either this book is alive or it's extremely powerful.*"

“Well, open it and find out!” I urged.

Maelduin walked over to a reading table and sat down. He gently placed the book on the table before gingerly opening it.

“Herein is the telling of the origins of the forces of light and dark, of day and night in the universe,” it began. “For these forces are the embodiment of all that is, was, and shall come to pass.

“The spark that brought forth creation was planted in the ear of the Ancient Will Cosmic and the Ancient Power Cosmic. The all-seeing Ancient, Propheteus, told them they would create a magnificent universe. Along with this knowledge, Propheteus foretold of a being of radiant beauty, of undying love and affection, which would be created along with the universe. The Will Cosmic and the Power Cosmic were well pleased with the information their fellow Ancient passed to them. The creation of this resplendent creature would be their crowning achievement in the new universe. Unbeknownst to them, there was to be another.

“As the universe came into being, from the depths of the void came a woman bathed in brilliant light. This woman was the essence of all goodness and purity. All who came close to her felt her love and healing grace and would leave her presence with perfect health in body, mind and spirit. The Will Cosmic and the Power Cosmic named her Tag, the Daybringer, for she marked the dawn of a new day in the annals of creation. However, she was not alone, for another being stepped forth into creation in her wake. This man was cast from darkness and shadow. Hatred and revulsion flowed from his countenance and infected all who were close enough to come under his influence. The Will and the Power were repulsed by this man they named Nacht, the Evrecaster. Propheteus had not told them of the Dark One and were troubled by what else might be called into existence from the void. To stave off any other unpleasant surprises, the Will Cosmic cast a binding spell on the void, keeping all remaining inhabitants from ever physically leaving its infinite darkness.

“The Ancients held council to determine what should be done with the two new entities. The decision was made to make every effort to keep Tag and Nacht separated. This proved to be quite difficult. Tag felt drawn to Nacht, one who had never known true love. She believed it was her mission to show him someone could truly feel warmly towards him. It was her hope that by doing so he would recant his evil ways. Regrettably, Nacht could not accept her love. Having no love in his own heart, he could not return her affection and her love went unrequited. Her beauty did stir cravings of lust in him however, and he was determined to have her for himself. Nacht attempted to gain access to her and bring her to the side of darkness. His failure to secure her for his own purposes stoked his anger.

“To keep Tag away from Nacht, it was agreed that the best course of action was to bring her to Atlantia, the home of the Ancients. Tag was unwilling to comply, feeling that she had a better chance to show Nacht true love in the ethereal. Her protests went unheeded and she was brought unwillingly to the great isle. Nacht, in his

displeasure at having the object of his lustful desires taken away from him, searched the Earth for centuries yet never found her. Tag yearned to leave Atlantia and find Nacht, for her love for him grew the more they were apart. Alas, she never found a way out from under the watchful gaze of the Ancients.

"In a final act of desperation and fueled with rage, Nacht cast his shadows to cover the Earth in darkness. The moon, acting on his command, blocked the sun's rays from the surface of the planet. Nacht was determined to keep the world in darkness until the Ancients gave Tag to him. The Ancients naturally refused. Months led into years and still no light shone on the Earth, except in Atlantia where Tag stayed in forced seclusion. Many forms of life were extinguished and mankind itself teetered on the verge of extinction. Seeing no way to break the hold Nacht placed on the world, the Ancients decided to banish Nacht from the Earth. The planet Haven, circling with the Earth in the same orbit yet hidden on the other side of the sun, would be his destination.

"Upon hearing of Nacht's fate, Tag pleaded with the Ancients to be allowed to accompany him to Haven. Most of the Ancients refused. Two Ancients felt differently. If both Tag and Nacht were allowed to reside on Haven, they could live out their lives together and the denizens of Earth would be saved. The Ancients found and banished Nacht to the other world and asked Tag if she truly wanted to be with him. When she said she did, her wish was granted. The Ancients had reached a compromise that would allow both Tag and Nacht to exist side by side. The planet Haven's poles face directly into the sun and directly away from it. One side is always in light while the other is in constant darkness. Tag would live out her days on the side of light, away from Nacht in his dark realm.

"The two Ancients in favor of allowing Tag to join Nacht on Haven were tasked with creating a border between the sides of light and dark on Haven. Propheteus, along with Styx, the judge of all mankind, brought Limbo into existence as this boundary. Limbo would exist as a pocket dimension on Haven. Invisible to the naked eye, it is merely a thin line separating the light and the darkness. Its true dimensions are vast, as Limbo exists both on Haven and in and of itself. Styx was given the undertaking of guarding the border and was put in charge of Limbo as a reward. It was decreed by the Ancients that all who died on Earth shall have their essences appear before Styx at the gates of Limbo for judgment. If one was found to be a good and decent person, they would be given access to the side of light, now known as the land of Haven. Those found to have evil and wickedness in their souls would be sent to the side of darkness, now known as the land of Haedes.

"Before a single soul was allowed into either Haven or Haedes, Styx granted Tag and Nacht a temporary reprieve. She allowed them both into Limbo so that they could be together one last time. From this encounter were born the Aseraphim."

"You know, I used to follow the teachings of Tag a long, long time ago," said a voice from behind Maelduin. I jumped back in my cell when I heard Nathaniel's voice. Maelduin almost fell out of his chair.

"Run, Mael!" I yelled. I could only imagine how badly my scream echoed in my brother's head.

"*No, not yet,*" he replied. Turning to face Nathaniel, he asked, "You did?"

"I most certainly did," he replied with a smile. To my shock, his voice was calm and reassuring.

"But not now."

Nathaniel let out a hearty laugh and said, "No, definitely not now."

"Was it your choice?" Maelduin asked.

"Absolutely, but it wasn't without some convincing." Nathaniel walked over to the table and sat down next to Maelduin. Again I urged him to flee and again I was ignored. "You see, many, many years ago my wife died of a horrible disease. All the healing spells, all the cures I could conjure, they did nothing to help. I couldn't stop the inevitable. Worse, being a follower of Light, I had to accept it as fate, as part of some divine plan. I couldn't accept that. Here was the woman I loved, wasting away in front of my very eyes and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. How is that divine, I ask you? It isn't."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Maelduin said with heartfelt sympathy. "But people die, Master Graves. It is completely natural."

Nathaniel waved his hand dismissively. "Of course they do, but not at such a young age. My Eve was only twenty-two when she was afflicted with the disease. Within a year, she was gone. To complicate matters, I ended up getting the same disease from caring for her. How's that for divine? Here I am, caring for one of the most ardent followers of Light, a woman that put me to shame with her good deeds, and my reward was to be stricken with the same ailment that killed her. It wasn't fair."

"I agree. But you're still alive."

"Indeed I am, child. Very much so. But not without some help. You see, a woman came to me one day with an offer. Her name was Djinn and she said she'd make me healthy again. All I had to do was give myself over to Nacht and all would be well. At first I tried to banish this evil temptress, but my heart wasn't into it. Maybe the illness had weakened me, I don't know. Either way, I couldn't dispel her. And she kept talking! My, was she a talker." Nathaniel's voice was almost wistful, remembering the day he switched alliances. "I finally relented. There

were two conditions Djinn set for me. I was told I would have to repay Nacht's deeds by fulfilling a task at a later date. That task was to watch over you and your brother. Now, I don't know who you are or why I'm supposed to take care of you. I don't ask those questions. Apparently you're important to someone, though the very idea seems ridiculous to me. The other condition was a bit difficult to grasp at first but I've gotten used to it. I had to become a killer because I now needed the dead to survive. I feed off the energy of the souls departing for judgment. I can taste the evil in all men's hearts, for there is evil everywhere. I know that now and I accept it. After so many years, I actually have to wonder why I ever thought the side of Light could triumph over the power of Darkness."

"How many years has this been?"

Nathaniel smiled and replied, "About one hundred and fifty. It may be more. I stopped counting long ago."

"So you can live forever? You're immortal?"

"As long as I can feed off the dead and dying, yes I can live forever. If not, the disease will kill me. Djinn didn't cure me, she only made me healthy. The disease is still inside me and always will be. It's just been suppressed."

"That's horrible. The least she could've done was cure you," Maelduin said.

Laughing, Nathaniel answered, "I couldn't agree more, child. But what's done is done." He stood up from the table and peered down at Maelduin. "Now, tell me. Why were you reading that book?"

"Okay, now it's time to run," I cautioned my brother.

"*No. Not yet. I can handle this,*" he replied. To Nathaniel, he said, "I was curious."

"Curiosity can be a dangerous thing. Have you read any other books in my library?"

Nervously, Maelduin replied, "Well, I've read some books on different languages..."

"Be careful, Mael," I cautioned. Nathaniel probably wouldn't stay so calm if he found out Maelduin had been reading spellbooks.

The pause to hear my words was sufficient for Nathaniel to break in before Maelduin could complete his reading list. He casually said, "Languages? Is that all? That's not a problem. This book, however, is. Why don't you go put it back where it belongs and get back to work? You're supposed to be helping organize the library, not catch up on your reading."

"At once, sir," my brother replied.

“Very good.” Nathaniel turned to walk away and stopped. Shaking his head in confusion, he added, “Why can’t your brother be more like you?”

“Bite me,” I shouted at him through Maelduin’s mind. “And you can tell him I said that, brother.”

“We’re very different people,” he replied, ignoring me once again.

“That’s an understatement,” he snidely responded.

“Sir Graves, if I may ask a question of you?”

“Yes?”

“Why are you telling me all this? It seems extremely personal.”

“It’s very personal. I just want you to realize that there’s a lot of evil in the world. You’re the kind of person that every follower of Light wants to be like. You’re kind and considerate, even to me. It will be your undoing if you aren’t careful. Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“Good. Now put the book back and get to work.” Nathaniel casually left the room as Maelduin picked up the book.

“What an ass,” I said.

“I don’t know. I sort of feel sorry for him.”

“You would,” I snorted.

“He had a tough choice to make and made the wrong one, I’ll admit that much.” Maelduin picked up the book and began traversing the stacks to return it. But there was one thing still bothering me. “Maelduin, who wrote that book?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look in the back. Maybe it says there.”

Maelduin opened the book to the last page and glanced down to the bottom. There, in the same golden script as we’d read earlier, read the words, “*Transcribed by Propheteus’s clerics, as retold by the Ancient Styx.*”

“No question about the accuracy, I guess.”

“No question at all, if you believe in all that stuff.” I contemplated my own answer as I asked, “Do you believe it?”

“You mean do I think these people are real and that these events actually took place? I don’t know. But something tells me it’s the genuine article. You?”

“I may still need a little more convincing. Something just doesn’t sound right, yet...”

I could feel my brother in my mind. If he was seeing what I was seeing, I could only guess that he was just as puzzled. The pictures in my mind were of Tag and Nacht, or so I assumed. One person was most assuredly female, and bright, cleansing light surrounded her. Next to her was a man cast from shadow and total darkness. If these two weren’t Tag

and Nacht, I had no idea who they could be. There were others wandering around too. Though they looked basically human, it was clear that they were most definitely not. Many of these creatures had wings, some composed of bright white feathers while others were pitch black. A few of the others were a man in a mask, a strikingly beautiful woman with long, lustrous black hair, and a guy in a robe that looked almost exactly like me. As Maelduin dug around in my mind, looking at all the people present there, I could feel his confusion grow.

"Who are they?" he finally asked, awestruck.

"I don't know. But I'll bet that book does. Put it back for now. We'll come back for it later."

"Good idea, brother."

With all the sarcasm I could muster, I said, "You expected anything less?" I let his laughter drift away before getting serious again. "Just be careful from now on, okay? I don't want to see you down here in the cellar because you were caught reading something you shouldn't have."

"I will."

Maelduin found the shelf the book belonged on and carefully slid it into its proper place. We talked for a while about why Nacht, the son of the creators of the universe, would be interested in us. The people we'd seen in our minds gave us a good number of questions too. We just couldn't come up with any answers.

Chapter 3

Maelduin had gone to retrieve the book the following day but Nathaniel must've guessed at our plan. It was nowhere to be found. In four years of working in the library, my brother found no clue as to its whereabouts. He did, however, find many more spellbooks. Whenever possible I'd distract Nathaniel while Maelduin would hide in a dark corner of the library to learn more spells. He hadn't attempted to actually cast a spell yet. He said he wanted to wait until he found the specific one.

In our twelfth year, our sixth in servitude to Nathaniel Graves, Maelduin finally located the spell. I was too busy occupying our owner to concentrate on the spell but Maelduin was ecstatic about it. He copied the spell down on a piece of paper and told me to meet him back at our bunks. I took me longer to finish up with Nathaniel than I'd hoped and Maelduin was a little upset at my tardiness.

"You saw him. He wouldn't let me leave," I protested in my own defense.

"I saw you constantly leaving a point of contention available just to make him mad and continue arguing."

"I did no such thing," I replied, shocked that he would make such an assumption about his own brother. He was right, but that didn't matter very much to me.

"Patrick, we both know you did, so why do you even bother lying to me?" he asked with the utmost calm in his voice.

Hoping to change the topic so I wouldn't have to lie to him again, I looked around and asked, "Where's Nicholas?"

The child that had infuriated me so much that day at the slave auction was the only other slave still alive. Most of the work was done on the castle so Nathaniel killed off the other slaves one by one. Nicholas kept away from me most of the time unless he needed me to protect him from another slave. Now that he was the only other slave left he avoided me at all costs. No one ever confronted us except some of the guards. Since we were now as big as them at only twelve years of age, and usually much stronger, even the smarter guards left us alone. Maelduin and I still didn't know how we could be so much bigger than the other slaves, but we eventually came to simply accept it. Dwelling on the unknown would lead us nowhere. "He's helping the masons. He'll be gone for hours."

There was a note of sadness in my brother's voice. He knew as well as I did that as soon as the finishing touches on the masonry were

completed Nicholas would be executed. Just another soul for Nathaniel to devour.

"So what's got you so excited? I take it you finally found the spell."

"Yes, I did."

"I know. I kept hearing, 'I found it! I found it!' over and over again in my head while I was arguing with Nathaniel."

"Sorry about that. I was just happy."

"You were more than happy, brother. You were ecstatic. Now, tell me what this spell is about so I can share in your excitement. All I can tell is it has something to do with binding. Considering our present situation, I'm not sure I want to be bound to anything else. Chains are enough."

With a beaming smile on his face, Maelduin asked, "What about me?"

His question caught me off guard. "You have my attention," I answered earnestly.

"This spell will bind our life forces together. You know what life forces are, right?"

"I know what you've read. That's not to say I completely understand."

"Your life force is basically your heart, mind and soul as one. I think we can safely say our minds are already pretty well bound together."

"Agreed," I interjected.

"But this will make it total. We would know everything, from what the other is thinking and doing to how they feel. No matter where one of us was in the world, the other would know everything, and at all times. But that's not the best part."

When I saw he was waiting for me to urge him on, I obliged. "And that would be?"

"As long as one of us is alive, the other would be as well. To kill you, someone would have to kill me too, and vice versa."

This was worth the wait after all. "So we'd be immortal?"

"That I'm not sure about. It's possible. All I know is one can't be killed unless the other one is too. Dying naturally wasn't covered in the books I read."

"So when do we do this?" Now that I knew what the spell was about, I was fully willing to go along with my brother's plan. His enthusiasm had thoroughly infected me.

"Why wait? Let's do this tonight."

“Where? It needs to be somewhere where Nathaniel won’t stumble upon us.”

“The south watchtower. It’s been unmanned for weeks.”

“Sounds good. It’s far enough away from the castle to keep out prying eyes.”

“As long as everything goes well, Graves will never know.”

We looked into each other’s eyes as we plotted and saw nothing but undying affection for each another. To me, that was better than anything the spell could hope to accomplish.

Around midnight that night while the majority of the guards slept, Maelduin and I slipped quietly from our sleeping quarters and wove our way out of the castle. We were fortunate enough to avoid all the guards on duty at this hour. Nathaniel had long ago stopped putting us in chains at night. After I’d broken a few dozen sets of shackles he realized the futility of it all. We could’ve escaped if we had wanted to but for some reason we never attempted it. Maelduin believed this was because of the deal Nathaniel Graves had made with the mysterious Nacht. If we were really as important as we’d been led to believe, Nathaniel would search the world many times over to get us back. Escape would be only temporary. I wasn’t completely on board with his reasoning but it did make sense.

The south watchtower was about three hundred yards from the castle, giving us ample distance from our owner’s watchful eyes. Scattered clouds dotted the sky, helping to darken the land around us by blocking the full moon’s light. We sprinted across the grassy field to the watchtower, hoping no guards would spot us. Arriving safely at the tower, Maelduin tried the door but it was jammed. I tapped him on the shoulder to move him aside and gave it a try. With one forceful yank, the door swung open. I had splintered the wood in the frame and pulled the door slightly off its hinges. It now hung awkwardly against the outer stone wall.

Proceeding cautiously, we entered the foyer of the watchtower. It was pretty dark but Maelduin had no trouble making his way around. He found a candle on the east wall and struck a match to light it. I didn’t like the idea of illuminating the room for fear someone might see. Maelduin, however, needed the light to be able to read the spell. There were only two candles in the room, and on opposite walls, so there really wasn’t much light anyway. Maelduin assured me it was enough.

He withdrew the parchment he’d written the spell on and took a deep breath. He then smiled at me, trying to calm my nerves. I could hear his reassuring voice in my head, telling me to relax. I wasn’t worried

about the spell. I was worried we would get caught. I couldn't believe Nathaniel would be pleased at all with our dabbling in the majickal arts. He might've gotten mad enough to put aside his dealings with Nin-Gauble and Nacht and kill us. If Maelduin's spell worked that would no longer be a problem. Until then his safety was my primary concern.

We stood in the center of the room, facing each other in silence. The dim glow from the candles barely reached us. Maelduin asked me if I was ready and I assured him he had my full faith and trust. He glanced down at the parchment and began to recite the spell. As the first words left his mouth, an aura of silver started to encompass his body. I looked down and saw the same thing happening to me. Maelduin didn't notice consciously but I knew he saw it too. He never broke his pace, continuing ever onward with the binding spell. Soon I noticed specks of gold among the silver glow. The candlelight reflected off the gold and lit up the room more than I thought possible. The silver and gold soon separated, with the silver resting around our heads and the gold around our hearts. Suddenly, the auras rejoined and shot out. I stiffened as I felt the power surge through my body. It felt as if my very heart, mind and soul were being transmitted through this glowing ray. The beams of gold and silver met between us and began to fuse to each other. Soon, a spot of light shone near my brother's heart. It was the color of the sky after a spring shower, a blue so brilliant a wave of calm would wash over you every time you saw it. I looked down to see if I had the same light on my chest. I did see a light but it was bright red. There was nothing soothing about the color I wore. It was the color of freshly spilt blood. And it was growing. Looking back to my brother, I saw his blue light growing also. The blue soon intermixed with the silver and gold and slowly journeyed towards the meeting point of the beams. My red glow was doing the same. Just as the red and blue were about to meet, I saw a shadow move near the doorway. In an instant, Nathaniel Graves appeared from the shadows.

"What's going on here?" he bellowed, breaking Maelduin's concentration.

"*Keep going!*" I screamed in his head. The red and blue lights had receded slightly at the interruption and I didn't want to turn back now. Maelduin heeded my advice and picked up the pace.

"Stop this immediately!" Nathaniel roared. I could see a vein in his head pulsating. I almost expected it to burst and kill him, but I wasn't so lucky.

"Ignore him," I calmly said to my brother, hoping maybe if I stayed relaxed so would he. Besides, the red and blue lights were almost together again. It would all be over soon enough.

"That's it," I heard Nathaniel mumble in anger. He raised his arm and pointed at Maelduin. His eyes were black as coal as he began to recite a spell of his own.

As the red and blue glows met, sparks of silver and gold shot out at the union. Sparks were flying from Nathaniel's fingertips as well. Before the first speck of gold had faded away, a blast of energy like a ball of lightning sprung forth from Nathaniel's outstretched hand. Knowing instantly Maelduin was the target I did the only thing I could think of. I didn't know if moving would break the spell and I really had to hope it wouldn't. With that in mind, I jumped in front of the crackling orb Nathaniel had directed at my brother.

I heard Maelduin scream as I took the hit. The blast caught me in the chest, and because I was flying through the air to block it, continued up my body and cut into my face. The pain was excruciating and I fell to the floor in agony. The room was still exceptionally bright, so I had to think the spell was still taking effect. I examined the point of impact and saw blood flowing from my chest. My neck hurt from the mere act of glancing at my wounds and my face was throbbing in pain. I knew I wasn't long for this world. Then I remembered what Maelduin had said about the spell. If it worked Nathaniel would have to kill us both. Hoping for the best but expecting the worst, I pushed aside the pain and turned to look for my brother.

I first saw Nathaniel, and his anger had been replaced by shock. Maelduin hadn't moved and I assumed he was in shock as well. He recovered faster and shouted at Nathaniel. I could barely make out his words and was confused by what I could hear. It finally made sense when Maelduin raised his arm towards Nathaniel and shot a ball of energy back at him. It missed by mere inches and struck the doorway behind him. The wood around the frame instantly began to smolder. Nathaniel wasted no time and darted out the door. Maelduin ran after him but stopped at the doorway. As he reached the exit, he cried out in anger before running back to me.

Light still filled the room and I could faintly see the silver and gold glow my brother wore. I looked at my chest, expecting my own aura to still be shining. I was pleased to see that my own light hadn't yet been extinguished. However, I knew I had lost a lot of blood from my wounds. Never having seriously thought about the afterlife, I was nervous. Seeing my brother running towards me calmed my fears, for

wherever I was going I was sure I would see Maelduin there someday and again be by my brother's side. I saw tears streaming down his face as he knelt down beside me. He swore to me that before the night was done, he would see Nathaniel Graves dead. They were the last words I heard before I at long last succumbed to death.

I opened my eyes and was shocked to see a cleansing white light surrounding me. I was just as surprised to be opening my eyes at all. I knew I had died. I had felt my heart stop beating as I passed away. Now I could see again, but all I could detect was the light.

I decided to explore my surroundings but could only walk a few paces before the light became an impenetrable wall. I was caged in, but unlike the cellar this cage was virtually unseen.

"Is there anybody there?" I cried out.

"There is," replied a woman in a wonderfully soothing voice. Her words washed over me like a waterfall, cleansing much of my unease.

"Do not be afraid, young Patrick."

"Where am I? Who are you?" I asked. "And where are you?"

"In time, child, all these things shall be answered and more."

"I don't have time! My brother's in danger!" I protested.

"I assure you, Maelduin will be fine."

"I can't hear him."

"No, I'm afraid you can't. Not here."

"He damn well better be all right," I mumbled.

I heard this unseen woman talking softly to someone else. She said, "Go to the other two. Their assistance will be needed. Have her stay with the fallen one and take the other with you."

"What should I do about Nathaniel Graves?"

"Kill him!" I shouted through the light.

There was a pause before she spoke again, "Only if absolutely necessary. He still may be able to change his ways. Convince him that redemption is the only solution for him if he cares to survive. Now go. Lillith no doubt knows of Patrick's arrival here and she may make a rash decision or two."

"I will do my best to stop her, my lady," the man replied. I saw a flash of light brighter than the walls of my prison and heard no more from him.

Seconds later, the intensity of the light making up my prison faded enough for me to see everything clearly. The only person I could see was the woman I'd been talking to. She was bathed in the same brilliant light of my prison, and all around her beams of light shot off into infinity. She

was the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on. Bright blue eyes were evident behind the light and shone with the same force. Her long, flowing blonde hair draped across her shoulders and fluttered in a breeze I could not detect. Her white robe was trimmed in gold that reflected the light in a dazzling display. The sight of her mesmerized me. With all I wanted to ask, in my current dreamy state all I could get out was, "Are you Tag?"

Her radiant smile warmed my very soul. She bowed and replied, "I am but my mother's humble servant. My name is Christi Lona, overseer of the land of Haven."

"I've seen you before. In my mind," I muttered.

"And more. Do you not remember?" I shook my head in reply. With a look of dismay, she began slowly walking towards me. "I feared as much. I'm not sure how much time we'll have, but I'll tell you what I can. Your brothers will be able to fill in the rest."

"You mean my brother. I only have one." I had regained enough of my senses to note her mistake.

Standing directly in front of me, she replied, "Actually, dear Patrick, you have two. And a sister, I should add." She raised her hand and placed it over my heart. With the wall of light between us, she couldn't physically touch me. That didn't stop her from reaching me another way. "Open your heart and you'll see."

Golden rays of light sprung from her hand and sank into my chest. I looked down and noticed for the first time that I didn't have a physical body. There was no beating heart, no blood coursing through my veins. I saw a swirling of silver and black, with a touch of gold where my heart should be. The golden light coming from Christi Lona converged with my own and spread through my body. When she stopped, the gold, silver and black were all moving into each other, creating a vision of chaos out of my body.

"What is all this?" I asked.

"It is your aura. The silver represents your humanity, the gold your purity and love," she replied.

"And the black?"

For the first time, Christi Lona avoided my gaze. "That is the evil in your soul." When she looked back up, sadness reigned in her eyes. "We will speak of that later."

"I don't understand. Did this happen from the spell Maelduin cast?"

"No, child. This is what you have been for millennia."

“Hold on a minute,” I blurted out. “This seems so unbelievable. Yet, why do I believe every word you’re saying?”

“Because it’s the truth. With an open heart, the truth can easily be extracted from the lies.”

I stepped back a pace and, with an air of confusion asked, “Who am I?”

With a smile that could warm the sun, Christi Lona replied, “That is the question I have been waiting for you to ask. This will take some time, but know that all I shall tell you is the truth.”

“I understand.”

The next hour was spent listening to a fantastic tale of gods and demons, of good and evil, of my family. Christi Lona began by explaining a little about what Maelduin had read in that book four years ago. She filled me in on Haven, Haedes and Limbo. She also briefly mentioned a man known as the Ancient Propheteus, the seer but wouldn’t go into too much detail. It was when she spoke of Tag and Nacht that her voice drew soft and wistful, as if she longed to see both of them together again. Finally, she clarified something she had said earlier.

Christi Lona told me she was an Aseraphim. I had read that word in Nathaniel’s book right before he showed up behind Maelduin in the library. This woman was Tag’s daughter. The person she had been speaking with, the one I didn’t get a chance to see, was her commander-at-arms Cherub. She went on to give me a brief overview of all six Aseraphim, one of whom was my actual mother. I was informed Maelduin would be getting a similar talk, so while there were some things we’d both hear, there were also items only one would be told. Comparing notes became a priority.

Once she had finished up with the Aseraphim, Christi Lona began to tell me of four children, born from the union of the Ancient Beholder and the Aseraphim Starz. I learned of two children, sent to Earth thousands of years ago. They were to be the embodiment of Order and Chaos on this realm. The other two were not born until much later, and they would become the leaders of all good and all evil. That was when I got nervous.

“So you’re telling me that Maelduin and I are these other two siblings?” I asked. Christi Lona hadn’t moved away the entire time she’d been talking. Face to face with her, looking into her ocean blue eyes and radiant smile, I believed every word she’d said. Now I just wanted to know why I believed, and what was to come next.

“I am.”

“And that one of us is pure evil while the other is pure good?”

“Precisely. But a problem has arisen that no one had counted on,” she replied.

“And what would that be?”

“You died saving your brother’s life. This was not supposed to happen, and has caused many problems.”

“I was supposed to let Maelduin get killed?” I shouted, shocked at the very idea.

“Possibly. Or you could have tried to save him and failed. Or Nathaniel Graves could’ve aimed at you and killed you out of anger. There were many scenarios. We didn’t know which one of you would perish until it happened.”

“I thought you said that ancient guy knows the future?”

Christi Lona’s smile brightened at my question. “Propheteus, yes. He does know what the future holds. But the future is not set in stone, young Patrick. If it were, free will would cease to exist. What Propheteus sees is the possible futures and significant events evident in all possibilities. A death was foreseen, not whose.”

“How do you know all of this? Did Propheteus tell you what he saw?”

“Some of it. Propheteus is very secretive. He does not often enlighten us as to future events. When too much of the future is known, too many people try to change it.”

“Are any of these other prophecies about my brother and me?”

“Indeed many of them are. There is one particular prophecy I must impart to you before you leave this realm.”

“What is it?”

“In a moment. I have told you all that went wrong this evening, now I will tell you the one thing that went right. The spell Maelduin cast...”

“The binding spell?”

“Yes. It did not work as intended.”

“And this is a good thing?” I asked.

“It is. Had the spell had enough time to have its full effect, you would be able to hear your brother’s thoughts even in separate realms. Since Nathaniel Graves interrupted the two of you, the spell did not completely bind your minds. Your souls and your hearts are as one where the other is concerned, but your minds are still disconnected to some extent. You are not meant to hear the thoughts of the living while in the realms of the dead.”

“What about the immortality?”

For the first time since I'd arrived in Haven, Christi Lona laughed. Melodic and gentle, her laughter eased my mind. "Forgive me, child. I do not laugh at your question. Just that you had to ask it. Though the spell would have indeed made it necessary to kill the both of you almost simultaneously, you would not have been immortal. Not that it matters, as you are already immortal and have always been."

"But I'm dead," I reminded her.

"For the moment. This too shall pass. Were it in my power, I would send your soul back to your body completely healed. Alas, I cannot. I have my orders and I must fulfill them. I believe the first of these has been accomplished."

"And that is?"

"To tell you who you are."

"And the rest?"

Christi Lona lowered her head in sadness as she continued.

"There is a prophecy foretelling of the one that shall hold dominion over Earth. It reads, 'There will be four born of Aseraphim sent to inhabit the realm of Man and they shall be as siblings to one another. Two then two shall be visited upon the Earth. And as time passes, one shall command dominion over all the creatures of the land, the air and the sea. Born to this world, this chosen one shall lead armies against enemies great and small. Blood will flow as crimson rivers around the sibling's feet and allies and enemies shall cower in fear of the wrath that follows in his wake.'"

"That sounds interesting," I commented. I was actually excited about the wars and bloodshed part of the prophecy. Christi Lona's head was still bowed, as if looking into my eyes would be too painful for her anymore.

"All your siblings will learn of this prophecy, and all may try to fulfill it. All I can advise is to use your judgment. If it is to be you, then it shall be. Always remember, prophecy cannot be forced. It must happen naturally over time."

"Speaking of time, how long have I been here? I want to get back to Maelduin." With all she had to tell me, and without my brother's voice in my head, I had almost forgotten I wasn't with him anymore. Now I wanted nothing more than to get back to him.

Looking back up at me, she replied, "The dead have no use for time, dear Patrick. The very concept is flexible in the realms of death. It may seem to you that you have been dead for over an hour, but on Earth barely a full second has elapsed."

"So I'll go back into my body when you're done?"

Lowering her head again, she softly replied, "I'm afraid not." Sorrow dripped from every word and I knew her next words would transfer that sorrow to me. "You never once asked why you've been imprisoned behind these walls of light."

"I'm used to being locked up," I replied.

"But it should not be so in Haven. Unfortunately, you are not meant to be here. Saving your brother's life was a selfless act. Your undying love for Maelduin compelled you to take the brunt of the attack, and for this you were granted access to Haven. But you are not to be here."

"I'm the evil one, aren't I?" I asked, though the answer was clear.

"There is a good chance, yes. And because of that, you cannot have unfettered access to Haven. Your influence would be too detrimental."

"So send me back to my body."

"I cannot do that either. You are destined for Haedes, and I'm afraid that when you leave here, that is where I must send you."

"I didn't choose to be evil. I can change. Isn't redemption possible?"

"For most, it is."

"What about free will?" I screamed. "I thought you said we make our own choices. Now you're telling me I'm condemned from birth? How is that free will?"

"I understand your anger, Patrick, but please, know that I..."

"Can't do a damn thing to help me." My eyes shot darts of rage into her as I added, "Some savior you turned out to be."

"Patrick, please don't think that way. I only..."

"I don't care anymore. Just get me out of here," I demanded.

"As you wish. Know this as you go. My love for you is unconditional. I knew you in the ethereal and I wanted a chance to get to know the man you would grow into. I'm sorry it has to be this way, but please take my affection and the full love of Haven with you as you journey through this realm and all others."

"Sure. Whatever," I dismissively responded. "Can I go now?"

"As you wish." With a wave of her hand, blinding white light filled my eyes. The light pulsated momentarily and I felt myself being pulled into it. With a flash, the light flared up, swelling to a peak before finally beginning to fade.

Colorful dots danced in my vision as the light dimmed. I wondered how my eyes could be affected when I didn't actually have them anymore. Then I remembered something Maelduin had said. My

life force was my heart, mind and soul. That was now all that was left of me. My mind could still see, so I still saw spots. Trying to concentrate was difficult. Given all that had happened I had bigger things to worry about. I rubbed my eyes, closing them for just a moment. When I opened them, I searched for something to focus on. All I could see was darkness.

Haven was gone. The absence of light made that clear enough. The smell of this new place was acrid, yet I found it oddly tolerable. It smelled of sulphur and sweat. More than that, it reeked of pain and blood. I recognized the smell from living as a slave for six years. It was as familiar to me as green grass and prison cells. The sky was dark crimson and stretched over the horizon into infinity. Dark, craggy mountains dotted the distant landscape. Over the mountains, I could detect a faint light. It was brief and dim, but it was there. After a minute or so, the light returned, searching the landscape like a beacon on the water safely calling ships to shore. I couldn't make out the origins of the light from so far away and wondered what this beacon called into harbor. Though the light from the beacon was faint, the red sky illuminated my surroundings just enough for me to see. I still couldn't detect the source of the crimson light however.

Suddenly, I heard a growling sound from behind me and whirled around. Before me was a vile four-legged creature. Its skin resembled tanned leather and horns protruded from its skull and back. It bared its jagged, bloodstained teeth and let out another growl. The sound the creature made didn't seem threatening to me. I didn't know why but I felt it. My feelings proved correct. The creature slowly walked towards me. Its head was lowered and it looked only at my feet. When it was finally in front of me, the creature sat down and leaned against me as if it were a pet dog. It growled again and I wondered if that was its way of showing affection.

Looking away from the mountains, I saw I was on what looked like a path, but to where it led I couldn't say. The only thing I could see was that it went downhill. At a certain point, it appeared to almost go underground and disappear into the vast nothingness. I decided to take a minute and get my thoughts straightened out. I sat down on a large rock along the path. The beast followed me and curled up at my feet. I was again thinking about how this creature acted so much like a dog when a crash of black lightning cracked the sky. A black vortex formed in the air, and from it fell Nathaniel Graves.

He dropped out of the blood red sky and hit the ground with a sickening thud. The sound of the impact instantly brought a smile to my face. My new pet raised his head to inspect our sudden arrival. The growl that issued from it was nothing like what I'd heard earlier. The beast's snarl was guttural and dripping with hatred and hunger. I rested my hand on the beast's head to stay him and ventured over towards Nathaniel.

He recovered faster than I thought he would. Nathaniel made it to his knees and was looking around frantically. His gaze swept past me as I realized he was blind.

"Looking for something, Nathaniel?" I asked.

"What? Who's there?" he replied, fright clear in every word.

"No need to panic, Nathaniel. I'm not going to hurt you. Yet."

"Patrick? Is that you?"

"Recognized my voice, did you? I'm not surprised." I spoke to him as I would to my brother. No anger, no rage tinged my words. Knowing Nathaniel was about to be punished for eternity helped temper my aggressive feelings towards my former master. I heard Nathaniel mumble something and wondered if he was going to attack. Rather, he conjured some light to see by. The light died away almost instantly. It simply couldn't survive in this world of darkness. "Having trouble with your spells?" I asked with all due sarcasm.

"Only temporarily," he replied with shocking confidence. He spoke another spell, loud enough for me to hear this time, and black flames erupted from the ground. Our surroundings were immediately visible to the naked eye, as was Nathaniel Graves himself.

While in Haven, I had seen my own soul. Three colors, black, gold and silver, made up my very essence. The forces of evil, good and mankind were all a part of me. Seeing Nathaniel's true self was much different. In the gloom of Haedes, I could make out his human features. In the light given off by the black flames I could see his soul. It was pure silver. His human features were overlaid on this body of silver, giving the illusion of seeing him two ways at once.

I heard the beast behind me growling again. I glanced back and saw the beast had risen to its feet. Spittle and drool dripped from its foaming mouth as it stared at Nathaniel. With him now easily visible, the beast's hunger seemed to have grown. I raised my hand and it obediently sat back down.

"Welcome to damnation, Nathaniel. You've earned it," I told him.

"Why am I here?" he protested.

I lurched forward and in the blink of an eye we were toe to toe. “How do you even have the gall to ask such a question? You killed me!” I roared. “You killed a child of the Aseraphim. And they have punished you.”

“I didn’t know!” he shouted back.

“You should have!” The fire in my eyes was causing my vision to take on a red tint. When Nathaniel wisely stepped back, I noticed the red color was coming from my eyes. It shone like a bloody searchlight as it bore down on my adversary.

“How could I? Nin-Gauble never told me. You and your brother didn’t even know, did you?”

“No we didn’t. But would the knowledge of who we truly are have made you act any differently? Would you have shown me kindness as you have with Maelduin? Would you have resisted throwing me in a cage for every little transgression? I cannot believe you would.”

“It wasn’t meant to be you!” he pleaded.

“And that makes it better?” I stepped towards him again and waved for the beast to join me. “You think telling me you only wanted to kill my brother instead of me is supposed to make me forgive you?”

“I only...”

“You only want to save yourself. Well, it’s much too late for that. I’d like you to meet someone.” The beast was now standing by my side, still drooling and staring at Nathaniel. Pointing at my new pet, I continued, “I don’t know exactly what this thing is, nor do I really care. It seems to like me. On the other hand, it doesn’t seem to like you at all.”

“You wouldn’t,” he cried.

“I will.” I looked over to the beast and said, “Feeding time.” With a wave of my hand, it sprung at Nathaniel Graves and bit into him.

The beast’s jaws were clenched around his shoulder, gnashing and gnawing and driving its teeth in deeper. Nathaniel screamed in agony and I couldn’t stop myself from bellowing in manic laughter. I watched as the beast tore chunks of silver from its victim’s body and swallowed them whole. The mass of gleaming silver flesh taken from his body energized the beast and it attacked with even more ferocity.

I noticed that the sections of Nathaniel’s body the beast had eaten away would heal and then grow back. The beast would devour it as soon as it had regenerated but to see it was astonishing. That creature could eat Nathaniel for days, years even, and he would continue to replenish the beast’s food supply. His cries of pain and suffering would last as long as the beast fed too. That was a pleasant thought.

I walked over to the stones I'd been sitting on when Nathaniel dropped in. I plopped down on the ground and watched with glee as the beast continued to consume Nathaniel's soul. His anguished screams lulled me to sleep. I leaned back on the stones, closed my eyes, and fell to sleep with a wide smile on my face.

Chapter 4

The first thing I noticed upon waking was the pain. I had hoped I would hear Nathaniel's tortured screams but I wasn't so lucky. Even if he had still been screaming I might not have heard him. My head was throbbing, clouding my thoughts. All I could sense from the pain was that I was alive again. A flood of information was being directly delivered from my brother's mind, supporting my belief that I was back from death. I was learning all he had heard from this other brother of ours. It was reassuring to hear his voice in my head again. However, the torrent of information flowing into my brain was overwhelming. I remained motionless on the floor, eyes shut, waiting for it to pass.

When I finally felt the pain subside, I opened my eyes and tried to roll over. Sharp daggers of burning agony darted up my side, halting my progress. Through the shadows and gloom I heard footsteps. They were soft and delicate, and they were getting closer. A long shadow fell over my body and I looked up to find the source of the footfalls. Staring back at me was a young woman who looked to be in her early twenties. Her long blonde hair hung down over her right shoulder and partially blocked her face from view. All I could see clearly were bright green eyes.

She continued to just watch over me in silence for a moment. Almost comically, she noticed her hair was obscuring her face and tried to blow it away. There was just too much of it. She snapped her head and her hair flew back over her shoulder. Now that I could see her entire face, I was surprised by what I saw. Sympathy lined her face, yet bubbling underneath was a hidden joy. I wasn't sure why I sensed such conflicting emotions but knew they were both accurate. When she spoke, her voice had none of the softness I expected. In fact, though her lilting voice showed caring, her tone was of someone barely containing their excitement.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," I curtly replied. Her question wasn't the most intelligent one I'd ever been asked. "How did you think I would be?"

I tried to sit up but she knelt down and placed a small hand on my chest to stop me. "Just lie back. It may take you a little while to fully recover."

"You're my sister, aren't you?" I asked.

Her grin migrated into a full-blown smile. She was so thrilled by my comment she was practically bouncing. "I sure am! I'm Valencia, but you can call me Val. How did you know that?"

Brushing aside her hand, I sat up and replied. "I don't want to answer any of your questions right now."

"I understand," she responded gleefully. "You've had a rough day. I've never died myself, so I don't know exactly what you've been through, but it can't be all that good."

"It wasn't all bad," I said in truth.

"Well, I guess that depends where you go. Don't worry, I won't ask."

I examined my body and saw the majickal bolt had done a lot of damage. There was a long, ragged scar running up my chest and neck and onto my face. I felt my jaw and cheek and was taken aback at the severity of the blow I'd taken. The scar was at least an inch wide as it snaked its way up my neck to my face. I continued up the scar to my eye. I could still see, yet the scar ran through my eye and finally stopped at my hairline.

"Yeah, your eye looks pretty bad," Valencia commented.

"I can see through it."

"Really? I don't see how." The bad wordplay elicited a giggle from her. I let it pass.

"Maelduin and your brother are outside," I told her as I felt them preparing to enter the watchtower. "Is he like you?"

"Who, Vincent?" She restrained her laughter, keeping her merriment low so only I could hear. Whispering, she said, "Vincent and I couldn't be more different. Don't you remember?"

"Remember? I've never seen you before."

"Not on this realm." She waved her hand indifferently. "Don't worry. It'll all come back in time. Probably."

"What's this Vincent person like?"

She stood up and said with a laugh, "I can say with absolute certainty that I am not the person you want to ask that question to."

Before I could ask her to explain, Maelduin and Vincent entered. My new brother, this man named Vincent, was slightly taller than Maelduin and radiated strength. He had blonde hair like his sister, though a bit darker. His yellow and red armor couldn't mask the raw power of the man. He didn't say a word as he escorted Maelduin inside.

I jumped to my feet at the sight of my brother. All my pain and unease were washed away when he entered the watchtower. He came over and locked me in a warm embrace. When we released our hold, he took a few seconds to look over the remnants of Nathaniel's attack.

"That doesn't look good at all. Does it hurt?" he asked.

"Not really," I replied. I looked at myself through his eyes and was stunned by the site of my disfigured face. The scar carved a jagged

line of dead flesh from my neck to my brow. My damaged eye was a pool of blood. A small drop seeped from the corner of my eye and slid down the edge of the scar. I casually wiped it away at Maelduin's silent request.

"I can take care of that for you if you want?" I heard from behind me.

I turned and saw Valencia leaning against the wall. "You can get rid of this scar?"

"Not exactly."

"Here we go," I heard Vincent mumble from the doorway.

Valencia looked past Maelduin and me and calmly shouted to her brother, "I wasn't talking to you!"

"Then talk to us," Maelduin said as he approached Valencia. "What can you do?"

She scowled at Vincent and let out a little growl, which I couldn't help but find absolutely hysterical. She was maybe half his size and wouldn't stand a chance against him in a fight. It was no wonder he remained perfectly composed the entire time. In the second it took her to look back to us, she was smiling again. Cheerfully, she said, "I can cast an illusion on him to cover the scar. It's called a glamour. No one would know the difference."

"I've read a bit about them," Maelduin commented. "It should work."

I stepped forward and stood in front of my sister. Behind me, I heard Vincent finally enter the foyer of the watchtower. He walked over and stood next to Maelduin as Valencia prepared to cast her spell.

I thought it would take some incantation or chant to cast her illusion. When she simply waved her hand across my face, I began to think she was joking about what she could do. "That should do it. How does he look?"

I turned around and saw Vincent smile. "Looks good, Val," he remarked. "Nice job."

"I'm not talking to you," she grunted at him.

Maelduin and I shared a shrug at their conversation. Even more, we couldn't understand what they were seeing and we weren't. I could tell from Maelduin's mind and by seeing through him that there wasn't any change. I still wore the scar on my face as clear as day. When Maelduin broke up their spat to tell her this, she was shocked.

"Then how come Vincent and I can see it?" she asked. Frustration lined her face and her eyes were glowing a bit.

"I don't know. Maybe it didn't work on me," Maelduin replied.

Valencia quickly accepted that theory. Her eyes returned to their normal brightness as she stuck out her hand. Instantly, a book appeared. "What do you see? Everybody."

"A book," Vincent and I replied at once.

Maelduin was staring at her hand. I could tell what he was thinking but couldn't make any sense of it. "*Just tell her what you see,*" I said to him quietly.

Maelduin raised his head to our sister and said, "You really want me to see a book, don't you?"

"Is that what you see?" she asked.

"It's what you want me to see."

"Go on," she prodded.

"It's like a painting. I can see a book, but I know it's not a real book. It's just what you want me to see."

In a move that caught us all off guard, Valencia leapt forward and locked Maelduin in a tight embrace. "That's fantastic! You can see through illusions! I've never met anyone that could do that before." She released him and added, "And you're really good at confusing people. I like that."

"I was just being honest," he sheepishly replied.

"Hey, whatever gets it done." She turned back to me and said. "Patrick, the fact that Maelduin can see through it doesn't really matter. He's family. Everyone else will see you as Vincent and I do. No marks, no scars, two clear un-bloody eyes, the whole package."

I didn't hesitate a second. "No. Take it off."

She jumped back in surprise at my reply. "What? Why?"

"The only person whose opinion matters to me is his," I said, pointing at Maelduin. "If he sees me with these scars, then so does everyone else. Let them see me as he does."

"Are you sure?"

Scowling at her, I sternly replied, "Yes, I am. Now do it."

She shrugged and did as I asked. With another wave of her hand, the illusion was removed. "You may want to get a cloak or something from the castle before you leave. No offense Patrick, but some people may not take well to your appearance."

I went to answer when Maelduin stepped forward. "Valencia, I think I know why Patrick asked you to remove the illusion. If I can see him as a person, and see past the scar and defacement my brother now wears, maybe others will be inspired to do so as well. Some will no doubt judge him by his appearance, I'm sure. Those worth knowing will see past the physical. As he said, let them see him as I do."

A single tear cascaded down her cheek. She absent-mindedly wiped it away and softly said, "That was beautiful."

"Yes, very," Vincent broke in with no emotion whatsoever, "but you'll still want to get a cloak in the near future. Just to be safe."

"So we're leaving?" I asked.

"Can you think of a reason to stay?" Vincent answered. When neither Maelduin nor I could come up with an answer, he continued. "That's what I thought. My advice is, get what you need from the castle and go. Food, clothes, weaponry, spellbooks, anything and everything."

"You think we'll need weapons and spellbooks?" I asked.

"From now until the end of time. My advice is that you head south towards the sea. From there, you can cross to the mainland and go from there. But before you do, I want to know if you have any questions. I know the two of you have been through an awful lot today and are probably a little overwhelmed by it all."

"It's getting better," Maelduin said.

"And it will continue to. But is there anything you specifically want to know?"

We spent another few minutes clearing up a couple of details. The more we talked, the more familiar it all seemed. Vincent and Valencia answered every one of our questions until we couldn't think of anything else. It was overwhelming, but it all made sense too. The Aseraphim didn't just feel real to me. They were real. I could barely remember them, like a memory of childhood pushed to the back of the mind by more recent events. The Ancients were still a bit confusing. Valencia didn't know much about them, other than the basics that Vincent went over. Vincent had met with most of them and was able to explain their functions better. I didn't grasp everything he was saying but I was sure Maelduin did. Thankfully, my brother and I were going to have lots of time to discuss it all.

When we finished up our inquiry, we bid Vincent and Valencia farewell. Valencia gave us both a big hug before leaving, embarrassing Maelduin slightly. I found her funny myself. Maelduin and I stood in the doorway of the watchtower as they walked across the field. A few more dark clouds dotted the sky and I could tell the rain would soon start. As I watched the sky, Maelduin jabbed me with his elbow to get my attention. He pointed out to the field and I saw Vincent and Valencia standing there. Well, Vincent was standing. Valencia was floating in front of him. Though she was easily a foot shorter than our brother, she was now eye to eye with him. I could hear her yelling at him but couldn't make out any words. Lightning was crashing across the sky, obscuring their voices. A

bolt of lightning crashed to the earth followed by deafening thunder. A lot of yelling later, as well as a few more lightning strikes including one that struck a nearby tree, and Valencia finally floated back to down to earth. They talked a moment longer, until Valencia turned and walked away to the west. Vincent disappeared in a flash of yellow and red, apparently sprinting off to the east. I knew about his speed from Maelduin's memories, but seeing it firsthand was an experience.

"Those two don't get along well at all, do they?" I asked my brother.

"Not really. But that's not what worries me."

"What is?"

"What if they used to?"

Maelduin had obviously learned what had happened to me. I could feel sadness underneath his delight at having me back. Knowing I was most likely damned was going to be a topic of conversation for a large part of our journey.

We stepped back into the tower to formulate a plan. Maelduin decided to take care of getting the rations and spellbooks, while I would gather clothing and weapons. Maelduin reminded me about the book and told me to keep an eye out for it. Figuring it would help explain many things, I made up my mind to actively search for it. And I knew just where to start.

We sprinted across the field to the castle and split up. Maelduin went straight for the kitchen. I ran to Nathaniel's office. I had only been there once before, when a guard brought me in for injuring him. Blake Paddington was the biggest bastard of all the guards in the castle. One day about a year ago, he had pushed me from behind to get me to move faster while I was carrying bricks for the masons. I dropped the bricks and came close to dropping them on my foot. At the time, I didn't know who'd pushed me, and frankly would've reacted the same way had I known. I spun around and slammed my elbow into the bridge of his nose. It exploded on impact, blood jetting out all over the both of us. I restrained myself from striking again though I very much wanted to. When he recovered, he grabbed me and led me to Nathaniel's office. When Blake told his master what had happened, Nathaniel actually laughed at him. His advice was, don't pick on someone stronger than you. That was the best advice I'd ever heard him speak. It was also the only time I could remember Nathaniel taking my side. Blake was told to release me so I could get back to work. I never forgot the sensation of feeling his nose collapse upon impact. It lulled me to sleep for weeks

afterwards. Blake never forgot either and made my life unbearable any chance he got.

Entering Nathaniel's office again, it looked very much the same as it had before. The room wasn't the largest in the castle and was made to feel more cramped by the bookshelves lining every wall. His ornate oak desk sat at the far end at the window. The dark glass in the window filtered the intermittent moonlight, casting a pall over the room. The heavy, wrought iron chandelier hanging in the middle of the room was unlit but I could still see fairly clearly. The final throes of the thunderstorm lit up the room erratically, giving me more than enough light.

I went behind the desk and checked the drawers. They were all locked. That didn't last long. With one good yank, each drawer came open with the accompanying sound of wood splintering. I found two things of interest. One was a key. More searching would be required to find what it opened, but I still had some time. The second item was in the last drawer I opened.

The bottom drawer on the right side was larger than the others. It gave ample room for the pair of gauntlets that sat inside. They were cast in steel and shone even in the dim light. Red stones, rubies perhaps, dotted the length of the gauntlets and formed a spiral at the wrists. I needed something to put these in and found a canvas bag in the hallway. I hurriedly ran back into the room and back behind the desk. I opened the bag and picked up the gauntlets. As soon as I did, I felt the bag slip from my hand. An overpowering urge to put on the gloves pounded in my brain. I felt all the anger, all the rage that had built up from six years of indentured servitude. I wanted nothing more than to put on the gauntlets and kill them all. And I knew I could. All I had to do was put them on.

"Patrick, are you all right?" I heard screamed in my head.

I dropped the gauntlets when I heard my brother's voice. "I'm fine," I lied.

"What was that?" he asked.

"I don't know. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was..."

"I know. No need to go over it again. Was it the gloves?"

"I think so. Should I bring them along?"

"Why not? Maybe I can figure out what they are. I read almost every book in that library. If I can't identify them I'd be surprised. Just do me one favor."

"What's that?"

"Don't put them on until we figure out exactly what they are."

"I can do that," I swore, knowing it would be a hard promise to keep. I picked up the gloves and quickly put them into the bag. Now I needed to find the book.

I was searching the shelf behind the desk when I heard a noise behind me. In my rush to find the book, I figured it was someone passing by in the hallway and didn't worry about it. The voice that came from behind me changed my attitude.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing in here?" Blake shouted from the doorway.

I straightened up at the sound of his voice. A wicked grin crossed my lips and in a quiet voice soaked with hatred, I simply said, "Blake."

"That's right, maggot. Master Graves is going to tan your hide this time, boy."

"Blake," I repeated, drawing the word out.

"Is that all you can say, you bleedin' idiot!"

I turned around and stared the guard in the eyes. "Blake," I said again. My voice was cold and serpentine as I locked my gaze with his.

The sight of my scarred and mutilated face froze Blake in his tracks. He was as tall as me but nowhere near as fit. His shoulder-length auburn hair was pulled away from his face, revealing his cold green eyes. His icy stare had set many slaves back to their tasks in my six years here. The other guards feared his physical strength as well. His mental prowess wasn't the sharpest however, so I wasn't shocked to see him paralyzed by the realization of his impending demise. He probably never saw it coming. I walked slowly around the desk, constantly repeating his name like a madman calling out his victim. Slowly I made my way to him. He never moved, didn't even so much as blink.

Standing toe to toe with my tormentor, I grabbed him by the neck and lifted him into the air. "Blake," I said with venomous glee one more time.

"What the hell happened to you?" he screamed.

"This is your master's work, Blake. Look upon me well, for you'll wish your fate was this pleasant."

"*Patrick...*" I heard in my head. His voice was faint, barely audible. It made ignoring him that much easier.

"For six years now, you've been nothing but a thorn in my side, Blake," I continued. "Tonight, I pull that thorn free and discard it like the trash it is."

"Graves will..." he began.

"Nathaniel will not be doing anything. You'll not be laboring under his command any longer."

“You killed him?” he choked out.

“No such luck. I was too dead at the time to do it myself.” I could feel a stream of blood cascading down my cheek. My eye was seeping again. Blake glanced at it and began to urinate all over himself. I couldn’t contain my laughter. “Pissing yourself, eh? And I haven’t even done anything yet. Do you know why?”

“No,” he replied, shaking his head so vigorously I thought it might fall off.

“Because I need your help.” I lifted him a little higher and hooked him onto the chandelier. Fresh urine dripped from the cuff of his pants and began forming a puddle on the floor. I wisely took a step back before continuing. “There’s a book my brother and I need before we leave. I suspect it’s in this office. I found a key but have no idea what it unlocks.” I held up the key for him to examine and his eyes went wide with hope.

“I know what that unlocks!” he cried. “I know. It’s behind the painting behind the desk. There’s a safe. I’ve seen him get things out of it before.”

“Very good, Blake.”

“Now please let me down. I helped you, just like you wanted.”

I shook my head solemnly and replied, “Yes, you did. But did you really think helping me this one time would make up for six years of abuse?” I let out a hearty laugh that echoed throughout the room as I went behind the desk again.

I moved the picture of a black angel out of the way and found the safe. The key slid in effortlessly and, once unlocked, revealed the book “Of Day And Night”. I quickly put it in the bag and cinched it shut.

“*What are you going to do about him?*” Maelduin asked just as I was throwing the sack over my shoulder.

“*I don’t know. Maybe I’ll just scare him,*” I replied innocently.

“*I think you already did.*”

I was moving from behind the desk when I answered my brother. “*That was nothing. Watch this.*”

I acted like I was going to walk right past Blake and leave him hanging from the chandelier. Without any warning, I whirled around and let out a deafening roar. The booming sound of it reverberated down the halls. Nathaniel’s office was flooded in red light that beamed from my own eyes. The affect it had on Blake was astounding. His hair went pure white, the color shocked out of every strand. A new, fresh stream of urine was running down his leg too. He did stop pissing himself when his heart stopped however. The gravity of his fear had made his eyes burst,

sending noxious fluids and blood everywhere. His deflated eyes hung outside his skull, limp and lifeless like the rest of him. His heart had apparently done the same thing. His chest cavity was bulging outwards as if his heart had tried to jump out of his body in fright. I had scared Blake Paddington to death.

"That was unnecessary," my brother scolded.

"I didn't try to kill him," I replied. I noticed his double-bladed axe strapped to his back and relieved him of it.

"No, but you're not upset about it either."

"Should I be?"

I wasn't sure if his silence meant he couldn't think of a reason or he was mad at me. I believed it was most likely the latter. When he finally did resume talking to me, all he did was urge me to get to the armory and then to our sleeping quarters. He was presently on his way to the library to get some spellbooks. I advised him to only take the ones he deemed most important. We didn't know how long we'd be hiking through Ireland and needed to travel light. It wasn't that we couldn't carry a heavy load. I just didn't think it was necessary to overburden ourselves. Maelduin was just pleased to hear some rational thoughts coming from me.

The armory was located just down the hall from Nathaniel's office. Since I had taken Blake's axe, I only needed to find a weapon for Maelduin. I took a moment to closely examine some long swords and found one that would be just perfect for my brother. Double bladed and honed to a razor's edge, the sword had a golden handle that sparkled in the candlelight. Intricate engravings lined its length, putting the finishing touches on a magnificent piece of weaponry. I strapped on the sheath and put the sword in. Now all I had to do was meet Maelduin back at the sleeping quarters and we could leave.

I arrived first and began throwing clothes into another canvas sack. It wasn't long before Maelduin joined me. Without a word, he assisted me in gathering our clothes. I could see in his mind he was still upset about my encounter with Blake. If he expected me to be sorry for killing him, he was going to be severely disappointed. From what I'd learned, this was my calling, my very nature. I was the essence of Hate. This may cause issues between my brother and me, but it shouldn't be over someone as worthless as Blake Paddington.

"It wasn't who it was, Patrick, it's what you did," he commented as I closed up the bag.

"I'm just being me, remember?" I mockingly replied.

“And do you remember asking Christi Lona if redemption was possible?”

“Yes, and I remember her pretty much telling me it wasn’t. At least, not for me.”

“You didn’t need to kill him.” His was almost yelling now, something he had rarely done.

“I didn’t mean to,” I growled back.

Maelduin stood in front of me, staring into what remained of my eyes, and said, “You wanted to. That’s all that matters.”

He turned away and began to leave. “Where are you going?” I yelled after him.

“To free Nicholas.”

“Why?” The very idea of delaying our freedom even one second for that insignificant peon disgusted me.

Maelduin looked over his shoulder and flashed a cocky smile. “I’m just being me. Remember?”

“He’s not coming with us,” I told him.

“I never said he was.”

Maelduin left and I was alone in the room. I meandered around, checking to see if there was a cloak or anything else of value to take with us. Since there wasn’t much in the sleeping quarters except cots, my search didn’t last long. I could see my brother walking the halls of the castle looking for Nicholas. I didn’t have any problem with Maelduin freeing him. Being a slave for six years had left me with a serious dislike of the practice. In fact, I was almost glad Maelduin was releasing him. In my opinion, the only thing that could’ve completed the downfall of Nathaniel Graves was to see the entire castle torn to the ground. Freeing his last remaining slave would have to suffice.

I waited patiently for my brother to return after he’d freed Nicholas. When he finally came back I shot him a weary look and picked up two of the bags. I was carrying the food and the clothes while Maelduin took the bags with the books and the gauntlets. I handed him his sword and, upon inspection, he praised my selection. Loaded up and ready to go, we wasted no time making our exit from Nathaniel’s domain.

It was well into the night when we started our journey south. We had only traveled a few miles when we decided to camp out for the night. Our journey was just beginning and we’d need the rest. Maelduin and I didn’t talk about our newfound family at all, deciding to wait until morning when our heads were a little clearer.

As I slept, I dreamt of beings I'd seen in my head years ago. The vision of these creatures had visited me often, always leaving me confused as to their intentions. Now, in my dream, I walked up to them without fear and called each one of them by name.

Chapter 5

I was up with the rising sun the next morning. Maelduin sensed me stirring and awoke at the same time. We divided up our tasks for the morning, as I set about starting a fire while Maelduin got the food together.

“You didn’t happen to grab any cookbooks while you were in the library, did you?” I joked.

Maelduin flashed me a smile and replied, “They don’t normally keep them in the library.”

“Well, you were in the kitchen too.”

“And I didn’t think about it at the time.”

I slowly shook my head in mock disgust. “No cookbooks. What are we supposed to do?”

“Starve, I guess.”

It felt good to laugh for a change. As slaves, there was no reason to feel jovial about anything. Freedom changed everything. “So what all did you grab from the kitchen?” I asked.

“Mainly cured meats. They’ll last us for a while. I also got some various fruits and vegetables.”

“Any raw meat?”

My brother eyed me up suspiciously at my question. “Why?”

“I don’t want to eat it raw, you moron. Fresh meat just tastes better than cured. You don’t need a cookbook to be able to make raw meat edible.”

Maelduin’s apprehension was replaced by a mischievous smile. He reached into the bag and withdrew a package wrapped in brown paper and bound in twine. Blood had soaked through the paper and a few drops fell to the ground. I smiled and reached for the meat but he drew it back.

“This is for later,” he informed me. “I didn’t get much and it won’t last too long before it goes bad.”

“Which is why we should eat it as soon as possible,” I remarked.

“And we will. We can cook it up for dinner tonight.”

“I guess that’ll do.” I returned to the pile of sticks I’d built and tried to make a spark to get it alight. “You know, fresh meat probably won’t be all that much of a problem.”

“Why do you say that?” Maelduin asked.

“I can always hunt something down. How many times did Nathaniel have me track down deer around the castle?”

“Quite a few.”

“Right. And I never failed to come back with a kill.”

Maelduin thought about it for a minute and we decided to cross that bridge when we came to it. The fire wasn’t catching and was causing me to lose my patience. Cured meat alone wasn’t much of a meal and the thought of some fire-roasted vegetables to go along with the meat made my mouth water. If I didn’t get the fire started soon we would have to go without. One more attempt to get the spark to catch proved futile and I jumped to my feet in anger.

“Light, damn you!” I yelled at the pile of twigs and leaves. Fire immediately sprang from the pile and shot into the sky. The flames weren’t the usual red and orange but a deep black. As the wood burned, red streaks filtered in until they completely overtook the blackness.

Maelduin had come over as soon as the fire started. “What did you do?”

“I don’t know,” I honestly replied, “but the fire’s lit.”

“It sure is. But is it safe to cook over?”

The fire looked totally normal now, sending bright orange sparks into the air. “I don’t see why not.”

My brother turned to get the food for grilling. In my head I heard, “*We are definitely going to have to talk about this later.*”

I didn’t bother to reply. He knew I heard him. I didn’t know what to tell him, since I didn’t know I could summon fire until just now. I was sure it wasn’t the ability to create fire that upset my brother though. It was the type of fire I brought forth.

After breakfast, we doused the fire and resumed our southward trek. We didn’t talk about the events of the previous evening right away. Instead, we decided to revel in freedom for a while. We talked about what we were going to do once we got to the continent. Maelduin wanted to go far south, all the way to Rome to be exact. I wanted to see it all. The peace I felt walking and talking with my brother in total freedom was so unusual I almost couldn’t believe it was all really happening.

Maelduin was so overjoyed by everything the day had to offer. You couldn’t have knocked the smile off his face with a cudgel. I was happy too, but was having some difficulty with the sunlight. Ever since I’d come back from Haedes, everything I saw had a slight, reddish tint to it. Now, out in the bright sunlight, my eyes felt as if they were on fire. I squinted until my eyes were barely open. Whenever the tree line would overshadow the path I would breathe a sigh of relief. It was under the shade of a row of spruce trees that I noticed something odd.

“Did it rain last night?” I asked Maelduin.

He was lost in his own thoughts and I caught him off guard.

“What?”

“I said, did it rain last night?”

“No. Why?”

I looked up through the trees and saw a clear blue sky. There wasn’t one cloud to disrupt the sun’s duties. “Weren’t there a whole bunch of storm clouds floating around last night?”

“Sure there were, but that doesn’t mean it always going to rain.”

“Mael, when was the last time we had that many clouds, with that much thunder and lightning, and didn’t have a downpour?”

Maelduin was at a loss for words. “I don’t know. I’m sure it’s clouded up before without raining. We just don’t remember.”

“I don’t think so. I think it was her doing it.”

“Who? Our sister?”

“Valencia, yes. Didn’t you notice that when she stopped arguing with Vincent the lightning stopped too?”

“There were more pressing matters at the time, Patrick.”

“I understand. But I noticed it. I think that could help explain how I started the fire this morning.”

“Majick?”

“Not really. I don’t think Valencia controlled the weather. I think the weather reacted to her. It’s the same thing with the fire. I didn’t control the fire. It just responded to me.”

“Well, they did tell us that we’d have abilities that mortals didn’t.”

“I think this might be one of mine. The ability to create fire.”

“Black fire,” Maelduin said, quite repulsed.

I shrugged, not knowing what he expected of me. It was what I could do. It was as new to me as it was to him. It wasn’t like I asked to be able to create the flames of Haedes. It was just one more thing my brother and I would have to deal with in time.

Thankfully, time was something we had plenty of. When we settled in for lunch, we started talking about Vincent, Valencia and the rest of our family. Maelduin wanted to know all I could tell him about Haven. Unfortunately, there wasn’t all that much to tell. So I told him what I could about Christi Lona. He was rapt with attention during our conversation. My information about her was limited, Maelduin already knew most of what I had to tell him from my memories, but any detail I could provide was music to his ears.

As for me, I wanted to know what the creature was that befriended me in Haedes. Maelduin had read some books on Haedes and

its inhabitants. He told me the creature was called a pit fiend. It survived by devouring human souls. In the realms of death, human souls were never in short supply and these beasts were known for their insatiable appetite. I told Maelduin about how Nathaniel's aura kept regenerating when the pit fiend torn a chunk out of him. My brother wasn't surprised. He said that in the realms of death, human souls are eternal. They cannot be killed, only put away. He had read something about beacons in Haedes but I didn't see one. According to him, these beacons held lost souls. The light that shone from these beacons came from the condemned souls contained within.

For four days afterwards, all we talked about was our heritage. The more we talked about it, the more I got the feeling we were the most powerful beings on the planet. It was as if we were gods on Earth, able to do as we pleased without consequence. There simply wasn't anyone strong enough to defeat us. Maelduin didn't agree with my theory. In fact, he was weary of the power we possessed. He was incessantly reminding me that power corrupts, and that we should only use our abilities if we found ourselves in the direst circumstances. I agreed to his request, but he knew I didn't mean it.

What startled me was, the more we talked about our family, the more we seemed to remember about them. I knew I had said some things to Maelduin that we didn't learn from Vincent and Valencia. Maelduin had done the same on occasion. Valencia had said we would probably get our ancient memories back. I was glad to see she was smarter than she looked.

Every now and again we would encounter the occasional passerby. The first one we met ran at the sight of me. Maelduin was obviously discouraged. I was flat out angry. There was no reason to react as he did, screaming and hollering as he ran past us. I wanted to follow him and teach him some manners, even if it meant using violence. The sadness in Maelduin's mind at my thoughts stopped me in my tracks. He would never approve of such a thing. Instead we made a deal. If it looked like a fellow traveler might be frightened off by my appearance, I would just dart into the trees and let Maelduin talk to them. I didn't like leaving Maelduin unattended. This was reinforced when someone decided to try and rob him.

I had hidden in the trees when the man approached. I spotted some deer tracks as soon as I broke through the tree line and decided to track down some fresh meat. I was concentrating on the tracks when I felt this pain in my gut. I jumped into my brother's mind and heard him yelling. As I ran back, the stranger must've hit Maelduin in the face. My

head snapped back at the impact and I picked up my pace. I emerged from the trees and saw the would-be bandit throwing punches in a fury. Apparently he had only connected those two times. I ran up behind him, axe in hand, before he could turn around. I heard Maelduin beg me not to kill him. I wanted to tell him I wouldn't but I couldn't make him that promise. I stepped on a twig on the path, garnering me the bandit's attention. I swung at him with all the force I could muster and struck him flush to the jaw with the heavy wooden handle of my weapon. He crashed to the ground, spitting out a few bloody teeth as he lay there dazed. I deftly spun the axe around and was about to bring it down across his neck when Maelduin intervened. His robbery attempt finished, the bandit got up and ran like the wind once he noticed I wasn't going to kill him. He ran north, eliminating any chance of him coming back with reinforcements. I asked Maelduin what he would've done had the bandit drawn a sword. I was happy to hear him say he would've run him through.

Maelduin was actually pleased by what had happened, which amazed me. He told me he could tell the bandit had ulterior motives when he was talking to him. My brother saw his lies for what they were. Apparently I wasn't the only one he could spot in a lie. We both figured his ability to see truth from lies was one of those things Vincent and Valencia had told us about. It wasn't as good as creating fire but it most definitely had its advantages. He had tried to tell me before the bandit starting attacking that there might be trouble but I was preoccupied. That would not happen again. We used much more care after that episode. I would still hide in the woods when someone came by, but from now on I would stay at the edge of the path so I could keep an eye on things.

We had been walking for almost a week when we met the guards. Maelduin and I heard a wagon coming from the north and he suggested I head for the trees. I wanted to see who was approaching first. When we saw the wagon accompanied by an armored guard on horseback I held out hope we might be able to get a ride to a nearby town. We had avoided the only other town we'd come across since it was where Nathaniel had done business on occasion. As enjoyable as hiking with my brother might be, after six years of sleeping on a cot I really wanted to sleep in a real bed, even if for just one night.

Maelduin again urged me to duck into the trees. This time I did as he suggested. If we were going to get a ride from these men, Maelduin would be the one to talk them into it. Seeing me might spoil any chance and I knew it. I wasn't happy about leaving him alone with armed guards so I tried to stay as close to the path as possible without being seen.

Maelduin stood in the middle of the path awaiting their arrival. When they finally got to him, he was smiling warmly. The guards were not.

“Move out of the way!” the lead guard bellowed. All four were dressed in chain mail armor and helmets. They looked just like your average city guard. I didn’t recognize the insignia they wore on their chests, so their home remained a mystery.

“Certainly, but first if I may ask a favor of you?” he calmly replied.

“We have no time for your petty requests. Move or we will move you.”

Anger rose in my soul when he threatened Maelduin. It wasn’t a violent threat, but that didn’t matter to me in the least. “*You want me to come out?*” I silently asked.

“*I don’t think that will improve the situation at all. Just stay put for now,*” he answered. To the guard, he said, “I would be more than happy to comply. All I humbly ask for is a small moment of your time.”

The guard dismounted his steed and walked over to Maelduin. “You have one minute.”

“My brother and I have recently found ourselves freed from the bonds of slavery. We have been hiking down this road for about a week now and grow weary. Would it be possible to obtain a ride from you and your brethren?”

The remaining three guards in his garrison had left the coach and joined the head guardsman. He laughed at Maelduin’s suggestion. I thought it was because he asked for his assistance. I knew I was wrong when I saw the guard looking around. “Your brother? I see no one here but you, my men and me. Has slavery driven you mad or something?”

“Not at all, I assure you,” Maelduin replied. “My brother is in the trees keeping an eye on our proceedings.”

“Is he shy?” one of the other guards asked comically. I wasn’t laughing.

“Let us say all interests are served better this way.”

“Well, we can’t help you out with a ride to Rendell but maybe you can help us.”

“How so?” The guard was pacing around Maelduin now, making me extremely nervous. Maelduin sensed my uneasiness and tried to calm me down. As soon as these guards left, I would be able to relax. Until then, I was alert and watching for anything suspicious.

“By paying your toll,” he replied with a smirk.

“Toll?”

"This road is the property of Queen Itna of Rendell. All who travel along it must pay a toll."

"This isn't good," I cautioned.

"I'm getting the same feeling."

"Should I..."

"Stay put." His tone was strong and sure. It was at that very moment I knew he wanted me hidden to protect me. "Sir guard, we have no gold to pay a toll. As I mentioned, we are but lowly freed slaves enjoying our first tastes of freedom. We were not blessed with riches before our journey began. Maybe there is some way we could pay off the toll? I'm sure if you took us to Rendell we could work off what we owe. My brother and I are very good workers."

"I'm afraid it doesn't work that way," the guard said.

"And what are the alternatives?"

"Simple." Turning to his companions, he said, "Rodney, William, detain our traveler here. Joshua, go find this mysterious brother of his, if he exists."

"Oh, I exist," I whispered malevolently in my brother's mind.

"Please believe me sir. He exists. And from what I can gather, he isn't in a very good mood right now. You would be wise to rescind your orders."

"I believe him, Philip," the guard named Joshua said.

"Just shut your mouth and do as you're told, maggot," Philip shouted back. "Find this other brother now!"

William and Rodney approached Maelduin with swords drawn. Maelduin, much to my delight, withdrew his blade as well. I found myself torn between continuing to hide and jumping into the fray to fight by my brother's side. My choice was made for me when Joshua spotted me in the shade of a spruce tree.

The oncoming guard had his sword in hand as he charged over towards me. I unsheathed my axe and instantly heard Maelduin in my head.

"Don't kill him, Patrick."

"I make no promises," I replied.

Joshua had closed the distance quickly and was now just a few feet away. His sword was pointed at my chest as he spoke. "Come with me, sir. We don't want any trouble."

I stepped out of the shadows and stopped with the point of his sword touching my chest through a hole in my shirt. I was an inch or two taller than the guard and stared intently at him. I could feel a droplet of blood coursing its way down the scar on my face as I stared into his eyes.

“Too bad. I like trouble.”

I felt a tinge of pain in my chest and assumed Joshua had decided he didn’t want to take me alive after all. I looked down to see a small cloud of steam wafting from where the point of his sword touched my skin. Joshua’s gaze followed mine and he jumped back at the sight of my smoldering flesh. When he did, the burning ceased.

“Demon,” he whispered in fright. Before I could argue, he lunged at me. I was able to sidestep his attack easy enough. I hit him in the back between his shoulders as I spun away. The guard continued on for a step then whirled around deftly, swinging his sword with vigor. I had my axe up and ready to block his strikes.

As we fought, I kept an eye on my brother. He was defending himself quite well. He never pressed the attack as I would have, but was still able to keep them at bay. He finally got the advantage on the one named Rodney and knocked him unconscious with one powerful blow with the blunt end of his sword. The other two stared at him as they considered their next move. Maelduin made the choice for them. He offered them a truce. The guards whispered amongst themselves before deciding to take him up on his offer. They asked about Joshua and my brother told me to let him go.

He was still attacking as I said, “Joshua, you can stop now.”

“You’re a demon. I stop, I’m dead.”

He took another swing with his sword and I caught it, pressing the cold metal blade between my hands. My flesh began to boil the moment I touched the sword. Acrid steam wafted into the air as my hands burned. “You don’t stop, you’re dead,” I told him with steely calm.

I released his weapon and he wisely retreated. Cautiously, he left the woods and went to rejoin his fellow guards.

“*You can come out now,*” my brother informed me.

“*Give me a minute.*” I examined my hands and saw they were severely burned. My palms were marked by a large, dark red wound the exact shape of Joshua’s sword. Once I made sure I could still use my hands, I joined my brother and the guards.

Maelduin had made peace with the guards and was talking about what to do next. All Maelduin wanted was safe passage. He glanced over at me and added a cloak to his request. William reached into the coach and pulled out the requested garment, pausing to comment that it was his own. Since William was about the same size as me I was sure it would fit. As he went to hand it to me, Joshua stopped him.

“Don’t get too close. He’s a demon,” he warned.

"My brother is no such thing," Maelduin protested before I could. "Please do not judge him by his appearance for his wounds came from saving my life."

"Then why did my sword singe his flesh? Silver only does that to the unholy."

Maelduin turned to look me in the eye. "*Well?*"

"*I have no idea,*" I honestly replied.

Turning back to Joshua, Maelduin said, "I assure you all. He will not harm you. You have my word."

"And what's that worth?" Philip asked with a cocky air.

To my amazement, Joshua, William and I all replied at the same time. "Everything."

Stunned silence followed our response. I saw Maelduin smiling, on his face and in his mind. William shook off his paralysis and delivered my cloak. My assumption was accurate as it fit quite well. When I raised the hood it effectively shielded my face from prying eyes.

"There is one more thing I'd like to ask, purely as a favor," Maelduin finally said to break the silence.

"Why would we help someone traveling with a demon?" Philip asked.

I stepped forward before Maelduin could stop me. "Sir, if I were truly a demon, do you think any one of you would still be standing?" I asked in a menacing tone.

Fear invaded Philip's eyes and he swiftly turned away. To Maelduin, he said, "What is this favor?"

"Would we be able to use your horse? As I've said, we've been walking for a week now and you have a coach you can all ride in."

"One horse won't do you much good. One of you would still have to walk," he replied.

"I have an idea," William interjected. "Why don't we ride to Rendell and bring back some horses?"

"Why the bloody hell would we do that?" Philip demanded. William leaned over to him and began whispering in his ear. When Philip began to smile I was overcome by a sense of foreboding. When William backed away, Philip addressed us again. "After some careful consideration, I believe William has a good idea. Two of us will continue on to Rendell and retrieve some horses for you. Rendell is still at least a week's walk away so there's plenty of time for us to come back with your mounts."

Maelduin smiled at Philip's change of heart, but I could tell it was forced. "Thank you so much, sir. We'll be sure to be on the lookout."

“Very well.” Turning to his lackey, he ordered William back into the coach and mounted his steed. “It should only take two or three days for us to ride to Rendell and return with your horses. Joshua will take care of you until then.”

“That will be fine,” Maelduin replied.

“No, it won’t!” Joshua protested. “Why do I have to stay behind?”

“Because this is my horse, that is William’s wagon, but most of all it is your orders,” Philip informed him.

Joshua bowed his head and promised to obey his orders. Maelduin offered to help put the still unconscious Rodney in the coach. Philip refused his assistance and assigned William and Joshua to the task. With everything in place, William and Philip took off for Rendell. The three of us continued down the path on foot.

We hadn’t traveled a hundred yards before Maelduin was talking in my mind. *“Something isn’t right about all of this.”*

“I got that feeling too. Mainly from you though. What do you think is going on?”

“I don’t know, but I got the feeling that Philip doesn’t want us to reach Rendell. Personally, I wouldn’t expect any horses anytime soon.”

“You think he left us with Joshua so he could kill us?” I chuckled. If he tried, he’d be in for an awful shock.

“Maybe. Just stay alert.”

“As always,” I promised.

Chapter 6

Joshua trailed a few yards behind us as we journeyed onward. Maelduin and I talked out loud about all manner of topics but never mentioned our heritage. Maelduin had wanted to ask Joshua about it at first. Until we understood our history and birthright better, we chose to keep what we did know a secret.

Joshua's reluctance to join us in our travels bothered my brother. Maelduin thought it odd that someone would choose to be isolated when all he had to do was ask. I couldn't figure out why our guard was doing such a halfhearted job of guarding us.

"If he doesn't want to join us, why should we make him?" I asked, sick of the subject of our guard, for that was what I believed him to be. I had finally had enough of my brother's whining to let loose on him. "We've been free of Nathaniel's control for about a week and now we have someone else constantly looking over our shoulders. Just once, why can't we be in charge? At the very least, why can't others just leave us alone? Let him walk by himself. Besides, there's no reason to make friends with our captors."

"I'm not your captor," Joshua shouted from behind us.

I froze. My veins pumped ice and a wicked grin crossed my face. I slowly turned around and saw Joshua frozen as well. No smile showed on his face. Quite the opposite.

"What are you going to do?" Maelduin asked apprehensively.

Brushing aside my brother's inherent curiosity, I looked intently into Joshua's eyes and was taken aback by what I saw. There was no fear there, no notion of panic. He was calm, almost relaxed. I wanted to frighten him, scare him into attacking so I could kill him. If Maelduin thought it was self-defense he wouldn't be as mad. But Joshua's passive demeanor stunned me into silence.

"Stare all you want," he said, his gaze locked firmly with mine. "I fear no demon."

I started forward but Maelduin stopped me. "Why do you keep calling me that?" I yelled at him.

"I know what my own eyes have seen. I saw the silver of my blade scald your flesh. If you weren't a demon, that wouldn't happen."

"What if there was another option?" Maelduin asked, joining our conversation.

"Such as?" Joshua had begun to slowly walk towards us. No doubt Maelduin's reassuring presence drew him in.

“Well, my brother and I have come into some unexpected information about our family. That may explain his reaction to the silver.”

Joshua was now standing with us, his gaze still on me. “And what information would possibly explain this?” Joshua grabbed my hands and splayed them open for Maelduin to see.

“Yes, I know what it did. I could sense it,” Maelduin told him.

“*You felt it?*” I asked.

“*Actually, no. I could smell your flesh burning,*” he quietly replied.

“What do you mean you could sense it?” Joshua asked, finally looking at my brother.

“It would take a while to tell you what we know. But let me ask you, how do you know about demons?” Maelduin inquired.

Joshua sighed and shook his head. “I’d rather not talk about it. You’ll just be like them.”

“Like who?”

“The other guards. That was what I was going to tell you. You aren’t my prisoners. I’m yours.”

“*What?*” we shouted in each other’s minds, shocked by his words.

“Care to elaborate on that?” I asked calmly.

“In Rendell, I’m sort of the resident authority on demons. Thing is, most people don’t actually believe in demons. They believe in good and evil, but not the actual embodiment of it. The other guards ridicule me all the time, saying how I see demons everywhere. They left me with you figuring I’d never make it back to Rendell alive. This way they wouldn’t have to deal with me ever again.”

“They expect us to kill you?” I asked.

“Truth be told, they’re probably placing wagers on which one of you does the deed.” He looked up at me and, in another surprising move, smiled. “I bet you’re getting good odds.”

“I’m sure,” I said before I could stop myself.

“That aside,” my brother quickly interjected, “we aren’t going to kill you.”

“Unless you make us,” I threw in.

“I’m a lot smarter than that,” Joshua remarked.

“I believe you. How much do you know about demons anyway?” Maelduin asked.

Joshua eyed my brother up suspiciously. “You really want to know?”

“Would it surprise you to know that demonology has recently become a topic of interest for us?”

“Not really,” he responded coolly.

“Then I recommend you put aside your remaining doubts and fears and tell us what you know. It’s a long walk and I’m sure you have lots to tell us.”

While Joshua organized his thoughts, I silently asked my brother, “*What are you doing?*”

“*We need to learn what we can about our family, right? Part of that is learning about the other residents of Haven and Haedes. Knowledge, my dear brother, is the key to all things.*”

“*And that’s the only reason?*” I asked accusingly.

“*What? You don’t want to know why his weapon burned your hands?*”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Maelduin smiling. The more there was to learn, the happier he was.

My brother was happy a lot that day. Joshua was a deep well of information on demons. From lowly imps to the hierarchy of Haedes, Joshua could describe them all in startling detail. I found myself hanging on his every word in short order. He was still guarded around me but slowly loosened up when he realized I wasn’t a threat. When night fell and we’d found a place to camp for the evening, Joshua and I even joked around a little with my brother.

Maelduin took Joshua into the woods to gather some food since our supplies were running low. We had finished off the fresh meat quickly and we were down to our last three pieces of cured meat. Maelduin was smart when it came to which nuts and berries were edible. If we decided we wanted something more substantial, I would hunt down some game. His foraging would suffice for this evening. He really just wanted to get Joshua away from the encampment while I conjured a fire.

Wood crackled in the fire as Maelduin and Joshua stepped out of the trees. Maelduin had refilled a small bag with various nuts and berries. He went over to his gear and rummaged around for more food. I was sitting by the fire as Joshua approached.

“Here, try these,” Joshua offered as he stuck out his hand.

“What are they?” I asked.

“I have no idea, but they’re tasty.” I took a few berries and threw them into my mouth. They were indeed tasty and very juicy. I was about to thank him when he sat down and continued talking. “I just wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier, Patrick. I’m sure you can understand my reaction, considering my studies and all.”

“Joshua, my brother seems to trust you. More than that, he seems to like you. That’s good enough for me. What you know, or what you think you know, doesn’t matter to me. Only he does.”

“I can tell you two are close.”

“You have no idea,” I assured him.

“I’m sure. Anyway, I see now you’re not a demon, and a man admits when he’s misjudged another man.”

“What if you haven’t misjudged me?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Why does silver burn demons?”

“That’s just how silver reacts to unholy creatures,” he answered.

“So maybe I’m not a demon, just unholy,” I surmised.

“Patrick, that’s not possible. It’s about your aura. It’s the darkness in their auras that reacts to the silver. As humans, we don’t have that. We aren’t inherently good or evil. That’s why we have free will and, if needed, the chance for redemption.”

I took a deep breath and turned to look him in the eye. As I went to speak, I heard Maelduin in my head. “*Not yet.*”

“*Why not?*” I screamed back at him.

“*He won’t believe you.*”

“*Then you tell him!*”

“*Not yet,*” he repeated.

“Patrick, are you all right?”

He must’ve seen the change in my expression when my brother interrupted me. So I chose a different tactic. “Joshua, what do you know about the Aseraphim?”

“*Patrick! What do you think you’re doing?*”

“*I’m not telling him who we are,*” I smugly replied.

The change in Joshua’s attitude was startling. He looked like he might explode. “You know about the Aseraphim? Amazing! Not many follow their teachings anymore. Only Queen Itna and her most devout followers subscribe to the wisdom of the Aseraphim,” he replied excitedly.

“We know a bit about them,” Maelduin said, joining us beside the fire. “What do you know of them?”

“Everything! Well, maybe not everything, but I know a lot, especially the Haven-bound Aseraphim. Still, you can’t study demons without finding references to the Fallen Aseraphim as well. One of the queen’s advisors is a good friend of mine and he’s let me see the scrolls. There isn’t a scrap of paper about the Aseraphim in all of Rendell that I haven’t committed to memory.”

“Seriously?” I inquired.

“Absolutely. Wait a minute. Why did you ask me about the Aseraphim? What do you know about them?”

“Actually, not as much as we should,” I answered.

“I don’t understand. Do you think you’re some sort of Aseraphim and that’s why the silver burned you? Patrick, I would’ve read about someone like you, I’m sure.”

“Maybe it just hasn’t been written yet,” I suggested.

Maelduin quickly stepped into the conversation before I could confuse Joshua any farther. “The night is still young, my new friend. Why don’t you tell us a bit about the Aseraphim? As my brother hinted at, we know a little about them as well. We can compare what we know.”

Joshua was still looking at me distrustfully. I had taken his sincere apology and turned it around on him until he couldn’t think straight. He put aside his bewilderment and we began talking about the Aseraphim. He spoke at great length about Christi Lona and Cherub. I wanted to tell him about my meeting with Christi Lona but Maelduin advised against it. He had a point. Seeing as how Joshua had been left to die by his fellow guards, his day started out a mite rough. I could understand how knowing I’d come back from the dead might be too much for him to handle. As the fire died down and our new companion’s eyes grew heavy, we decided to continue the conversation in the morning and bunked down for the night.

Maelduin wanted one of us to stand guard while the others slept. Ever since the robbery attempt he’d become more concerned about our safety. We both decided to let Joshua sleep. The mere suggestion of sleep wasn’t even out of my mouth before Joshua was snoring. I offered to split the responsibility of standing guard if Maelduin took the first shift and he readily agreed.

Maelduin crept silently over to the fire, careful not to make too much noise and awaken Joshua. I pulled some fallen leaves together and rested my head on my makeshift pillow. Exhausted as I was, sleep came easily for me as well. As the world around me faded away, the world of Haedes awaited me.

The craggy landscape of Haedes, with its black mountains and reddish sky, shattered the hopes of all men who witnessed it. Jagged, crumbling cliffs with fissures of molten lava dotted the horizon. Rivers of blood flowed from a source unknown. A single light broke open the darkness away from the mountains. I found myself endlessly walking towards its brilliance. It scanned the horizon, fading into the darkness

with each brief pass. I started to run, hoping to find the source of the light before it faded into darkness forever.

The light's glow intensified as I grew nearer. When the beam would wash over me, I could make out my surroundings in detail. I saw silver auras, hundreds upon hundreds of them, lining the shores of a river of blood. I saw demons of all shapes and sizes watching me as I passed by. I also witnessed some of those demons feeding on the souls along the riverside. But mostly I saw the darkness, and I looked right past it.

I could see the source of the light in the distance. It looked like a lighthouse and I immediately recognized it as one of the beacons Maelduin had spoken about. More than light was emanating from the beacon now. I could hear tortured screams seemingly coming from the beam of light, only the wailing was constant while the light was not. I slowed my pace as I neared and saw the river of blood crossing in front of the beacon, halting my progress. As I stood there on the opposite shore, two men emerged from the shadows. One was much shorter than the other and donned a black robe emblazoned with symbols of a language I didn't understand. He was holding a large book, open and ready. It wasn't him that captured my attention however. It was Nin-Gauble standing next to him.

Nin-Gauble rested his hand on his companion's shoulder. At his touch, the smaller man began to speak. "Four children shall come to be in the realm of men, and they shall receive power over many things. One shall be given power over all light, goodness and life. One shall be given power over darkness, disease and death. One shall work to unite all mankind. One shall strive to bring absolute freedom to all. Time shall pass by and touch them not, nor can the bonds of death itself reign in their power, for they are the sacred children of Starz. In the realm of man they shall be as gods. In the realms of death they shall be kings. And one of them shall be betrothed with one of two, as this child is one of four. This promised spouse shall be born to the realm of darkness and be bound to it for eternity by blood and matrimony. The foretold child of Starz shall bring the Kingdom of Haedes to its knees, by blood and by word, and will have their betrothed sit in the Grand Chamber of Haedes beside the throne." He closed the book and quietly stared at me.

"Welcome home, Patrick," Nin-Gauble casually hissed when the reading was finished. They stepped back towards the beacon and faded into the shadows.

Nin-Gauble's voice echoed in my mind, my name softly repeating itself over and over again. The voice slowly began to change and I

realized Maelduin was calling me. He nudged my shoulder in an attempt to wake me.

“Patrick, are you awake?” he politely asked.

“Is it my shift already?” I replied through closed eyes.

“It is.”

I slowly stood up and stretched to get the blood pumping. I could feel concern clouding my brother’s mind as I roused myself from slumber.

“Is something wrong?”

“That dream you had...”

“You saw that?”

“Bits and pieces. Was that Nin-Gauble talking to you?”

“It sure was.”

“Who was the other guy?”

“No idea.” I wanted to change the subject before Maelduin prodded more information out of me. “So what did you do to stay awake?”

“Nothing really. Believe it or not, it wasn’t difficult. I’m not even that tired now.”

“Well, try to get some sleep all the same. No sense in me being awake if you’re just going to be up all night anyway.”

“Good point,” my brother replied with a yawn. Just talking about sleep had begun to make him drowsy.

“Before you lie down, can you hand me the book?” I asked as he started to turn away.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he replied suspiciously, “What book?”

“You know damn well what book. Don’t play that game with me.”

“Why do you want...”

“Something to read to stay awake,” I answered before he finished asking.

Wordlessly, Maelduin retrieved the bag and withdrew “Of Day And Night”. He slowly walked over to me and, with anxiety written all over his face, carefully handed me the tome. He was walking away as I gazed down at the book. In my hands were the Ancient Styx’s words, transcribing the history of Tag and Nacht. I was mesmerized by the knowledge contained in this tome. Finding out that my brother and I were children of beings superior to mankind had awakened memories previously suppressed. I could see Styx in my mind. I knew her radiant face, her long black hair. More importantly, I knew the power she possessed. The Ancient’s faces and forms were clearer now, but I still

didn't know what they did or why. I was hoping to find a few of those answers in the book too.

I waited until Maelduin was resting comfortably before heading out for my turn on watch. I had walked only a few steps towards the road when I opened the cover of the book. It immediately snapped back shut, nearly pinching my fingers as it did. This stopped me in my tracks. I examined the spine, searching for a trigger or obstruction that made the book clamp shut. Finding nothing, I again tried to open it, and right away it slammed shut. I suppressed the urge to throw the book into the woods and stomped back to the campfire.

Sleep had not been difficult for Maelduin after all. When I got back, he was out cold. I stood over my brother and nudged him with my boot to rouse him.

"I know it's not morning yet," he mumbled.

"No, it's not."

My brother's mind was wide awake even if his body had succumbed to fatigue. He detected the uneasiness in my mind and its origin and sprung to his feet. "What's this about the book?" he asked.

"It won't open. How did you do it?"

He shrugged and simply replied, "I just opened it. I know you aren't much for reading, Patrick, but I'm sure you still remember how to open a book."

"Don't get cocky, brother," I growled. "Why can you open it and I can't?"

"Calm down, Patrick. I'm sure it was nothing. Here, let me see it." He reached out and I handed him the book. He inspected its exterior before deeming it unchanged from before. With unsettling ease, he opened the cover. And it stayed open.

I saw in my brother's mind that he was worried about me. The second I noticed pity in his thoughts, I stormed away. As soon as I turned my back, I heard the book slam closed.

"*I didn't do that*," I heard Maelduin say in my mind.

"Really?" I asked aloud.

"Of course, really," he replied.

I rejoined him and we stared at the book a moment longer. Evidently the book wanted to be read by both of us at the same time. Why the sudden change, we had no idea. We concluded that, considering the strange behavior of the book, it might be best if we read it away from where Joshua was sleeping. We didn't want to take the chance of it clamping up again because of him. We weren't sure it would, but we also weren't going to take the chance.

Maelduin and I walked out to the road, prepared to read by the dim moonlight. A few leaves drifted by on a light, cool breeze. Clouds dotted the sky, cutting us off from the moonlight momentarily. Signs of rain in the sky and the breeze, which was picking up force, told us we would be wise to find some temporary shelter come daybreak.

Maelduin held the book out and lightly grasped the end of the cover. More and more leaves blew by and I began to think the rain wouldn't wait until morning. Cautiously, Maelduin began to open the tome when a voice came out of nowhere, yet seemed to be everywhere.

"You know, you probably aren't going to understand most of what's in there," the voice calmly stated. The mysterious voice was serene and composed, yet held a tone of vast intelligence and authority.

"Do you want to answer?" I asked Maelduin.

"I'm not sure I'd even know how," he replied.

"Just talk anyway you care to. I'm amenable to either vocal or mental, whichever you two prefer," the voice commented.

"Who are you?" I asked, withdrawing my axe.

"You can put that away, Patrick. I'm not going to harm you," it replied.

"Show yourself and I'll put away my weapon, but not before."

From underneath my feet, a strong gale of wind took form. Before I could step away, the gust of wind shot up my body like an arrow and blew the axe out of my hand. I had been gripping the handle so tightly my knuckles went white, but the wind had dislodged my weapon as if it were made of paper. I watched as my axe flew into the air and landed in the road about fifty yards away.

"Now that you have relinquished your weapon..." the voice said, its final words fading away on the breeze. The wind that had carried my axe away formed into a small tornado at my feet. It slid across the road, growing in intensity with every inch. It stopped just short of the tree line on the opposite side of the road. It drew in no leaves. No stray rubbish strewn about by travelers long gone got caught in its wake. It was just an immense funnel of unspoiled air.

As I was gawking at the clear whirlwind before me, I spotted something inside. Shapes began to form that soon took the form of a man. A dark cloak concealed his face. I felt, even without seeing his face, that I knew the identity of this stranger. A voice was screaming in the back of my mind to remember, but to no avail.

The man started forward slowly yet with no apprehension. As he reached the middle of the road, he raised his head and lowered his hood. I found myself looking into familiar eyes. They were my own.

“Do you see yourself?” I asked my brother.

Maelduin, visibly shaken by current events, replied nervously, *“You don’t want to know what I see.”*

“My apologies for that, young lord Maelduin. I understand you didn’t know about your gift of true sight until very recently. Not to worry. In time, you’ll come to see how much of a blessing it truly is,” the stranger commented. It was the same voice from before, still with the same relaxed tone. His voice was carried on the wind and into our ears. What bothered me was the mouth of our mysterious visitor never moved when he spoke.

“Would you mind not eavesdropping on our private conversations?” I asked bitterly. My last remnant of calm was shattered when I saw his lips move with mine. My mind couldn’t tolerate the tricks I was seeing any longer.

“I’m sorry, Lord Patrick, but there are no secrets from me.”

“And who might you be?” I asked, ready to run and grab my axe if he didn’t cooperate.

A smile curled on his lips, crinkling the scar tissue on his face. Proudly, he said, “I am the watcher, the overseer of all the Earth. I am the wind that moves the very clouds in the sky. I am the mind, of the mind and in the mind of every sentient mortal being on this realm. Dear children, I am the Ancient Each, and I am honored to be in your company.”

Maelduin and I glanced at each other, our thoughts jumbled into a muddled mess. I looked back at the Ancient, stunned by his presence. We had learned a little about the Ancients from our brother Vincent but didn’t expect to meet one this soon. A few leaves swirled around his feet, kicked up by the barely noticeable breeze surrounding him. The leaves fluttered towards him and passed right through his body. At this point, my mind couldn’t take anymore. Just as I was about to voice my confusion and displeasure, Maelduin spoke to him.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“Because of that book,” Each replied.

“Are you the one that caused it to act up?” I angrily asked.

Laughter filled the air and my mind as he responded. “Indeed. My apologies for the confusion, but I wanted the both of you together so I could explain what you were about to read.”

“You do realize that if I know something, so does he,” I commented.

“Yes, but his questions would probably differ from yours. I needed you both awake and alert, and making the book react oddly accomplished that task.”

“So we can read it by ourselves?” Maelduin asked.

“Of course! Though the book you possess is very old and very much treasured, it is still just a book.”

“Written by an Ancient,” I added.

“Styx, yes.” Each’s face, or mine depending on your point of view, smiled broadly as her name caressed my ears. “Easily amongst my favorite beings in the universe. But Styx did not actually write it. Look again.”

Maelduin opened the book to the back and read the last sentence aloud. “Transcribed by Propheteus’s clerics, as retold by the Ancient Styx.”

“The clerics are the transcribers of history. All the knowledge passed down from the ages comes from these clerics. There are in fact four breeds of clerics, one for each of the realms. Obviously, Propheteus’s clerics wrote this one. You’ve met a few clerics in your time on Earth and didn’t even know it.”

“Like who?” I asked skeptically.

“Your parents, for starters,” he replied. “Allen and Nichole McFaen were given the task of watching over you by Propheteus himself. Unfortunately, their deaths came much too early.”

“You knew they were going to die?” I yelled.

Each passively raised his hand and said, “Be still, Patrick. It was inevitable. They are not dead as you know death to be. They are with Propheteus in his castle in Limbo now, serving him as they always have.”

“Isn’t Propheteus the guy that gives out prophecies?” Maelduin asked.

“Indeed he is. His clerics know many of these prophecies, but not all. In fact, all breeds of clerics know at least some prophecies of their respective realms.” Each looked back to me and added, “You’ve seen one yourself, haven’t you?”

“I think so. The man standing with Nin-Gauble,” I answered.

“Nin-Gauble,” he spat out. The wind kicked up at the mention of his name. “Detestable individual.”

“Who is he?” Maelduin asked.

Each stepped closer until he was within arms reach of us. In a quiet voice, almost a whisper on the wind, he replied, “Do not fool with him, young masters. Nin-Gauble is a vicious man capable of hideous atrocities.”

“But who is he?” I repeated.

“He is a Titan, born before time began in this universe. Before the Ancients came to be, the ten immortal Titans ruled existence. Violence and death were their trademark and all who crossed them met a vile, painful end.”

“So they still exist?”

“Five of them, yes. Nin-Gauble, the dark seer. Bedlam, hateful chaos. Pak, animal bloodlust. Zomb the undead. And their overlord, the Darkness. These are the remaining Titans. They were all relegated to Haedes, though Bedlam has since moved on to Limbo. Take heed, young masters, though they reside in the world of eternal night, some of them can come to this realm. You would be wise to avoid any and all confrontations with these repulsive individuals.”

“What happened to the rest of them?” Maelduin asked.

“We killed them,” was his simple reply.

“I thought you said they were immortal.”

“Immortal does not mean their essence cannot be dispelled.

There are only four essences in the universe that cannot be destroyed, for they are eternal.” With a widening smile, he asked, “Care to guess which four?”

“Love, Hate, Order and Chaos,” I answered.

“Correct. And you are not the first beings to be so endowed with these essences. The Titans held them, as did the ones you know as the Ancients. Now it is your turn. When the Titans were replaced by the Ancients, the essences of Love, Hate, Order and Chaos were returned to the ethereal, waiting to be reborn. All four forces of mankind reigned over the ethereal as the Will and Power Cosmic created the universe we now find ourselves in. Once the coupling of the Ancient Beholder and the Aseraphim Starz occurred, the essences were then pulled from the ethereal and brought to bear. All that was needed was bodies for them to enter. However, the realm of Earth was not yet ready for your presence. These essences, your essences, were returned to the ethereal to await the maturation of the inhabitants of this world.”

My brother and I let all this new information sink in for a moment. My mental processes weren’t completely cooperating, so I let Maelduin sort it out. His conclusion brought me back to one simple question. Looking Each in the eye, I asked, “What does all of this have to do with the book?”

Each smiled at me again and said, “That book will tell you about your true birth through the union of The Beholder and Starz. You need

to realize that yours is a special place in the world. Both of you. You will both bend mankind to your will, for it is your duty.”

“So we’re the children of an Ancient and an Aseraphim?” I asked.

“Correct.”

“And the essence of who we are is eternal?” Maelduin chimed in.

“Correct again.”

“So we’re gods?” I posed.

Each’s smile faded as he replied, “I would have to say no to that. You are powerful, eternal, but not gods. Gods cannot be destroyed. You most certainly can.”

“I thought we were immortal?”

“So did the Titans.”

“So we aren’t immortal? Then why did Vincent and Valencia tell us we were?”

“Because it is what they were told. Part of you is immortal, and that part is your essence. To put it in simple terms, you’re only immortal for a limited time. Once the essence is drawn from you, you can most definitely be destroyed.”

I looked over to Maelduin and said, “We’re gong to have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Good luck with that,” Each commented with another laugh.

I’d had just about enough of Each’s condescension and confusion. Wheeling around to face him again, I could feel the blood trickling from my eye. “I think you’ve done your job now, Ancient. It’s time for you to be going,” I said with obvious displeasure in my tone. Before he could reply, I started down the road to retrieve my axe.

Each stuck around to talk to Maelduin a moment longer while I was away. I could hear their conversation but ignored it. I was having trouble believing the Ancient had our best intentions at heart. My brother hung onto every word he said. For the first time in a long while, I found myself doubting Maelduin’s sanity. This man had told us nothing useful other than we could be killed, contrary to what we’d been told before. I wasn’t sure Each was on our side but Maelduin was thoroughly convinced.

Having picked up my axe and checked it for any damage from its flight, I headed back to my brother in time to see Each walking away. He was only a few feet from Maelduin when the wind picked up and carried him away on the breeze. His body faded into the wind for a second and he was gone.

“Good riddance,” I commented when I returned.

“Why were you so hostile to him?” he asked.

“You can’t figure it out?”

“I know what you think, but why do you think it? He was helpful.”

“He was deceitful. Nothing he told us matches anything else told to us. Vincent, Valencia, hell, even Nathaniel Graves gave us more useful information than he did. Sorry brother. I don’t believe him.”

“What if he’s right?”

“I’m willing to take my chances,” I said with confidence.

“You’re willing to risk getting killed?”

“Or become a god. If those are the options, I’m willing to take the chance of dying.”

Maelduin lowered his head in despair. He turned back towards the campsite and waved for me to follow. “Come on. Each said it was okay for us to let Joshua read the book. In fact, he recommended it.”

“Which makes me...”

“Stop it, Patrick,” he demanded. “I know what you think and I don’t really care at the moment. In the morning, we’re going to let Joshua in on everything and that’s final.”

I grabbed my brother’s shoulder to halt his progress. As I looked into his eyes, I saw something I’d never seen before, at least not because of me. There was love in those eyes, but behind that usual sight was the smallest tinge of fear. I found satisfaction in this discovery. “I’ll go along this time, but don’t you ever think you have the right to tell me what I am going to do. You’re my brother, and I love you as a good brother should, but you are not my keeper.”

I released his shoulder and told him I was going back out to the road to continue the watch. He started back alone, downhearted at our spat. I stood watch until daybreak, never more alone.

Come morning I did not rejoin my brother and Joshua, instead choosing to wait for them along the side of the road. When Maelduin tracked me down and offered me breakfast, I not so politely declined. My anger hadn’t faded much during the night. I kept replaying our argument in my mind. For six years I had to do everything Nathaniel Graves ordered. I wasn’t going to be anyone’s puppet anymore. Maelduin wasn’t happy with my attitude and I couldn’t have cared less.

When Maelduin returned with Joshua so we could continue on to Rendell, I took the lead and walked a few yards ahead. I could hear the two of them discussing the Aseraphim and the book. Joshua was beyond excited about reading it. They wasted no time opening it and absorbing all it held. I read through Maelduin’s eyes but wasn’t nearly as concerned

about what it had to say. I knew what I needed to know. I was immortal, despite Each's statement to the contrary. I was one of the most powerful beings, not just on Earth but also on any realm. How I got to be this way wasn't important to me. How to stay this way was.

For days, we walked onward toward Rendell. Rain slowed us down a few times as we chose to find shelter and wait out the storms. Maelduin and I had reconciled by the time we settled down to eat that first day. By daybreak the following day, our argument was forgotten. I also had some time to listen in on their conversations about the Aseraphim. Joshua didn't know anything about the Ancients, but what he knew about the Fallen Aseraphim was interesting. He spoke of a demon named Wraith, the scribe. One night, sheltered in a cave during a particularly heavy rainstorm, he spoke of this grand evil creature known as the Falling One. At almost eight feet in height, he towered over mere mortals. Horns solid as bone protrude from his head. His crimson skin was coated in black flames, and all that crossed him met their demise. Those who didn't fall dead at the sight of him and were quick enough to avoid his wrath spoke of him in hushed tones.

After hearing all this, I joined in on their conversations. I even asked a few questions once in a while. If Each was right, and we eventually could be killed, it might be a good idea to find out whom to avoid. More importantly, maybe I could find an ally or two. By the time we reached the gates of Rendell, the book had been read cover to cover and discussed at great length between the three of us. We also discussed everything Joshua knew about demons and the Aseraphim.

The gates of Rendell awaited, unaware of the coming of two gods in waiting.

Chapter 7

Maelduin recommended putting the hood up on my cloak in case my appearance made the guards at the gate nervous. I wasn't concerned about their feelings but relented to my brother's wishes. Besides, it wouldn't do us any good if we couldn't get into town. Joshua took the lead and we followed him over to the closest sentry.

"Matthew, hail," he spoke as we neared.

"Joshua? Is that you? I heard you'd been left for dead?" the guard replied.

A smirk lined Joshua's lips as he replied. "In a manner of speaking, I was. It worked out in the end, that's all that matters. May we pass?"

"Most certainly." Matthew shouted for the guard manning the door to open it and we filed past. Maelduin even politely bowed to the guard as we passed. I at least had the courtesy to nod in his direction.

As we entered, Joshua turned to us and said, "Matthew O'Brien is one of my closest and dearest friends from childhood. Grew up next door to him. I'm glad he was at the gate. I have to wonder about what he said though."

"You said it yourself. They left you with us to get killed," I stated. We were just past the giant stonewalls of Rendell when I spotted the other three guards Joshua had been with that fateful day. I tapped Joshua on the shoulder and pointed to my discovery. "Shall we go see who won the betting pool?"

Before he could respond, I threw my arm around his shoulder and led him off to greet his fellow guards. I heard Maelduin caution me against doing anything I might regret. I assured him the only regrets would come from them, not me. He eventually calmed down when I promised not to hurt anyone. Joshua was another story. He was protesting the entire time. No reassurance was going to settle him down. The three guards were conversing amongst themselves and still hadn't noticed our approach. I stopped Joshua and whispered my plan in his ear. His laughter was all the approval I needed.

I drew the hood of my cloak up higher, making sure to keep my face completely hidden. We drew near and the one Maelduin had knocked unconscious saw us first. He pointed and questioned his companions. When they turned, we were face to face. My head was slightly bowed but out of the corner of my eye I could see Joshua trying to suppress a smile.

"Philip, William, how are you? And Rodney, I believe it is. Pleasure to see you upright," I said quietly.

"Joshua! So good to see you," Philip timidly replied. His voice cracked in panic.

"I'm sure you want him to think that," I answered for him. "I have a question for you, Philip. What happened to our horses?"

"Well, the stable couldn't spare..."

I snapped my head up, sending my hood flying back off my head. Blood was trickling down my eye and I could see a red glow reflecting in Philip's eyes. "Don't tell me your lies, maggot. You left this man for dead." I pulled Joshua in closer to show my affection for him. It wasn't totally genuine but wasn't completely false either. Joshua no longer entertained the idea of enjoying this encounter. No smile graced his lips, only worry. "This good man. You thought we'd kill him, didn't you? Why, the idea never crossed our minds. You, on the other hand..."

I leaned in until I was nose to nose with Philip. "Look, friend," he warned in a quivering voice.

"We aren't friends, you piece of shit. You're nothing. And if I ever, and I mean ever, hear of you harassing my true friend here, you'll regret it. Are we understood?"

I wasn't sure if he nodded his head in agreement or if it was just him shaking from fright. I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt this time and chose the former. I stuck out my hand and, when he didn't move, grabbed his hand and shook it, sealing the deal. I looked up and saw Rodney and William stunned into silence and almost laughed out loud.

I released Philip's hand and Joshua and I started back to my brother. I still had my arm around Joshua's shoulder and could feel him shaking as well. Once we were well out of earshot of the other guards, he said, "If I knew that was what you were going to do, I probably wouldn't have agreed."

"I told you I was going to scare them a little."

"You scared them more than just a little, Patrick."

"What can I say? I fed off their fear."

"I could tell."

"Look, I guarantee they'll never bother you again. It all worked out. If I have to, I'll give them another little warning before my brother and I leave Rendell. I think they'll believe me, don't you?"

I slipped my arm off his shoulder as we reached Maelduin. He chastised me a little for what I did but I knew he wasn't all that mad. I could see in his eyes he believed they got what they deserved. He just

would've used a softer approach. Personally, I thought I did use a softer approach. We asked Joshua where we should check out first. He asked if we had any money and unfortunately we did not, so renting a room was out of the question. An invitation was put forth and accepted, and we started off for Joshua's house, our new, albeit temporary, home.

It wasn't a spectacular house but it had a quiet dignity. A simple home with two bedrooms, the only notable feature was the books. No room in his home, spare the kitchen, was without a bookshelf loaded to capacity. No sooner had we finished a tour of the house than Joshua suggested we go talk to Michael Malvern. Michael, he told us, was Queen Itna's advisor and a close friend. Joshua was confident Michael would want to meet us.

When Joshua went off to see if Michael was available, I asked Maelduin if we should tell Joshua all we know. We still had yet to inform him of our relation to the Aseraphim. We had read about our births in "Of Day And Night". We just didn't tell Joshua the story was referring to us. Maelduin still wasn't ready to tell him just yet but felt the time was nearing. We agreed to discuss it more after talking to Michael. Maelduin was eager to talk to him, in fact. Again, his quest to learn anything and everything was in full force. It worked out well for me, since this way I didn't have to do all the questioning and searching. Also, if I didn't understand something Maelduin was normally quick to explain it to me.

Parts of our relationship worked out incredibly well for the both of us. Maelduin's desire to learn kept me in the know. My love of combat and fighting helped him defend himself. Maelduin had no formal training in swordsmanship yet I was willing to wager a king's ransom on him against anyone in Rendell. I had learned to fight with a sword while enslaved to Nathaniel. There were a few guards under his command that didn't completely make my life miserable. A few of these men taught me to use a sword. They never let me have an actual sword, fearing my eagerness to fight might backfire on them. Still, I was able to hold my own against some of Nathaniel's best men in combat training. Maelduin absorbed all this knowledge thanks to me. It was our tradeoff for his studies in the library.

I thought back to Maelduin's battle with the three guards and smiled. Maelduin knew what drew the memory out and thanked me for the skills I learned for us both. We talked a bit about it until Joshua returned. When he showed up, we were reenacting part of the battle in his sitting room. Maelduin was using Joshua's sword and I his. Since Joshua's sword was made of silver I certainly couldn't use it. Joshua was

dazed at the sight, thinking we were really fighting. When we started laughing, his paralysis broke and he joined in.

Once we'd regained our composure, Joshua informed us that Michael was very eager to meet us. Not wanting to waste any time, we quickly left and made our way through Rendell. I had never been in a town as grand as this one. Large stone walls surrounded the entire village, keeping all aggressors at bay. Mountains were visible just above the wall at the far end of town and Rendell seemed to be a resting point for travelers heading to these peaks. Shops lined the cobblestone streets with satisfied customers abound. The smell of fresh baked bread and strong coffee floated heavily on the air. An imposing building rose on the horizon as we walked and Joshua informed us this was the Queen's palace.

Cast in grey marble, the palace glistened in the sunlight. Large stone statues lined the steps to the door. Most of the statues were of men slaughtering dragons and demons, which I found slightly unnerving. I had noticed a few people eyeing me up suspiciously as we made our way through town. No one said anything, so I let it pass. Maelduin didn't even need to warn me. I knew not to start trouble. Not against an entire town at least.

We reached the heavy, oak doors of Queen Itna's palace. Joshua went inside to talk to the guard on duty. As Maelduin and I waited patiently on the steps, keeping an eye on the door for his return, we heard a noise from behind us. We slowly turned and saw a crowd forming around the base of the palace and extending into the town square. I looked at Maelduin, who just shrugged.

"Any ideas?" I silently asked.

"I'm not sure. Are they looking at you, me or us?"

I scanned the crowd and saw the strangest thing. Not one of them had their sights on me. Every single person in the crowd was staring at my brother. Some of them even had their mouths hanging open, as if in awe of his presence.

"Maelduin, what's going on?" I asked tensely, knowing he came to the same conclusion I'd reached.

Joshua returned before we could continue. Maelduin and I were through the front door before he could say a word. I grabbed Joshua on the way past and Maelduin quickly slammed the door shut. There was a guard, dressed in very regal armor, standing and watching us. Maelduin looked embarrassed by our odd behavior. I was too shocked to care.

"What the hell is going on out there?" I screamed at Joshua excitedly.

“Watch your mouth, sir,” the guard sternly suggested.

I glanced over at him and gave him a half-hearted apology. I then restated my question to Joshua. “I’m not sure,” he replied. “But it may explain why Michael is so keyed up about meeting the two of you.”

“Why were they staring at me like that?” Maelduin asked. It was good to see he’d finally recovered.

Joshua had no answers, only the offer to ask Michael. It was going to have to suffice. I could feel Maelduin’s anxiety and quietly tried to reassure him. As we weaved through the halls of Itna’s palace, Maelduin finally regained enough of his usual composure to talk to Joshua about the man we were going to see. I didn’t tell Maelduin my theory about the crowd. I didn’t think he’d want to hear it. Since he didn’t ask, I didn’t offer. To my eyes, though, it looked as if they were spellbound at the sight of my brother. It was as if they were looking upon their savior and redeemer. They thought he was a god.

Michael Malvern was not what I’d expected. I was a full head taller than the queen’s advisor and easily outweighed him two to one. A tiny man in his late twenties, he had a head full of reddish-blond hair and wild blue eyes. The man was full of energy and jumped out from behind his ornate wooden desk when we entered. Behind the desk of his unexpectedly simple office was a fantastic painting, one that warranted a closer inspection if time allowed.

“Michael, allow me to introduce Maelduin and Patrick of the clan McFaen,” Joshua said as we approached.

He rushed over, gushing platitudes with every step. He grabbed my hand and welcomed me by name. After he moved on to Maelduin, it occurred to me that Joshua never identified us individually.

“Michael, how did you know I was Patrick? Joshua never pointed that out,” I mentioned.

“Patrick, your presence here has been expected. Yours as well, Maelduin. More so, in fact. My apologies to you on that, Patrick. Different tastes and all that.”

Michael spoke at such a rapid pace that his words seemed to run together. His head snapped back and forth between my brother and me as he rambled. I held up my hand to stop him. “We were expected? By who?” I asked.

“Yes. And why didn’t you tell me?” Joshua added.

“And why were those people staring at me like that?” Maelduin threw in for good measure.

Michael, instead of being overcome by the rapid questioning, got more energized by the inquisition. "Of course! Of course. There's so much to discuss and so little time before we have to go meet the Queen."

"Meet the queen?" all three of us chimed in. In any other situation, I might have found that comical. Now, all it told me was I wasn't the only one that was utterly confused.

"Yes, yes. I know there's a lot being thrown at you," he continued, gesturing wildly with his hands as he spoke. "But I'm afraid I'm only going to make that worse. Oh, much, much worse. But it's for the best! So why don't I start with what you've asked so far. Joshua, you weren't told because, frankly, I wasn't allowed to tell you. Patrick, you were expected by me and a select few others. Not just you, of course. Your brother was expected as well. His arrival was a little better known. That's why there were gawking at you, Maelduin. They've been waiting generations for your arrival. Patrick, you, not so much."

Michael was bouncing on the balls of his feet. His speedy answers left me more confused than before. My head was pounding and I realized I was feeling Maelduin's headache as well as my own, which only compounded the pain. With a spring in his step, Michael skipped back behind his desk and took a seat. The three of us slowly slid over to the cushioned chairs facing him and sat down as well. Dazed expressions lined all three of our faces as we stared at this hyper little man.

Maelduin promptly asked Michael another question before he could get comfortable and continue with his attempts at disorientating us. "How could these people possibly have been waiting generations for me? I'm only twelve."

"Okay, maybe they weren't necessarily waiting for you specifically. No, I guess not. Not really. But still, they were waiting for what you are, not who you are. That's what they were doing. So that explains it."

"Excuse me, Michael, but what did you mean by 'what you are'?" Joshua posed.

"Oh, come now. We all know who these two young men are. Let's not be coy, my friend." When Joshua returned a blank stare, Michael's attitude shifted somewhat. He looked at my brother and me and asked, "You haven't told him, have you?"

"Told me what?" Joshua demanded before Michael could raise a hand to object.

I glanced at Maelduin and he silently gave me his permission. "Joshua, you know how, at the end of the book we read, there were those four essences born from the Aseraphim Starz?"

“Yes,” he replied, drawing out his answer.

“And those four are the basic forces of mankind; Love, Hate, Order and Chaos?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Maelduin and I are two of those essences in human form.”

“Uh-huh,” he mumbled. After a few seconds of deep reflection, he asked, “And what makes you think that?”

“*You see. This is why I didn’t want to tell him earlier,*” Maelduin chided in my mind. I quietly growled back at him, eliciting a small laugh.

I went to explain but Michael cut me off. “Joshua, my friend, these two are who they claim. Oh, yes indeed. The next, the chosen, the future, whatever you want to call them. These are two of the most revered creatures on the planet. Oh, my yes. Granted, they aren’t as revered as they used to be. No, no, definitely not. In time, though, in time that will change. Just one of many, many changes to come.”

“This can’t be,” Joshua muttered in astonishment.

“It is,” I told him. “We didn’t know ourselves until a few weeks ago.”

“Didn’t know ourselves,” Michael broke in. “Well put. Very well put.”

I threw him a nasty glare that shut him up immediately. When I looked back at Joshua, he was visibly shaken. “There’s no need to worry, Joshua. My brother and I are still finding out who we are and what we can do. Michael here probably knows more about us than we do.”

“Oh, I doubt that. I doubt that very much,” Michael responded. “However, I was wondering if it might be too much to ask for a private moment of your time. The both of you, of course. Let’s let Joshua sort these things out for himself for a moment. Solitude and all, peace and quiet to set his mind straight.”

Before we could answer, he was up and out from behind his desk again. He opened a door beside a bookcase and waved for us to follow him. Maelduin assured Joshua all would be fine before following Michael through the door. It led to a smaller room with bare walls and four chairs. We each took a seat, and Michael resumed talking right away.

“Joshua will find the time alone most beneficial, I’m sure. I know I would in his situation. Oh my yes,” he rambled.

I cut him off with a sharp wave of my hand. “You knew he didn’t know about us, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did! He would’ve been acting much, much differently had he been informed. He was too calm, too composed. No, no, I knew he was ignorant of your true identities.”

“So why the charade?” Maelduin asked.

“Just in case, dear boy, just in case. It was a long trek to Rendell, was it not? The three of you discussed many, many things I’m sure. I could’ve been wrong. Maybe you let it slip on the way in. It was a possibility. Pretty sure I wasn’t wrong though. Pretty sure, not totally.”

“Do you ever relax?” I wearily asked.

“Of course!” he elatedly replied. “You have to understand, I’ve been waiting for this my entire life. It’s not every day you meet the person that marks the fulfillment of your destiny. It most certainly is not.”

“Your destiny?”

“Not now, not now. There’s plenty of time for that later. Much later. I don’t want to bore you with the details of my fate when your fates are so much more interesting. Infinitely more interesting.”

“You know what’s to become of us? How?” Maelduin excitedly asked.

“I know many things, sir. Many things. I know of your past, your future. Not the present so much, but that’s always changing anyway. I know of your origins, of your mother and father. Your real mother and father, not the people charged to raise you. I knew them too though, so I guess that counts.”

“How did you know them?”

“Who? Allen and Nichole? Good friends! Well, not exactly good friends I guess. More like business associates. Different sides of the same equation.”

“They were clerics, did you know that?” I asked.

Michael let out a hearty laugh and replied, “Only the two luckiest clerics in any realm. Everyone put in for that job. Raising two children of the Aseraphim! My my, you can’t imagine how many people wanted that responsibility. I was never in the running, much to my dismay. Shame, really.”

“I thought so. Another cleric,” I sighed.

“Another? You’ve met another cleric? Who?”

“I didn’t get a name. Seeing as how it was a dream, I didn’t think about it. Next time I get a strange little man reading to me in my dreams, I’ll be sure to ask him to identify himself.”

“He read to you?” Michael asked breathlessly. “What did he say?”

“That’s none of your business,” I flatly stated.

“Of course it’s not. My apologies. But, yes, I am indeed a cleric. Being an advisor to the queen, it’s come in handy. I’m able to steer Itna in the proper direction without taking direct action. Hide in the shadows,

as it were. Also, no one knows more about demons than me in all of Rendell. Same goes for the Aseraphim. Maybe Joshua knows more now, depending on what you've told him. I'm going to have to have a long sit-down with him, poke around in his brain for a little while."

"So those people that knew we were coming..." Maelduin prodded.

"Oh, they are your most loyal servants. This town was built on a foundation of good. Nothing lasts forever, though. Nothing at all. Help is needed to get Rendell back where it should be. That's where the two of you come in. They want you to show them the way, Maelduin. You are their beacon in the darkness, so to speak. The queen has been expecting your arrival too. She's very excited to meet you, Maelduin. Again, you Patrick, not so much."

"What could a queen possibly want with us?" I pondered.

"A queen is nothing compared to the two of you," Michael readily replied. "She knows the power of the Aseraphim. The power the two of you have she can only guess at. But she knows you are powerful nonetheless. She may try to elicit your help. I believe that's her intention."

Maelduin was about to continue asking questions when I spoke in his mind. *"I've had just about enough of this guy. Let's get out of here."*

Maelduin nodded agreement and we asked Michael if we could be excused. He informed us we could end the conversation, but he had to take us to Queen Itna once we were done. My brother and I decided to stop this infuriating exchange and take our chances with the queen. Michael sprang out of his seat and bounced over to the door leading back to Joshua.

Our friend was exactly where we'd left him. A puzzled look dominated his face as he sat still as stone, staring at the painting behind the desk.

"Joshua, are you ready to go? Have to get these two to the queen," Michael informed him as we reentered the room.

"Sure," he replied offhandedly. Pointing at the artwork, Joshua asked, "Is that a new painting?"

I walked over to the piece in question and examined it closely. It was obviously a rendering of Rendell. The main square was the centerpiece, with a screaming throng of people standing around a large stack of burnt wood. Rising up from the middle of the pile of wood was a stone pillar with chains dangling from it. Spots of dark red were easily visible on the cuffs of the chains. It was a sacrificial pyre. No one was currently being offered up to die. Upon closer inspection, I saw that the

cuffs of the chains were broken, cracked straight in half. The crowd no longer seemed to be clamoring for blood as I'd first thought. Now, to my eyes, it looked as if the villagers were screaming in terror.

Michael grinned from ear to ear as he answered Joshua's query. "New? Most certainly not. Very old, very old indeed."

"But it's a different..." Joshua began in protest but Michael cut him off.

"No time for that. No time. We have to get these two to the grand chamber. Shouldn't keep the queen waiting. Not a good idea at all."

I came out from behind the desk and rejoined the others. Michael led us down the winding corridors of the palace until we reached Itna's grand chamber. Four guards stood watch at the door. They didn't like the looks of me and acted accordingly. It wasn't until Michael explained we were all expected that he let us pass. I couldn't help notice all four guards kept a close eye on me as we entered the chamber.

Itna's chamber was enormous, with garish chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and elaborate silver candelabras lining the walls. Every candle was lit, casting the entire room in bright, almost blinding light. Pews lined either side of the aisle leading to Itna's throne. No one was currently sitting in the pews, causing our footsteps to echo loudly as we walked along the stone aisle. We followed Michael to the steps leading to the queen herself. He bowed reverently and I saw Joshua and Maelduin do the same. Since she wasn't my queen, I did not bow to her.

Itna was seated on her throne awaiting our arrival. Her seat was forged in gold and beset with jewels of every color imaginable. It sparkled in the bright glow of the candles, casting dazzling colors throughout the massive room. Itna rose from her throne and approached us. She wore a flowing dress of silver, highlighted with trim as blue as the sky. Though she appeared fairly young, no older than her mid-thirties, her hair was snow white. Her ashen skin easily matched her pale hair, making her seem much older. It was her cold blue eyes that stood out. Her icy stare sent a chill throughout my body. Her expression changed when she gazed at Maelduin. Though Maelduin accepted her, my first impression was of a cold and calculating shrew.

She offered her thanks to Michael after he introduced us and dismissed him. I was waiting for her to do the same to Joshua but she let him remain in our company. Our friend took a few steps back, allowing Itna a clear view of the two of us.

"It is, without a doubt, an honor to have you in Rendell," she said, staring fondly at Maelduin.

"The honor is ours, Queen Itna," he replied.

She casually brushed off his sincere proclamation. "I'm sure. Still, there is much to discuss. I believe Michael has told you that we know of your origins, correct?"

"Correct," I replied.

Itna snapped her head in my direction and looked upon me with distaste in her eyes. Without a word, she resumed speaking to Maelduin. "I only require the presence of one of you, so why don't you ask your brother to leave us?"

"I want to be here," I commented.

Itna didn't even bother looking at me this time. "Would it be possible for you to grant my request?" she implored of Maelduin.

"Maybe it would be best..." Maelduin spoke in my mind.

I stopped him with a mean look and replied, *"Don't you start with that crap!"*

Maelduin sighed and repeated, *"Maybe it would be best if you stayed quiet for now. Let me handle this."*

My burning glare dug into my brother as I let him know I was agreeing to his terms, but only temporarily. He turned back to Itna and told her I was staying.

"So be it," she groaned dismissively. "Let me tell you a little about Rendell, Lord Maelduin. This city was the first one built in this part of Ireland. It has withstood the tests of time. Wars, famine, disease, Rendell has survived them all. My great-great-grandmother, the late Queen Lucretia, fought back against the tide of evil seeking to drown Rendell in its misery. She succeeded in many ways, none more important than driving the dark elements from our midst. For years we have abided by her teachings and no vile creature has set foot in Rendell since. Until now, I presume."

I was about to give this woman a piece of my mind, but Maelduin begged for restraint. When I said nothing, Maelduin asked, "Her lessons have paid off, for to the best of my knowledge no evil creature stands in Rendell at this moment." He glanced at me, then back at the queen, just to make his point.

"If you say so," she responded glibly with another flippant wave of her hand. "My advisors, many of whom are clerics of the varied realms, tell me the two of you are indeed children of the Aseraphim Starz. We have been awaiting your arrival for generations. You are to lead Rendell into the next age, an age of love and peace, of respect for one

another and charity for all. I've been told you've seen the crowds gathered in your wake. The citizens of Rendell are eager to hear your wisdom and follow your example, Lord Maelduin. These are your people as much as they are mine. In the same vein, your brother's words should be chosen with caution, for many people here will not care what such a man as Patrick has to say."

"I'm right here," I softly growled, catching Maelduin's attention. I could feel his nervousness and apprehension, fearing I might do something rash. To be honest, killing Queen Itna didn't fall under my definition of a rush to judgment.

"It would be an honor to speak to the citizens of Rendell. However, I'm not sure what I could say that would make any difference," Maelduin informed her.

"It is not so much what you have to say at this point, it is what you must do," Itna replied.

"And that is?"

"For the last few years, we have been in a continuous struggle with the dragons of the south mountains, as well as the giants in the west. The giants have slowed their attacks lately but the dragons have never relented. My soldiers have slain many of these beasts, never allowing one to breach our walls. Unfortunately, it is never enough. There is believed to be a den in the mountains where the dragons rest. We need a valiant warrior to find this den and slay the remaining dragons. Lord Maelduin, if you can accomplish this arduous task, there will be great reward. I will see to it personally that you receive the finest training in the art of combat. Also, I will allow you to read all you want about the Aseraphim. Our entire library will be open to you and you alone. Access will be given to you that some of my own advisors do not possess. In fact, my advisors will be at your beckon call at all times, should you need clarification. You will become a paladin for the church of Light and fight the never-ending battle against all evil."

"And what of Patrick?" he asked.

Itna hesitated before asking, "Are you certain you wish for your brother to accompany you?"

"Where I go, he goes," he assured her. "Besides, he's a much better fighter than I am, to be perfectly honest with you."

"In that case, I'm sure we can find some way to reward him for assisting you if he survives," she uncaringly replied.

"Know this, Itna. I will come back," I told her. My tone conveyed every ounce of my anger with this woman, which was reaching

a boiling point. She took one look in my eyes and stepped back towards her throne.

“Please tell your brother to address me as queen!” she demanded of Maelduin. “I will not allow such disrespect from a lowly peon such as him.”

That was all I needed to hear. I went to step forward to confront her but was stayed by my brother’s hand.

“Queen Itna, Patrick is just as noble as I and you should show him the respect due him if you wish to have it returned,” he politely, but firmly, responded.

“Of course,” she replied insincerely to his rebuke. “If you need any supplies, such as weaponry or armor, go to any shop in Rendell. They have standing orders to fulfill your requests before all others. I will see that they are sufficiently reimbursed for any expenses, so there’s no need to worry about paying them.”

“That’s very generous. Thank you,” my brother said. His face was the picture of solitude, yet I knew better. My voice was shouting in his head about how much I wanted to strangle this woman and choke the very life out of her. “Will that be all?”

“I see no need to detain you any longer. Please, explore my lovely town and all it has to offer. Lord Maelduin, Rendell opens its hearts and its doors to you.”

“That’s very kind,” he hurriedly said while grabbing me by the arm and turning away. Joshua had been so quiet during our time with the queen that I’d almost forgotten he was still there. He turned to leave with us but was called back by Itna. She wanted a few moments in private with him. Seeing as how he couldn’t say no to his queen, we told him we’d meet him outside.

The crowd was gone, much to my relief. We hadn’t said a word to each other as we traversed the halls of the palace. My mind was still filled with images of Itna’s demise at my hands. I didn’t want to let slip something a guard might find offensive anyway. They probably wouldn’t treat me very kindly if they heard what I thought of their queen. Once outside, there was nothing left to stop me.

“What a hateful bitch!” I blurted out.

I expected my brother to admonish me for my outburst. Instead, he looked me in the eye and calmly said, “I understand what you’re saying. She didn’t seem to like you very much. I know what you wanted to do to her, and I don’t completely blame you. I’m just grateful you didn’t. It wasn’t me stopping you either. It was you. You showed tremendous restraint, and let’s face it, you aren’t known for holding back.” My

laughter at his accurate observation brought a smile to his face. Instantly, most of my rage at Itna's rude behavior faded away. "But you showed more than restraint. You knew we'd both be in for a fight if you did what you wanted to. Reason won out, and I can't thank you enough for that.

"No matter what happens in our lives, no matter how long they may be, don't ever lose those two things, Patrick. Reason and restraint. Hold on to those two attributes and you'll be fine."

I still wanted to be mad, to take out my anger, but I found the feeling passing by as I stared into Maelduin's eyes. "I hate you," I lied, chiding him for calming me down when I wanted to stay angry.

"Yeah, I know," he joked back. "So what do you know about dragons?"

"They're big. They're mean. And they sometimes breathe fire." I shrugged and added, "That's about all."

"Looks like we'll need Joshua's help on this one."

"You think he knows enough about dragons to be useful?" I asked.

"He knew a lot about demons. And, if this town has been under attack from dragons for a while I'm sure he's studied up on their kind. If not, he'll probably know someone who has."

We heard the doors of the palace open behind us. Joshua was finally done speaking with the queen and he had an odd look on his face. Without a hint of what they discussed, he asked, "Anyone care for a drink?"

"Aren't we a little young?" Maelduin asked.

I threw my arm around my brother and pulled him close. "Mael, when are you going to learn? We're ageless."

Rather than argue, Maelduin grudgingly relented, allowing Joshua to lead us off to the local tavern, the Lion's Den.

I had never seen the inside of a pub before. Walking into the Lion's Den I wasn't disappointed. The tavern was only half full but with the sun just beginning to set I was sure business would pick up shortly. Most everyone ignored us as we entered, lost in conversations about work, the wife, the kids. No one actually seemed to enjoy sitting around and getting drunk. They all just wallowed in their own misery. Maybe less gloomy people would show up later.

The Lion's Den was decorated with obvious care. Red and yellow tapestries lined every wall, accented by various pieces of weaponry and armaments. I examined everything as we made our way to the other side

of the bar. Above our table was a large gold shield with a startling emblem emblazoned upon it. Before sitting down, Maelduin and I were both drawn to take a closer look. In red, cast into the gold, was a large, ornate letter 'A'. The bottom of the letter had been expanded downward and curved to look like fangs. Three pyramids, one smooth, one with steps and the last with four stone statues, stood in the background.

"That's Vincent's," Maelduin commented quietly.

"I was thinking the same thing. Now, answer this for me. Why was I thinking it?"

"I don't know. But I know we're both right." We gave each other a confused look, which was becoming an all too common expression between us lately. With nothing else to say, we sat down on either side of Joshua.

Joshua beckoned for a barmaid and placed an order of three lagers. I'd stolen some ale from the guard's supply while a slave so I knew what to expect. Maelduin had never imbibed before. I chuckled softly at the thought of my brother getting drunk. I figured he'd be one of those guys that would go around telling everyone how much he loved them.

I heard a door open and saw a side door just a short distance from our table. Two men came in and noticed me looking at them. Both of them were about Joshua's age but that's where all similarities to our friend ended. These two were dirty, as if the mere idea of a bath was sacrilegious. Both men had long, greasy black hair that fell to their shoulders. Faces covered in dirt barely concealed the fact that their chins hadn't met a razor in weeks. Ripped clothes adorned their bodies, completing the image of two lowlifes.

I must've looked too long because one of them pointed at me. "What the hell are you looking at?" he roughly demanded.

"I'm not sure. Let me get back to you on that," I happily replied. Joshua and Maelduin were both quite taken aback by my answer. I thought it was clever.

The newcomer didn't share my sense of humor. He stormed over, friend in tow, and stood at the edge of our table. "You have a problem there, boy-o. You're mouth's getting ahead of your brain, if'n you have one in that ugly head of yours."

I jumped to my feet. I wasn't sure what I would do, but I was eager to find out. Unfortunately, we were interrupted. Our barmaid was returning with our drinks. She saw me standing toe to toe with the walking mound of dirt and began yelling.

"Bradley Malloy, you leave that young man alone!" she warned in a thick brogue. Her accent reminded me of my mother's, as did her

bright red hair and green eyes. "Don't go startin' any trouble a'for you even have one drink."

"Patty, I don't need you tellin' me my business," he yelled back, still staring at me.

"And I don't be needin' you startin' fights in me bar, 'specially with a youngin'. Now leave off!"

He ignored her and said to me, "We're not done here, freak."

I smiled and replied, "You're going to wish we were."

Brad continued to stare at me until Patty grabbed his arm and almost threw him out of our way. His friend quickly followed, needing none of Patty's prodding.

"Thank you, Patty," Joshua said.

"Aye, think nothin' of it. Brad Malloy's been a jackass as long as I known 'im. And that's all me life." She smiled at the three of us and added, "Is there anything else I can be gettin' you boys? Be quick about it. I've only maybe ten minutes left on shift. Lookin' forward to gettin' home and puttin' me feet up after I tend me horses. Been a rough one today, it has."

"I think we're fine for now, Patty. Thanks again."

"Anytime, lovey," she said warmly. She even blew a kiss to Joshua as she walked away.

"I assume you know her?" Maelduin asked, smiling broadly.

"I've known Patty McFarland a long time, yes," he replied, sounding a mite puzzled. "She's never been like that before though."

"You can't tell me she's never stood up to someone in here before today?" I asked in amazement. I could hardly believe ours was the first confrontation she'd witnessed as a barmaid.

"No, she's done that plenty of times," he replied in the same odd tone.

"You mean the flirting?" Maelduin asked. We were still young in terms of years on this plane, so affairs of the heart were still a lesson yet learned.

"Yes, that. She's always been friendly before, but..." Joshua let his words fade away. Even without being able to get into his head like we could with each other, Maelduin and I still knew exactly what he was thinking.

I raised my mug and said proudly, "To Patty!"

"Hear, hear!" Joshua concurred, clinking his glass with mine then Maelduin's.

Maelduin took a small sip and nearly choked. I laughed so hard I almost choked on my drink as well. The mood was getting lighter with

every passing second. Maelduin and Joshua started talking about studies and our family again. I sat there, thinking back over the day's events. Our meeting with Itna replayed in my mind over and over again. Every time it ended differently. Every time, I snuffed the life out of her a different way. My anger was rekindled by my confrontation with Brad. As I finished my drink, wondering what Brad's neck would sound like as it snapped in my hands, I felt the call of nature and asked Joshua where I could relieve myself. He pointed towards the back door and told me there was a room just beside the exit.

I rose and walked over to where Joshua had instructed. Opening the door was tough, for it seemed to be jammed on something. When I finally was able to wrench it open, I instantly regretted it. The room reeked worse than Brad did, and I wasn't sure that was possible. Feces were splattered all over the walls and the floor. I slammed the door shut and opened the one leading outside.

Once outdoors, I ducked around some crates and answered nature's call. I hadn't been standing there for but a few seconds when the door opened. Patty walked out and saw me urinating against the wall of the pub.

I went red with embarrassment and meekly said, "Sorry about this."

"Think nothin' of it, love," she casually replied. "Five years of slingin' drinks in this bar, it ain't nothin' I ain't seen before."

I couldn't stop myself from smiling as she walked away. Not once did she treat me unkindly because of my appearance. She didn't even appear to notice. If she did, she showed no outward signs. I finished up as I wondered why more people couldn't be like Patty. Ready myself to return, I stepped around the crates and went to head back in. As I reached for the door it swung open again. This time, Brad and his companion walked out.

I steeled myself for a fight, waiting for my chance to let out some pent up aggression. Instead, Brad pushed me aside and said, "Out of the way, freak. I'll deal with you later." That said, he marched straight past me and down the same path Patty had taken. I didn't know if Brad and his friend lived in that direction or not. The simple fact was I didn't care. I just had a bad feeling. Instead of rejoining my brother and Joshua inside, I followed Brad.

Great oaks lined the road away from the town proper, casting deep shadows along its path. In short time I began to see farms and realized we were entering the rural section of Rendell. Stands were set up

along the road, empty of goods at this hour. Come morning they would no doubt be filled to overflowing with fresh fruits and vegetables.

I was very careful not to make a sound as I tailed Brad and his friend. They did turn around once to see if anyone was following them. As they spun around, I froze. I was in the shadow of a large oak but was sure there was still enough light to detect my presence. I could surely see them in the midst of the shadows. Instead, they apparently saw nothing that alarmed them and continued on.

They were gaining ground on Patty, who was still unaware she was being followed. They took me by surprise by suddenly sprinting and snatching Patty as she walked along. She was kicking and screaming, struggling to get free from her two assailants. Luckily for her, no one was nearby to hear her cries for help but me.

They dragged her to the relative safety of a barn away from the road. I jumped from shadow to shadow, staying unseen as I tracked my prey. I flashed back to the times Nathaniel had me hunt deer on the castle grounds. I was an excellent tracker, always able to get close enough to my target without a sound. It came in quite handy too. Never once did Nathaniel give me a weapon to bring down an animal. Never once did I return empty handed. I expected the same result now.

I moved with cat-like grace across the field and reached the entrance to the barn undetected. I could hear Patty screaming inside and nearly rushed in blindly. Instead I used some of the common sense my brother had alluded to earlier in the day. I crept up slowly alongside the outer wall of the barn until I reached the corner. I peered around just in time to see Brad knock Patty over the head. She slumped over and slid down the wall she'd been backed into. I heard Brad's friend yell at him and Brad assured him she was still alive. With a quick glance, I saw that she was indeed breathing.

"At least she isn't screaming anymore," Brad's friend said.

"Right. Now get the wench undressed. It's about time this uppity bitch got what's comin' to 'er," Brad ordered as he undid his belt. When his friend hesitated, Brad screamed, "Move it Thomas, or you won't get yer turn."

I decided to wait no longer. My axe had been sheathed for so long it felt like an extension of my body. It was soon time to finally get to use it for what it was made to do. First, I wanted to have a little fun.

I stepped around the corner and yelled to the two would-be rapists, "What's wrong, boys? Can't get one willingly?"

Shadows covered the doorway, shrouding me in their dark embrace. They both wheeled around at the sound of my voice but didn't see me. "Who's there?" Brad called out.

"Someone with some unfinished business to attend to." I stepped forward into a ray of moonlight shining through the loft above. As soon as Brad figured out who it was, a smile graced his lips.

"Boy-o, I am so glad to be seein' you. Now I don't have to go 'round tellin' everyone how you savagely violated dear Miss Patty here. When I show 'em yer dead body, I'll be a bloody hero."

"Brad," I spat out with ample bile as I got near, "all you're going to be when this is all said and done... is bloody."

Before I could deal with Brad, I wanted his ally out of the way. I feigned toward Brad and charged at Thomas. I drove my shoulder into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. I picked him up, carried him across the barn and slammed him into the wall. He fell to the ground, hurt but still conscious.

I wheeled around to see Brad had pulled his pants back up. "Let's settle this then," he called out. "First, do away with your weapon. Let's fight like men, boy-o."

"Sounds good to me," I replied. I unsheathed my axe as I walked calmly towards my quarry and casually let it drop to the hay-covered floor.

I darted at him, swinging forcefully at his jaw. When I connected, I was promptly reminded I was fighting an adult. The guards at Nathaniel's castle were spoiled and soft. They were no match for me. The other slaves never fought with me more than once, having learned enough from one lesson. This was a man who was used to the tough life. A working man, hardened by everyday life outside castle walls. My hand ached a little but I pressed on.

He threw a right hand into my gut, pounding the air out of me. I didn't feel the pain from the contact but still had trouble breathing. I grabbed his fist and twisted his arm. I spun around him and grabbed him by the back of the neck with my free hand. I felt such satisfaction when I ran his head into the pillar supporting the loft. It wasn't enough as he kicked back and hit me in the knee. I stumbled back, releasing my grip on both his wrist and his neck.

We traded blows back and forth for a few minutes, neither one of us getting a great advantage over the other. Apparently, that didn't suit Brad. After I had connected with another powerful shot to the ribs, he withdrew a dagger from his pocket. I was able to move out of the way as he swung the blade at me. He was between me and my axe, giving him a serious edge.

“Let’s end this, boy-o. I’ve had ‘bout enough playin’ around wit you. Gots other items on me agenda, as it were,” he beckoned.

I surveyed the area and saw a chance. I was standing near the wall where Patty had fallen. She had yet to awaken from her assault and I was almost glad she wouldn’t see what I was going to do to this man. I stepped to my left, away from the wall, then darted back when Brad fell for the trick. As I had done so many times in the cellar, I ran towards the wall, planted my feet and ran on it. I was defying gravity itself, running with my body nearly parallel to the floor. I only needed a few steps before I was over Patty and past Brad. I leapt off the wall and dove for my axe. I had seen Patty beginning to stir as I ran past her and wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. Brad didn’t let his shock at my escape slow him down. He was lunging for my axe as well.

I got there well before Brad. As I was falling towards my weapon, I put my hand down flat on the handle and pushed up. My body’s direction instantly changed. My feet were thrown higher into the air, over my head. As my hand was about to slip away from my axe, I grabbed the weapon. I placed it properly in my hands as I finished my mid-air flip. I landed on my feet just as Brad got close. The impact from the height of my acrobatics dropped me to my knees, right where I wanted to be. In one motion, I stood up and impaled Brad in the abdomen.

I pushed the axe in deeper until the blade was halted by Brad’s ribcage. I grinned as a crimson flood washed over my hands. He was barely still alive and I didn’t want to leave the job unfinished. I stood up and twisted my weapon a quarter turn. That ended Brad’s pathetic life. Two large, gaping holes adorned his torso. Blood poured out and with it pieces of tissue and fragments of bone. Vital, life-giving organs dropped in pieces from his ravaged body. I shoved the axe in deeper until I connected with his backbone. Then I leaned back and used the weapon to throw him over my shoulder. He flew from my axe and hit near the top of the far wall with a wet thud. I gazed upon his lifeless body with satisfaction as his bloody mass slowly slid down to the floor. The body came to rest near where I had driven Thomas into the very same wall. I saw Thomas wasn’t sitting around waiting to see how his buddy made out. He was nowhere to be seen.

I stashed my axe and walked over to Patty. She had finally regained her faculties and was staring blankly at the huge streak of blood on the far wall. Her face was ashen, as if all her nightmares had come true all at once.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Get away from me,” she hissed and backed up.

"It's okay. I stopped them. Brad was going to rape you," I explained.

"I don't know that. How do I know that? How do I know you aren't goin' to do the same? Why should I believe you?" She was ranting, talking faster than Michael had earlier in the day.

"Believe what you want, lady," I said crossly. I stormed off and began the trek back to the pub. Patty quickly ran up behind me and grabbed my arm.

"I'm sorry," she said as I turned to face her. "I shouldn't 'ave spoken to you like that. You saved me life and me honor. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," I said, meaning every word of it. I had a feeling a lot of other people would have the same initial doubts she did. I didn't think they'd be as willing to change their minds. I asked Patty if it was safe for her to finish her walk home alone. I wanted to get back to Maelduin. She assured me she was okay and we parted ways.

Maelduin had, to my surprise, remained silent while I was dealing with Brad. Now that it was over, I expected a flood of criticism. When none came, I went beyond mere surprise into total astonishment. I entered the back door of the Lion's Den and saw that the crowd had definitely grown since I'd left.

"Patrick, over here!" Joshua called out. "You get lost or something?" They were sitting in the same place as before. I couldn't figure out why Joshua was acting as if I were stupid.

I got to the table and glared at Joshua. "You think I couldn't remember where our table was?" I heatedly asked.

"No, Patrick," he practically whimpered. "I was just joking. You were gone so long I thought maybe you forgot where the table was. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"Take it easy, Patrick," Maelduin advised. "He didn't mean anything by it."

I looked at Joshua and saw fear in his eyes. I wanted to continue to goad him, to see if I could change his mind again and make him think I actually was a demon. I restrained myself when Joshua, cowering in mock fright to add some levity to it all, reached out from as far as he could reach to hand me another lager. I took the offered drink and he snapped his arm back. I finally cracked a smile, causing Joshua to start laughing.

"I haven't been gone all that long. How many has he had?" I asked my brother.

"This is only his third. From what he said after you left, it's the most he's ever had to drink in his life."

I raised my glass to propose another toast. “To Joshua, our kind and generous host.”

The three of us tapped our mugs together and drank. It felt great to sit back and relax after what had happened. Itna’s speech and treatment of me brought out a desire to simply hurt someone. Brad gave me that outlet. In my estimation, it was the most remarkable day of my young life so far.

Chapter 8

Maelduin and I had to help get Joshua back to his home after our evening out at the pub. He only had four drinks but was finding the simple act of walking to be extremely tricky. Not once did he mention his conversation with Itna. I wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing. I had to assume if their talk led him to get drunk, his mind must've been severely troubled. What the problem was would have to wait for morning.

There was only one other bedroom in the house but my brother and I were used to sharing. Sleep did not come easily for either of us, so we chose to stay awake a while longer. I was prepared for him to scold me for what I did to Brad. Instead he only complained about the brutality of my actions. He even admitted he would've been hard pressed not to kill him too. It was just the way I did it. Granted, Brad did meet his end in a most gruesome way. I thought it was quite fitting. He lived as slime in the world. He died as slime on the wall of a barn. My logic only dismayed Maelduin all the more. My brother's only other complaint was having to excuse himself when Brad and I had our fight. When Brad connected the first time, Maelduin hadn't been totally prepared. After that, he went out back to wait it out.

We talked through the night about other events of the day. Maelduin told me about what happened at the pub while I was gone. Apparently, it was the most festive that place had been in ages. Everyone was dancing and singing from the moment they stepped in the door. All dour appearances vanished in the entranceway before one drink could be served.

We finally brought the topic back around to Itna and her request. Killing a dragon wasn't something we'd prepared ourselves for. We had never even seen one. The sun began to peek into the house as we scoured the bookshelves for something about dragons. We still hadn't had any luck when Joshua awoke.

To say his mood was unpleasant wouldn't accurately describe his attitude. At no time was he in any way rude or inconsiderate. He merely had a pounding headache and begged us to stop asking questions long enough for him to get a cup of tea into his body. You could see he wanted to yell. He simply couldn't bring himself to do it. I had a lot of admiration for our friend Joshua. Though he thought I was a demon upon our first meeting, and I really didn't give him many reasons to think

otherwise, he came around. He looked past my appearance and his own apprehension to give me a chance. Since then, all had been well.

The three of us sat at a small table in the dining room as Joshua slowly sipped a cup of tea. "I've never been drunk before in my entire life," he groaned.

"So why did you start now?" I asked.

Joshua lowered his head and moaned. In a barely audible mumble, I heard, "I can't tell you."

"Just one of those days, huh? It happens, my friend," Maelduin commented.

Joshua looked up at him wearily. His unsteady gaze met my brother's gleaming blue eyes. "No. I mean, I can't tell you. Queen's orders."

"Fine," I said, not caring one bit about what Itna had to say. "If you can't tell us that, how about you tell us about dragons?"

Joshua gulped down the last of his tea and poured himself another. "Well, let's start with what you know," he prodded unenthusiastically.

"Big, mean and they breathe fire," I answered briskly.

"That's all?" he sighed.

"That's all." My smile probably wasn't helping his headache. The more I thought about it, the more I was looking forward to battling the dragons. Since we couldn't die, at least not permanently, there was no way they could win. We'd just keep coming back until we were victorious.

"You don't know much." He raised his empty hand to stop me before I could respond. "No insult intended. Dragons are a lot more than big, mean fire breathers. They're majickal. Their very blood flows with majick. Spellcasters of all stripes thirst for dragon's blood. Better still, the eye. That's where the power is. Very majickal."

"What do you know about majick?" Maelduin asked.

"Not much. I saw your spellbooks, but they made no sense to me at all."

"I'll have to give you a few lessons in return for all your hospitality."

"That's not necessary," Joshua demurred.

"Joshua, give up now," I advised. "If he says he's going to do it, it will be done. Most stubborn person in the world."

"Look who's talking?" he blurted out and we both started laughing.

Joshua was not amused. He held his hands over his ears to dampen our merriment. “Do you mind?” he whimpered desperately. We quickly apologized and asked him to continue on about the dragons.

“Dragons,” he resumed, “are the most revered beasts on all of Earth. Their blood and their eyes are not the only parts of their body worth a king’s ransom. Their scales make practically impenetrable armor. Claws from their feet can cut through a man as easily as a fish cuts through the water. Their teeth, as tips of arrows, can enter a tree from one side and exit the other unscathed.

“Now, that’s what man can do with various parts of a dragon. Guess what a dragon can do with them.”

This was not what we wanted to hear. I didn’t need to get into my brother’s mind to know what he was thinking. He was nervous. He had to be because I certainly was. My anxiety only made me more eager to head to the mountains and find some dragons. Maelduin assuredly did not feel the same way.

I looked at Joshua, a sly smirk on my face. I chuckled and said, “You aren’t a very good drunk. You’re very cranky the next morning.”

Joshua’s smirked back as he replied, “I’m a fine drunk for never having been drunk before. And as someone who will never be again, I think I can be given some latitude for my behavior.”

“You’d better sober up fast. We’re leaving soon,” I informed him.

“Leaving? We? What?” he stammered in reply.

“I mean, you can stay here if you want. Maybe Philip and his buddies could even stop by for a visit.”

That wiped the smirk from his face and fast. “So when do we leave?”

I turned to Maelduin and said, “Could you help the poor boy? I’ll scrounge for supplies in the kitchen. You look for anything of use while you get him together. And don’t forget his weapon.”

“Yes sir!” he mockingly answered back, jumping to his feet and standing at full attention. It reminded me too much of being a slave for me to find it funny. I flashed a faint smile and waved Maelduin on to his task.

It took a little longer to get ready and moving than I’d hoped for. I couldn’t find much food to take along. When Joshua located me in the kitchen, he was cleaned up and noticeably more awake. When I asked him where all the food was, he told me what I saw was what he had. Since he lived alone, he never kept much food around. Most of it would spoil before he could eat it. When Maelduin overheard this, he told me to

let Joshua have the food. We would go without. Since he was the only one that would be eating on our trek, Joshua got the dubious honor of carrying the supplies.

We were about to leave when I asked Maelduin where our other bags were. He directed me to their locale and I quickly grabbed the sack containing the gauntlets I'd found in Nathaniel's office. I didn't know why I wanted to bring them along. I only knew it was a good idea. As I carried the bag, I could feel an eruption of rage simmering inside my mind, like the lakes and rivers of molten lava ever flowing beneath the earth. Though the crisp air of daybreak was a bit chilly, I was drenched in sweat.

During the night, Maelduin and I had decided to head for the mountains right away and forgo Itna's offer of armaments. We wanted to get this over with and continue on our way. Joshua led the way out of town and onward to the mountain path. Our lecture on dragons continued as soon as we left town. His informative lectures were helpful and worrisome at the same time. Not all dragons apparently breathed fire. Some spit a sick, green mist that would eat away at the skin. Flesh bubbled and fell off in large chunks at its touch. Still others spewed out a thick brownish sludge that infected the dragon's victim with fatal diseases. Even if you killed such a beast, if it infected you first it could still kill an entire village from beyond the grave. Joshua went on and on about the different types of dragons. There were ice breathers, wind blowers, and even a few that shot lightning from their giant maws.

I wasn't very encouraged by what Joshua had to tell us. To the best of his knowledge, most of the dragons in this area were fire breathers. Still, he couldn't say for sure if there were other breeds or not. Majickal creatures with rock hard scales, razor sharp claws and teeth like metal spikes were not what I had been expecting. The fact they could spew forth all manner of hazardous material from their mouths only compounded the bad news. Then Joshua gave us the good news.

Though their hides were tough, they weren't impenetrable. Rendell's guards had brought down a few over the last few years. Joshua admitted it was mostly blind luck that felled the giant beasts. Lessons were learned on how to defeat them, so luck or not it was all well and good. The most vulnerable parts were the neck and upper chest as well as where their wings joined with their bodies. When Joshua mentioned wings, he quickly clarified that most dragons couldn't actually fly. Only newborns and extremely old ones had that ability.

The journey to the dragon's den took longer than expected. We reached the base of the mountain and set up camp just as the sun was

setting. Though I could see in the dark, Maelduin refused to let me climb partway to the den to see what awaited us. A fierce yet silent debate raged for a few minutes before I finally conceded. Caution dictated we stay together, but my capacity for caution was limited.

Joshua spoke more of dragons and their tendencies well into the night. By the time he fell asleep, we had received an extensive education on the topic. I felt more sure of our task now. Having a better grasp of what we were about to face eased my mind. I yawned and stretched, ready for a good night's sleep myself before doing battle in the morning. Maelduin again suggested one of us take the watch and again volunteered to go first. I was in no mood to argue. He stoked the fire as I drifted off to sleep.

Considering I fully expected to die in the near future, maybe even more than once, I slept deeply and dreamlessly. Only once could I remember stirring during the night. I heard strange words echoing in my head in a language I didn't understand. I knew the words I was hearing held power. I nearly jumped up to see if someone was casting a spell on us. It was the sense of calm that accompanied the words that kept me at rest. I was feeling my brother's mood with those words, and it was relaxed. I swiftly curled back up and drifted into a deep sleep once again, awaiting my shift on guard.

When Maelduin finally woke me, I was startled to see the sun rising in the eastern sky. Before I could rebuke my brother for not waking me earlier, I noticed Joshua still asleep. He was out cold, not so much as a twitch from underneath his blanket.

"Are you going to wake him or should I?" I asked my brother.

"Neither. He's staying here." Maelduin was extinguishing the fire as he answered and never even made eye contact as he spoke.

"Aren't you even going to ask him if he wants to join us?"

"No need."

I was taken aback by his casual answers to what I considered important questions. Since Joshua was the expert on dragons and knew the terrain, he was going to be integral to our success. I explained all this as I went to wake Joshua. When I threw back the blanket, I leapt back in shock, unsheathing my axe as I did.

"What happened to him?" I yelled.

"Calm down, Patrick," Maelduin sedately said. "It's only temporary. We don't know how long we're going to be fighting these dragons and I didn't want anything to happen to him while we were gone."

“You turned him to stone?” I was stunned. Joshua looked like a statue. He was curled on the ground, a look of peace on his face. Maelduin had apparently cast the spell during the night while he slept to get around any and all objections.

“As I said, it’s only temporary. I have a spell to reverse it. You said it yourself, brother. We can get killed as many times as we want and still come back. Joshua does not have that good fortune. I don’t want him getting hurt.”

“That’s a good point,” I agreed. “Still, you could’ve told me you were going to do it. Seeing him like that without knowing ahead of time...”

“Caught you off guard. Yes, I apologize. Won’t happen again if I can help it.”

“Thank you. Now, what’s the plan?”

“The plan is, follow the trail until we find an entrance to the mountain itself. I assume it’ll be higher up on the mountain. I’m going to leave most of the tough climbing to you. You’re more adept. We can find easier footing for me to take once you find the entrance. Once we’re both there and ready, we’ll go in together and do what needs done.”

“Not much of a plan there, Mael,” I commented.

“We’ll know more once we find the entrance. Right now, it’s the best I could come up with using what we know.”

“Then let’s do this.”

I took one last glance at Joshua as Maelduin covered him with leaves and shrubbery. Though nothing could kill him in his present state, we didn’t want someone deciding to carry him off in our absence. Best to hide him away until we returned.

A ragged path curved up the face of the mountain. To our left was the sheer cliff face, extending upwards into the low clouds. To our right was the ground, growing farther and farther away with each step up the mountain. We made good time while on the path but soon found our goings more difficult. A large boulder had fallen onto the trail. There was no easy way around it. It was jammed in tight against the mountain wall and overhung the edge of the cliff by a good five feet. Maelduin asked for suggestions and I only had one.

I walked over to the boulder and closely examined it. I ran my hand along the boulder, searching for anything to grip so I could climb over. It was smooth, almost polished, leaving my search empty. I leaned against the mountain and reached my hand around the giant stone. My hand, though encountering only more smoothness, stuck to the rock. I

put my other hand on the mountain and pulled myself up. Slowly, I crawled up the mountainside and atop the boulder.

I peered down at Maelduin, taking extra care to keep my footing. The top of the boulder was just as smooth as the rest, making it very slippery. Even lying on my stomach I could barely reach down and grab my brother's hand. Grabbing him and pulling him up was going to be tough. I unsheathed my axe and gripped it near the blades. I lowered the handle of my weapon down to Maelduin and told him to hold on tight. Once he was ready, I slowly crawled backwards, slithering my way down the opposite side of the huge glossy stone. As gravity took hold I started sliding faster. Just as I hit the ground I saw Maelduin appear atop the boulder. He was on his stomach, gliding along the face of the rock. He let go of the axe and, with the grace of a dancer, slid head first down the remainder of the boulder. I stepped out of the way as he neared the bottom, where he shot off the rock, dove head first into a flip and sprung to his feet. That earned a round of applause and he returned my compliment with a severely exaggerated bow.

I remarked to Maelduin that the boulder was way too polished and much too securely in place to have happened by accident. He agreed, adding that the dragons' den must be close by. When he mentioned their den, a great plume of steam arose a few hundred feet above us. It shot upwards, not out from the side of the mountain. Still, we had a good idea of our goal now. It was just a matter of getting there.

I had expected a few dragons to be guarding the path to their den. That there wasn't was strangely disappointing. I could've used a good warm-up before the main battle. Alas, the only creatures we saw on the way up were large lizard-like things. Most just ran away but one had some courage. It charged at us from its nest in the mountainside. I saw Maelduin draw his sword but told him I'd handle it. The lizard was about the size of a hunting hound but much faster. It ran at us as I stood stoically in its way. As it neared, I stepped forward and swung my leg. My timing was perfect. With one swift kick, I sent the lizard flying off the side of the mountain. Its screeches and wails echoed back up the mountain. To me, it sounded like sweet music. I started back up the path as Maelduin watched it impact with the ground below. I found its nest, which contained three eggs. I pulled out my axe and smashed the eggs to pieces. Maelduin didn't approve but I didn't want any more of those things running around. The animal did have sharp teeth and claws. It just didn't get a chance to use them.

A thunderous crash shook the mountain and thankfully neither of us was near the edge. We both struggled to maintain our footing and

dashed off to see what had happened. We rounded a corner and saw several boulders, one stacked on top of the other. I knew I could climb up without much trouble. Getting Maelduin over would be a problem though. And we didn't know how far back the boulders went along the path. It was my turn to ask if he had any ideas. He winked at me and said he did.

He reached into his satchel and got out a spellbook. I hadn't seen this one before. The one he normally used had a brown leather cover. This one was leather also but tanned a golden color. He opened it and a column of sunshine shone down on the open pages. I took a step back so he'd have some room to work. He read a spell from the book that caused the sunlight streaming into the book to shoot out at the boulders. The light slid down the surface of the rocks and illuminated the shadows underneath. The light spread like wildfire under the polished stones. Soon, the boulders levitated into the air on a cushion of pure light. Maelduin, book still open, casually led the way forward. Gigantic boulders hovered above our heads as we continued on the path. I openly admitted my nervousness to my brother, just so he didn't misinterpret the yelling I was doing in his head. His amusement didn't help. When we cleared the last stone, he turned back and closed the book. The boulders came crashing back down to the ground. Some hopped off the edge of the cliff and rolled down to the ground below. I couldn't tell what side of the mountain we were on anymore, as the path had twisted and turned so much I'd lost track. I could only hope Joshua wasn't resting at the bottom on this side.

Clear of our latest obstruction, I proceeded to shout at my brother for not doing that before. He told me he wanted to save up his strength for anything big. This was assuredly bigger, he remarked, so his planning had been for the best. His being right only made me angrier.

Onward and upward, we inched ever closer to where we'd seen the eruption of steam. As we neared, we saw it was not the entrance we were looking for. The path leveled off, forming a large plateau. Dividing this plane was a large crack. We approached the crevice with care and peered in. Regrettably, there was no straight view inside. Against Maelduin's wishes, I slithered inside the opening and crawled my way downward through the maze of rock. I hung on by one hand to the tiniest piece of shelf and swung my legs over to another stable mound of rock, defying all laws of gravity. When I at last came to an open expanse, I had a bird's eye view of the dragon's den.

I scrambled back up through the network of stone passages and emerged to find my brother gone. I tried to sense where he was when I

saw him running back towards me. He had found the door to the den. When I told him I found the back door, we excitedly sat down to make a plan.

I wanted to launch a two pronged attack. He could go in the front door while I dropped from in from above. The element of surprise would give us an advantage. Of course, he had other ideas. Going back to something Joshua had told us, he reminded me that dragons were not only fierce beasts but intelligent too. He agreed to the two pronged aspect, but wanted to work his side of things differently. He was going to request a meeting with their leader and try to negotiate a peace deal. I argued that we did not come all this way to talk to them. We were asked to rid Rendell of them. Though I could care less what happened to Itna personally, we had made a promise. That's when my brother did something that would forever be etched into my memory. He laughed.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"I never promised to slay the dragons, Patrick."

"Mael, I was there. I heard it."

"No. You heard her ask. When she did, I asked about your role, remember?"

I thought back to our meeting with Itna. I was so furious at the bitch that I didn't really pay much attention to what they were saying. With my brother thinking about the conversation as well, it made recalling it all much easier. Now that I could replay it in my head, I found he never did agree to slay the dragons.

"You changed the topic?" I said, dumbfounded.

"Of course. I don't want to kill anything if I can help it. After what Joshua told us about them, my feelings couldn't be more just. These are majickal creatures, Patrick. Killing them would be a travesty. If we can work out an accord, maybe they can exist in harmony with the people of Rendell."

Maelduin's blue eyes shone in all their brilliance as he spoke. There was no way I was going to convince him to kill these beasts. I had come here looking for a fight and still expected to get one.

"I'll make you a deal, brother," I said. "We'll do it your way. You go knock on the door and see if they'll answer. If you aren't burnt to a crisp on the doorstep and get in, we'll give diplomacy a chance. I'll tell you now, I don't think it'll work. You get one chance at this. The first sign of trouble, I'm dropping down. After that, it's kill or be killed. Agreed?"

He smiled and said, "Agreed. No dropping in until it's absolutely necessary."

He turned and went to return to the door when I grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "You agreed to my plan of using our immortality," I told him.

"I did. And if we need it, we'll use it." He tried to leave again, but I still had a firm hold of his arm.

"You didn't want me to go up the mountain last night when we first arrived lest I find the dragons and kill them, right?"

He bowed his head and meekly replied, "Basically."

"And the watch?"

"I didn't want you running up there during the night while I was asleep."

I cuffed my hand under his chin and lifted his head. My gaze bore into him as I firmly pointed out, "You tricked me."

"And if you think that's easy when someone else has full access to your mind, let me tell you, you'd be wrong." The smile faded from his lips as he concluded with one clear truth. "And never once did I lie."

There was no fear, no terror in his eyes. He knew in his heart I wouldn't do anything to him. Besides, he'd told the truth. He always did. I released my grip and pushed him away. "Get going. You've got one chance to make this work."

Freed from my grasp, Maelduin made his way back along the path towards the den's door. I slid back into the crevice and made my way back to where I'd been. I looked around and saw I was in the ceiling of a cavernous room. Dragons milled about below me, weaving in and out of stone pillars formed naturally by the cave. A few small piles of gold and jewels sat unguarded in each corner of the room. Other than that it looked like an ordinary cave, just much, much larger.

Maelduin had yet to make his presence known. I could see the door from my vantage point. What interested me more was the ceiling. The maze of fissures continued to the far end of the room and beyond. At that end was another door and if needed, I would be able to sneak my way around up here and get into that room unnoticed.

There was a loud rapping sound at the door, making all the dragons scramble. They lined up on either side to await their caller. A large red dragon, easily thirty feet in height, approached the closed door. I shut my eyes and placed myself behind Maelduin's eyes.

I saw the large door in front of me and watched as it slowly opened inward. Before me stood the dragon, its smallish wings unfurled. The sight of it at this range was awe inspiring, and I knew Maelduin felt the same way.

Once my brother had composed himself, he opened his arms to show he was not wielding a weapon. "I come only to talk to the one who leads you. I mean none of you any harm," he cried out for all the beasts to hear.

The red dragon ducked his head down and stepped forward. His head was nearly as large as my brother's body. He maneuvered his head as close to Maelduin as he could. His hot breath coursed over his body, causing him to perspire. After a few sniffs, he retreated to the doorway and said, "Who are you and by what right do you seek council with Dorma?"

"My name is Maelduin McFaen and my pedigree is my right. That, however, is a matter of discussion for Dorma alone. Let me assure you, I am worthy of your leader's company. I have been sent at the request of Queen Itna of Rendell. But know that I do not do her bidding. My motivations are my own."

The dragon stepped back into the cavern and said, "Enter. I will speak with Dorma on your behalf."

Maelduin confidently walked into the dragon's den. Every set of eyes was focused on him. Dragons of all colors lined the corridor to Dorma's chamber. The tallest looked to be around forty feet while the smallest was a mere ten. Ten feet was still twice our height, and we didn't breathe fire. The red dragon told Maelduin to stop at the center of the room. The door shut behind him with a loud bang.

I opened my eyes and looked down at the scene below. Maelduin was nearly directly beneath me. The red dragon in front of him opened the large door and walked in. It closed behind him, leaving Maelduin alone with ten dragons. They were all behind him, staring holes into his back. He stood erect, proud, and unafraid. This was a man determined to see a non-violent solution to this problem. A part of me didn't want him to succeed.

Maelduin was concentrating fully on the task at hand, giving me a little time to myself. I pondered the fact that I didn't want him to reach a peaceful solution. I knew it would be best for everyone. To be able to talk to dragons and strike an agreement with them would be an extraordinary accomplishment. Yet Maelduin had made sure I'd have enough pent up anger to fight the dragons. I needed to let it out and this was going to be the best option. The only other one that sprang to mind was taking out Itna, and I just knew Maelduin wouldn't like that at all.

The door to Dorma's parlor opened again and the red dragon emerged. He told Maelduin to follow him and he made his way forward.

I grabbed onto a small ledge, pulled myself up and weaved my way the same direction as my brother.

It was slow going but I was able to make my way into the other section of the cave. Dorma's chamber was gigantic. Easily larger than the main room, Dorma's lair needed the extra space. All around the room were gigantic piles of gold and treasure. Mounds of gold coins, jewels, crowns, scepters, weapons, chalices and even a few statues littered the room. Near every stack was a small cave. These openings didn't look big enough to allow passage for the dragons. As I centered my attention across the room, one of the lizards we'd seen before ran out of the hole in the wall. It saw Maelduin and darted into another cave.

Dorma was standing in the center of the room. As big as the lair was, it was made all the more necessary by Dorma's girth. Fifty feet long if an inch, Dorma enormous dark orange body hovered over Maelduin as he entered.

"You come to speak to me of Itna's wishes, young sir?" Dorma asked. The voice was markedly feminine.

Maelduin picked up on the same clue. "My lady, I do not. I come to speak of my own. That my wishes are beneficial for Rendell is of secondary concern to me."

"And what is your primary concern?"

"Peaceful co-existence."

Dorma reared up and let out a roar. "There can be no reconciliation with Itna and her ilk," she said as she stared back down at Maelduin. "That time has long passed."

"Have you even tried?"

"Effort goes two ways, child. There is a war between the majickal races and the citizens of Rendell. This is a war of Rendell's making, not ours. If there is to be an end to the conflict, there must be an end to Itna and her followers."

"Itna's followers are led by the teachings of Tag, the Queen of Light. They are good people."

Dorma roared again and I realized this was her way of laughing. "Do not speak to me of Tag, child. She is better known to me than to those insects infesting Rendell."

"And what does a creature such as you know of Tag?" Maelduin scoffed.

Dorma leaned down at his slight, bringing her nose right up next to him. Her upper jaw was larger than he was and still he showed no fear. She pulled back and said, "Watch your words, child. I not only know of Tag, but of you as well. Are you not the child of The Beholder?"

This didn't sound good to me. If Dorma knew who we were, she would probably know we couldn't be permanently killed. I started screaming warnings to Maelduin but he wasn't listening.

I decided to take some precautions. If the battle started I wanted to be ready. I positioned myself on a small ledge overlooking the proceedings. Once balanced, I carefully pulled out my axe. With my free hand, I reached into my satchel and grabbed the gauntlets. My anxiety immediately turned to rage as I held the metal gloves in my hands. I put one on and nearly jumped headlong into the cavern. I'd never felt more ready to fight in my life. I'd also never felt more anger and fury. That changed when I put on the second gauntlet. My rage intensified to overflowing now and it took all my willpower to not jump down, swinging my axe at everything that moved as I fell.

I looked down and saw Dorma was still arguing with Maelduin. I couldn't say Maelduin was arguing with her, as he barely said a word. She was vehemently against the idea of an accord and was letting Maelduin know it. She darted towards him after he asked another question. I thought she was attacking. Maybe that was what I wanted to think. Either way, I was done waiting.

Dorma was distracted with Maelduin, so I aimed for the large red dragon. I leapt from the hole in the ceiling, bellowing with rage as I descended. I planned to land right between the beast's wings and drive my axe into its spine.

I heard Maelduin scream for me to stop but it was too late. I raised my weapon over my head and brought it down with all my strength as I landed. I hit the creature's scales, sending fragments shooting into the air. My blade never touched flesh. I brought my axe around for another swing when the dragon unfurled its wings. This gave me a clear view of the soft spot Joshua had pointed out. I spun and sunk my axe into its body. Blood exploded from the wound, showering me as my reward. I wrenched my axe out and continued chopping away at the opening I'd made under its wing. A crimson mist cascaded over me with each blow I struck. My face was swiftly covered in the dragon's majickal blood. I licked my lips, tasting the power and strength contained within. The dragon thrashed in an effort to buck me free from its back. I held onto its wing to help keep my footing as I continued to unleash my wrath.

For six long years I had been made to suffer. From the moment Allen and Nichole got killed, my brother and I had been under someone else's thumb. Taking orders, holding back, not saying the wrong thing, it was all meant to restrict our growth, our destiny. We were not meant to take orders. We were destined to give them. Even freedom from the

chains of slavery did not give us what we desired. Now we serve a queen that chose to insult me as she asked for our help. A man attempted to rape a woman and cast the blame on me. With the exception of Brad, I hadn't been able to fully let out my aggression since I'd killed Layne in the arena long ago. Now, the time had come for me to collect my reward for years of subservience and restrictions. I would not be denied my due.

The dragon was screaming in pain as I finally cut the wing free. I heard Dorma bellowing at Maelduin, begging for him to stop me. Maelduin was in turn yelling at me. His voice echoed in the large chamber, but surprisingly I couldn't hear him inside my head. All I sensed in there was primal rage. Feeding off that emotion, I drove my axe deep into the gaping wound on the dragon's back. I dropped to my knees and slid down its side. My axe slashed through its skin. Sounds of tearing flesh accompanied the fresh, jagged gash down its side. My weapon wound around its rock-hard scales as I made my way down to the floor, slicing the beast open down its side from wing to foot. A torrent of blood issued forth, blanketing me in a scarlet wave. I could feel the majick Joshua had spoken of. The very touch of the dragon's blood against my skin refreshed me. The blood I'd tasted was coursing through my veins and I wanted more. I felt invulnerable. This was not to last.

I yanked my axe from my victim, eliciting one last scream from the wounded beast before it fell over to die. I whirled around, looking for Dorma. She found me first. From behind me, a giant column of fire erupted and enveloped my body. I saw the flames surround me and awaited Maelduin's reaction to the burning. He showed no anguish, no pain whatsoever. I watched as the fire continued to engulf me yet not burn me once. In the midst of the flames, I turned to Dorma and smiled.

I charged at the great dragon, axe covered in her kin's warm blood and thirsting for more. I leapt into the air, hoping I could reach high enough to strike her in the neck. With casual ease, she swung her claw and swatted me away. I sailed across the room uncontrollably. My only chance was to land on a pile of gold. Though not my first choice, it was better than a statue or a wall. I looked down and saw no piles of gold. Only cold, hard rock.

I hit the wall back first. My head snapped back and collided with the unforgiving cavern wall. I had hit twenty feet up from the ground and slowly slid to the floor. There was no sense in trying to get to my feet. My right leg had been broken on impact. I held my axe up defensively as I heard Dorma's thunderous footsteps approaching. I saw Maelduin running over at full speed, sword withdrawn. He fell the moment I impacted with the wall, my pain coursing through his body. He was

ahead of Dorma and his determination to reach me first gave me strength. I rose and stood on my one good leg. Limping forward, I yelled at Maelduin to get out of the way. He didn't hear me in time and was swept aside by a rampaging Dorma.

My brother regained his footing as fast as lightning. Pushing aside my pain, he pursued Dorma with all his might but was too late. Because I was slow recovering from Dorma's swipe at my brother, she was able to get to me a few seconds before Maelduin. When she bent down in an attempt to bite me in two, I got a good shot in. I swung and connected square to her snout. She reared back, momentarily dazed. She swept her claw at me again, sending me into the wall a second time. This time when she went to take a bite, she succeeded.

Her teeth felt like rusted iron poles being driven into my chest. One of her teeth punctured my pelvis, separating me from my broken right leg. It fell to the floor at Maelduin's feet. He grimaced in pain as he sprung at my limp body. He grabbed on with his left hand, and with his right he impaled Dorma through the bottom of her jaw. He twisted the sword, boring a hole into her jowls. She thrashed, throwing Maelduin away and onto a mound of gold. With one final twitch of her head, she flung me into the far wall again.

I could feel the last bit of life escaping my body. Darkness covered my eyes, and this time I couldn't see past it. It was the mask of death, coming to carry me to realms unknown. I could barely raise my head enough to see my brother. He had seen Dorma run off after dispensing with me and waited until she was out of sight before moving. He stopped before reaching me to retrieve the leg I'd lost. I watched as my brother used the last of his strength to scoop me up into his arms. Tears clouded his eyes as the darkness continued to cloud mine. The darkness enveloped me, and all was gone once again.

Chapter 9

Darkness again. However this time I could see through it. At first glance it appeared I was in some sort of pit. Large earthen walls rose from both sides, making escape for an ordinary person impossible. I knew I could scale my way out at any time. Since I was in new territory, I decided to explore my surroundings before departing.

I was, for the moment, alone. Not far away I could hear the anguished screams of people being tortured. Their agonizing cries filled the pit. From behind me I heard a familiar sound. A deep growling noise, soft yet mildly threatening, arose in the gloom. I turned to see a pit fiend gazing up at me. It appeared confused, looking at me and then past me. I waved him by and he ran off in the direction of the screams. I decided to follow and see who was on the receiving end of those cries.

The pit fiend sprinted along ahead as I took my time. I examined the walls of the pit closely and saw holes dotted its length. Impossibly long snakes, their scales a sickly green and black, poured out of these openings and slithered away. For the first time, I looked skyward to see how high the inside wall really was. As my eyes reached the top, I saw a castle sitting on top of a hill. Made of dark stone, its rough design gave it an ominous appearance. Jagged, uneven overhangs darted out from the top of the structure. Its black walls were illuminated every few seconds by the beam of light from a nearby beacon. Brilliantly dark colors reflected off the stained-glass windows, dispersing an eerie glow onto the bleak surroundings. The light didn't improve the aesthetics of the castle. It only reinforced the notion that all who entered its gates would face eternal punishment.

Several more pit fiends filed past me, hurrying along so as not to miss too much more of the malicious activity going on. A few paused as they got near, sniffing the air around me as they did. None reacted to my presence like the one that had greeted me the first time I'd been in Haedes. That was where I was now. There was no mistaking it.

My enthusiasm for witnessing the torture of some poor soul faded as I walked along. In the recesses of my mind I knew I was here for something more important than to watch some fool suffer. With no discernable way out, I put my hands on the inside wall and began my climb to the castle above. Something told me that was my true destination.

Scaling the wall was easy, even though the castle was quite high. I worked my way around to a drawbridge leading to the main entrance.

Pulling myself up onto it, I looked back down into the pit. It resembled more of a moat than a pit from this vantage point. I saw pit fiends running around, endlessly devouring the souls trapped therein. I turned my attention back to the main gate of the castle. It was standing open, awaiting my arrival.

As I moved closer to the entrance, I heard a voice call from inside. "Please do hurry, Patrick. I have other matters to attend to, you know."

The voice had a pleasant tone, almost like a kind relative. Taking into account my present location, that was a definite possibility. In that voice however, was a hint of power, fury and might. The speaker was someone of great influence and spoke with due authority.

I didn't reply until I'd reached the raised gate. "Whoever you are, I have things I'd like to get done too. Any chance of me getting out of here anytime soon?"

From the shadows in the corner stepped a demon. There was no denying this. He stood almost eight feet tall, with large black horns curling from his brow. His flesh had a reddish tint to it and his black eyes burned like black flame. I had seen this figure before in my dreams yet his name eluded me.

Gazing at me as if I were his long-lost child, the demon spoke. "I highly doubt it. There is much to discuss before you depart."

"I know you," I hesitantly said.

"Indeed you do, Lord Patrick," he replied smiling, offering no further explanation.

I examined him from head to toe, searching for the tiniest clue to his identity. His satchel held a large book, its edge protruding from the top. I could physically feel the power held within its pages. I felt the same way when the dragon's blood was splashing over me. The book was majickal, maybe the most majickal book ever written. I knew this but still didn't know how. What I did now know was the owner's name.

I grinned and said, "You're Wraith, aren't you?"

He bowed and answered back, "I most certainly am. I knew you'd figure it out. Now come, we have much to talk about."

Familiar sounds flooded my ears upon entering Wraith's castle. More screams of anguish and pain echoed off the walls. My suspicions proved correct about this place. It was an abattoir, the final destination for the most condemned souls. When I remarked about it to Wraith, he flashed a smile that made me stop dead in my tracks.

"Oh my, no," he said in response. "There are much worse places to be in Haedes. If you're going to assume command over the forces of

darkness, you're going to need to know this place much better than you do now."

"Am I going to be the leader of Haedes?" I asked.

"I would say there's a good chance. Lady Lillith believes it and that's all that matters at the moment."

"Why would she think that?"

"Because of the prophecy. And before you ask, yes, I know of the prophecy as well."

"So you think I'm going to rule Haedes too?"

"Only time will tell. Still, a formal lesson of Haedes would be most beneficial to you in any event. Knowledge is power, young Lord Patrick."

"That's what Mael always says," I mumbled.

"And you brother is correct." Wraith stopped walking and looked down at me. "My question to you is, do you want to rule Haedes?"

I gazed up at his fiery black eyes and replied, "Only time will tell."

Wraith smiled once again and continued walking. "Very good answer, young master. Now, all I ask from you is that you give me some of that time. When we're finished, maybe your stance will change."

As we proceeded deeper into his palace, the screams of his victims grew louder. I questioned Wraith about it and he told me we'd see the source of these cries soon enough. We rounded a few more corners until we came to a long hallway. On either side were prison cells not unlike those in Nathaniel's castle. Every cell held at least four prisoners bound in chains. Their silver auras were dim and I wondered aloud when one of them would just fade away into nothingness.

"That will never happen," Wraith informed me. "Souls are eternal, as you well know. Once their energy has been drained, they will be relegated to the beacons."

Several questions occurred to me at the same time, making my head hurt slightly. "What exactly are the beacons? Maelduin told me they were the final resting places for condemned souls."

"That's not entirely accurate. It is where certain souls are contained once they've outlived their usefulness. Others are confined there because they have no place in any realm, although that is a rare occurrence. But the beacons serve an even greater purpose. They are way stations to other realms, portals if you will. One only need know how to harness the power of the beacons to traverse between realms. Not everyone is permitted passage either. When you use a portal, you must go through Limbo. That is where all the portals originate. If Lady Styx decides you aren't supposed to go where you're aiming for, you will

be trapped in Limbo until she sees fit to let you leave. Soon enough, however, that will not be a major concern for you.”

He quickened his pace as he finished, obviously eager to get where we were going. I wanted to ask him what he meant but felt he had his reasons for leaving my mind to mull over more questions. A few more twists and turns down the dark stone corridors of his castle found us at his throne room. He opened the door and led me inside.

The first things to catch my eye were the prisoners. More than fifty of them were chained to the walls, each of their auras dimmer than those I'd seen before. They reached out to me as I neared, but once they saw my face they knew I was not to be their savior. As I looked at these pitiful souls, I had but one question for my host.

I spread out my arms and asked, “Are they all slaves?”

“Yes, they are,” he casually replied. “I need the energy from their auras to feed my majicks. Without them, I'd be nearly powerless.”

His answer confused me more deeply than before I'd asked. “I thought you were the most majickal being in creation. That's what Joshua told us.”

“And he was partially correct. I am the father of majick, keeper of the books of all things majickal. Nevertheless, I have my limitations. Majick comes from different sources. Mine was granted to me by the Ancients to assist mankind. This was before I arrived in Haedes, of course.”

“That's right. You used to be in Haven. I remember Joshua referring to you once as the Fallen One.”

Wraith's mood changed at once. His passive demeanor was replaced by unbridled fury. “Do not ever call me that,” he shouted. “I am not fallen!”

His screams reverberated around the room, causing some of the slaves to cower in fear. I was undeterred. “Then how did you end up here if you didn't fall from grace?”

He glared down at me with a look that would send a sane man running for the hills. At that moment I was never happier to be immortal. “I did not fall. I was pushed. Because my actions during the Aseraphim wars were deemed too violent for Haven, Tag herself issued the order to have me cast out. I still retain a minute shred of my former life, a speck of gold in an otherwise pitch black aura.”

Since Wraith was a resident of Haedes, and as such in physical form, I couldn't see his aura. He obliged my curiosity and recited a quick spell to show me. There it was, right at his heart. It was easy to see the

tiny fragment of gold amongst the inky blackness that made up the remainder of his aura.

“Now that you have seen, I presume you will not make the same error in judgment again,” Wraith advised. I nodded in agreement and he continued. “As I was saying, your friend Joshua was only partially correct about my abilities. Though I am the father of majick, there is currently one being more majickally powerful than I.”

“And who is that?”

Wraith shook his head in dismay. “Patrick, this is not what I need to discuss with you at the moment. Please, let us sit and talk. I want to discuss Haedes, not me.”

I followed Wraith to the end of the room. There sat his throne, a resplendent black marble studded with gleaming black obsidian. He ventured up to his seat and I sat in a plush chair facing him.

What followed was the most interesting conversation I’d ever had. All the talks I’d had with my brother while enslaved to Nathaniel Graves, our many chats with Joshua about the Aseraphim, not even our talk with Itna’s advisor Michael compared to what the great demon had to tell. Wraith educated me on the realms of Haedes. Not its denizens so much, just Haedes itself. Apparently, Haedes was divided into nine regions, known as planes, each with its own overlord. The various planes of Haedes circle the globe in concentric rings. Wraith cast an illusion of the view of Haedes from out in space. It resembled a bull’s-eye. The rings were a little ragged, as they weren’t exactly perfect circles. Each ring was a plane, but the bull’s-eye was actually sunken into the planet’s surface. Wraith said that this was the Void. His full explanation of this place would have to wait until later.

The plane closest to Haven, encircling the equator of the planet, was the River Styx. This plane by all accounts existed in both Haven and Haedes, yet in neither. It served as the crossing point into Limbo and was commanded by a man named Ragil. The only mortal to hold a place of honor in the realms of the dead, Ragil takes the souls that arrive for judgment to Styx’s palace. A thick fog forever shrouds the river from view. Even the light from the beacons cannot penetrate it. The fog itself is the birthplace of souls, the ethereal. It exists not so much in a physical form as an ideal. You cannot enter it from the river, for it is the river and all around it. Only Ragil is able to navigate its mysterious tides.

To summon Ragil and request passage from Haedes, you had to traverse the second plane, the Shores. Standing along the banks of the river Styx at any time were thousands upon thousands of souls begging for passage away from the suffering and misery that is Haedes. A new

soul arriving at the shores would blow into a great horn that stretched into the fog of the River Styx. This was Ragil's signal that another wished to cross over. It did not mean, however, that Ragil would immediately reply. He showed when it was time for you to go, and not a moment before. Until then, the pit fiends feasted on the souls awaiting their turn and their chance at freedom. The one charged with overseeing activity along the shores was the demon Baal. The first born of the union of Lillith and the Titan Darkness, Baal resembled a large, humanoid lizard. His skin was layers of blue scales and his forked tongue slithered from his mouth with every word spoken.

His brother, Natas, was the master of the third plane of Haedes, the Lake of Fire. Natas couldn't look less like his brother if he wanted to. The demon Natas was an immense individual, all fat and gluttonous. His giant girth was only matched by his capacity for inflicting pain. Volcanoes and great pools of lava dotted the third plane of Haedes and Natas used them to burn his victims for eternity. Many times he would impale them on his pitchfork and roast them over the open flames of a lake of molten lava. Their endless screams of agony fed his strength. These fires supplied the only light in Haedes, giving the sky of the surrounding planes its eerie red glow.

Where the volcanoes sloped back to the surface, they would inevitably slide into the Pit. The plane I was currently in was the fourth plane of Haedes. Ruled by Wraith himself, most of the pit resided belowground. Infested with Pit Fiends and other lesser demons, it was one large underground maze. Around every turn for those unlucky souls doomed to its depths was a beast waiting to feast upon its essence. Those souls who found a way to ascend one of the craggy outposts that dotted the pit would find themselves confronted by flying demons called boremen. These flying abominations fed on the souls for a while before dropping them back into the pit for more suffering.

If you escaped from the pit and found yourself in the next plane, the Dark Plane, you would begin to believe you had been driven insane by the torment and cruelty of the Pit. The fifth plane was the closest thing to civilized society in Haedes. This was essentially the capitol of the realm and was the home of Lady Lillith herself. Loathe was the protectorate of the plane as he oversaw its general operation. Libraries, training facilities, temples and more found their home in the Dark Plane. Most importantly, it was where Lillith's castle resided. Made of sleek black marble shades darker than Wraith's castle, it was a tribute to the dark queen in every respect. Statues of her sinister beauty were everywhere, carved from black

obsidian and polished to a glossy sheen. Living shadows crept from these statues and covered the castle in perpetual gloom.

"This is where things get a bit complicated," Wraith said hesitantly.

"How so?" I asked. I had been enjoying this lesson and wanted to hear more.

"How much do you know about the Titans?"

"Only what we learned from Each."

"Ah yes, the wind. Good man."

"He seemed a little weird to me," I commented.

"That isn't unusual. He comes across that way to most people." He paused to reflect on his past statement and added, "When he talks to them, that is. He's very private. If he took the time to speak to you, you would be wise to pay attention to his words. So he told you of the five that survived?"

"Yes. And that all but one of them are in Haedes."

"That's correct. The other now resides in Limbo but used to be a leader of a plane of Haedes. Bedlam, the most vile and repellent being every to exist, once ruled the sixth plane, the land of Nightmares. A deal had been struck between Lady Lillith and Darkness when they created the lesser demons and such. She would allow them to control the final four planes of Haedes as long as they made no attempt to overthrow her rule. It was a fair deal for all as the remaining Titans would retain some semblance of power. There was only one problem. Bedlam. He was simply too unstable to remain in Haedes and had to be removed."

"Wait," I blurted out. "You're telling me there was actually someone too evil for Haedes?"

"It wasn't that he was necessarily evil, Lord Patrick. In fact, as far as that goes, I wouldn't define him as evil at all. He was simply mad. Completely insane. His unpredictability caused too many problems. The Nightmare Plane contains the worst nightmares a mind can conjure. Things that surely would never exist otherwise roam freely there. Bedlam had a nasty habit of letting them out of his realm. He found it humorous, watching the lesser demons try to defeat something that had no place existing in the first place. The fights never lasted long as the living nightmares were all easily defeated. Simply put, it was a distraction.

"When the Fallen Aseraphim Benevolence's child grew to an age where she could take command, Bedlam was cast into Limbo. This child was aptly named Nightmare and had been groomed to take over the sixth plane since her birth. In her usual form, she looks very much like her mother. For new arrivals to her domain, she takes the form of a fiery

steed. A mane of fire adorns her black coat as she races towards her new victims. Fire and smoke pour from her nostrils with every breath. It truly is a sight to behold.” His last words were said with an odd amount of genuine affection.

“And Bedlam?”

“He has things to do in Limbo. Strangely enough, he keeps order there.”

“What? I thought...”

“Remember, Lord Patrick. At times in Limbo, chaos is order.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask. Why do you call me Lord Patrick?”

“Because for now, that is your name.”

“For now?” I asked, baffled at his remark.

“For now,” he assured me. “Back to the lesson, one of the reasons Nightmare was given control of the Nightmare Plane was to keep someone more trustworthy between Lillith and Zomb. The Titan Zomb is the ruler of the seventh plane, the land of the Undead. The first necromancer, Zomb created the various plagues of Haedes. Undead, vampirism, lycanthropy, he’s responsible for them all. Don’t misunderstand, there are other types of lycans. Those are the work of Genepool and Pak in the cursed deal they made at the takeover.”

“Those are the ones seen on Earth, right?”

“Indeed they are. The Titan Pak can infest any of these simple-minded creatures at any time, so beware. He is a formidable foe and not to be underestimated. He can also inhabit a weak minded human but the effects would be disastrous. In theory, a strong mind might be able to hold him at bay. That’s never been tested, mind you.

“Back to Zomb, he can raise any mortal from the dead. For this reason, he is never allowed passage to Earth. He would take control of it within days. Mortals who find themselves in Haedes, and it does happen, never survive a journey into the seventh plane. Zomb kills them and reanimates their bodies to serve as his drones. He has been known to constantly kill and reanimate those that fall far out of favor simply for his own enjoyment. For now, I’d advise you to avoid his realm altogether. Though he cannot kill you, he can make things very unpleasant.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I replied. Nathaniel had been a necromancer. I could only hope his soul was being subject to the cruelest of unnatural acts by Zomb and his minions.

“Finally, in the darkest reaches of Haedes are the final planes. The eighth is the Shadow Plane and is what its name implies. No light reaches there, not even the light of the beacons. It looks much like the pit as it has several large canyons. In the depths of these chasms lie creatures

that could only survive in the blanket of the shadows. Unspeakable monsters left over from the reign of the Titans dwell in the craters, waiting for a lost soul to drop in. The son of Darkness himself controls the realm. His name is Shaddo and, as with Nightmare, his name is quite apt. He is comprised of the shadows and is the voice of his father. All who wish audience with Darkness must come to Shaddo and meet his approval. Being dropped into a chasm normally marks his disapproval.

“Darkness, the grand Titan, the dark creator, resides in the ninth plane, the Void. This plane is a vortex extending into the surface of the planet. A second spent in the Void is a century in any other realm. Creatures deemed too savage for even the canyons of the Shadow Plane were cast into the Void after the takeover and reside there to this day. It is written that there are beings in there that have never seen any other realm and long to break free from the bonds of the Void. The only being with any control over anything on the ninth plane other than Darkness is Nacht. He has his residence there as well. And it is there that you will one day seek his council, for if you are to rule Haedes you must have him on your side. Though he holds no position of power, he still wields significant influence over the various demons and minions of this realm.”

Wraith finished his lecture and sat solemnly on his throne. I could only imagine the expression currently on my face. All I had been told was new to me, yet in the deepest reaches of my soul it sounded so familiar. I had several questions but no idea where to start. Now that I knew more about Haedes and its geography, I wanted to explore. I knew this wasn't the proper time, seeing as how I needed to get back to my body and help Maelduin defeat the dragons. Yet I wanted, even more I needed, to see it all. And that led me to my first query.

“If I'm to meet Nacht in the Void, how am I supposed to get there? Didn't you tell me to avoid Zomb's territory?”

A smile crept onto upon Wraith's demonic features. Even though his grin showed no malice, I was nervous until he spoke. “That is the other thing I needed to talk to you about. Come with me.”

Wraith rose from his throne and walked back the way we'd come. I quickly stood up and followed. We ascended several flights of stairs before we reached our final destination. Wraith opened a door and led me into a small room. The only furnishings were a small wooden table and a rickety old chair that looked like it would fall apart if so much as a mouse sat on it. There was an object on the table but my gaze was elsewhere. What drew my eye away was the opening in the wall.

I walked over to the window and looked out over Haedes. From this height the view was awe-inspiring. I was hoping to catch a glimpse of

the Dark Plane but we were facing the wrong direction. The reddish glow from the Lake of Fire cast a mesmerizing light over the landscape. The volcanoes were a good distance away but I could see eruptions of lava in the distance. Vast rivers of magma flowed around the base of the far off mountains, collecting and distributing fiery molten stone to the farthest reaches of the plane.

Wraith's castle appeared to be in the middle of the Pit. All around, for as far as the eye could see, was desolation. The forbidding landscape of Haedes stretched before me, an abomination that held nothing short of fascination. The maze that was the Pit seemed to go on forever to the east and west. A few plateaus were visible and I spotted a boreman feasting on some unfortunate soul. It unfurled its wings, showing me these creatures were much like Pit Fiends only with wings. The boreman shrieked and threw the tortured soul into the air. Its dead eyes followed the arc of its victim as it descended. With surprising grace, it sprung into the air, flapped its black wings once and deftly snatched its prey mid-flight. All that was left after that was more pain and suffering back at the boreman's nest.

"It is a sight to behold, is it not?" Wraith asked from behind me.

"It's incredible," I replied, captivated by the scene in front of me. I turned away from the window and asked, "I'm going to rule over all of this?"

"As I said before, only time will tell."

A strange question popped into my mind and I couldn't fight it off. Finally, I asked, "Do you want me to take over?"

The smile returned to Wraith's face as he replied, "If I didn't, I wouldn't have had this made for you."

Wraith picked up the object from the table and handed it to me. It was a mask. Cast in cold metal and deceptively light, it bore red and black markings on its face and three holes near the top. An insignia adorned the mask next to the left corner of the mouth, a fiery red "F" on a black background and enclosed in a circle of red.

"What does this mean?" I asked, pointing to the odd symbol.

"That, Lord Patrick, is to be your seal, your emblem. All who march to your orders shall wear it proudly. The spirit of your crest shall also protect those with whom you find favor. Should one of them find themselves in dire circumstances, you will know of it. And should an attack be waged on someone under your protection, your emblem shall appear to shield your ally and turn the aggressor to ash. It is not all that special really. All four of you children have one. I believe you've seen your eldest brother's?"

The shield in the tavern. Maelduin and I both commented on it at the time. "I believe I have," I answered back.

I was again staring at the mask as Wraith continued, "This mask was created especially for you, young master. Brought to bear by the Dark Clerics by my command, it will allow you to teleport to the Shadow Plane any time you choose. But know this. If you are on Earth in your physical body and teleport, you will arrive in the Shadow Plane. From there, you will be able to hop into another shadow and arrive back on Earth. Convenient, is it not? However, in Haedes, it takes you to the Shadow Plane and no further."

"Why not? Why can't I jump into a shadow and return to another place in Haedes?"

"Look out the window again and see for yourself."

I walked back to the opening in the wall and gaze outward. Though the sky was brightened slightly by the red glow from the Lake of Fire, there were no shadows. The outcroppings cast no shadow into the pit. The boreman had no noticeable shadow falling onto its outpost. I backed away and asked Wraith to explain.

"Shadows only exist on this realm in the Shadow Plane," Wraith explained. "True light cannot shine here, and since there is no true light there is no shadow to be cast. The only other remnants of shade here are the living shadows that surround and protect Lillith's castle. Because your mask is drawn to shadows, it can only take you to the Shadow Plane. Do you understand?"

I nodded and examined the mask again. I started raising the mask to my face when I remember something important. I didn't currently have a face. "Am I supposed to put this on here or when I get back?"

"You need to put it on before you leave Haedes. It will attach itself to your essence and follow you into every plane of existence you visit. This does not mean it cannot be removed from your physical body."

"What would happen then?"

"That unlucky creature would feel compelled to wear it. Once they did, they would then have only one, overwhelming desire. Find your body and return the mask to its rightful owner. Only the most powerful of minds would be able to resist its pull."

With all that had been told to me about Haedes, and now the mask, I had no doubt I was to lead this realm someday. Wraith's help and guidance had been important and his gift of this mask was proof he was on my side. I would not forget his assistance when I took over.

“Wraith, I thank you for this. It will be my most prized possession.”

“You will be receiving another gift eventually,” he interjected.

“From who?”

“You’ll see. My humblest apologies, but I promised not to tell you.”

I let his remark pass and stared at the mask. All I had been told, all I had seen and done, and all the times I’d died had led me to this moment. I knew in the furthest reaches of my soul that this was home now. This was where I belonged. Wraith had almost said as much.

“If I don this mask, am I damned to Haedes?” I asked.

“That may happen regardless.”

“It hasn’t yet?”

“Not completely,” Wraith answered cautiously.

Again, I let the more confusing aspect drift by and continued making my point. “So you’ll follow my orders?”

When Wraith’s eyes lit up I knew he’d been expecting that question. “In matter concerning Haedes, I will be at your beckon call, your eternally loyal servant.”

“And elsewhere?”

“I have duties separate from this realm that are no one’s concern but my own,” he sternly replied. “Although I will not take up arms against you outside of Haedes and will do all I can to support you whenever possible, I may not always stand by your side.”

He had said exactly what I wanted to hear. “In that case, I ask you to show your loyalty to me now.”

“In what regard?”

“Release your slaves.”

The Falling One had been smiling during most of our encounter. I couldn’t have knocked the grin from his mouth any better had I connected with my best right hook. “You cannot be serious.”

“I am deadly serious,” I growled. “I was a slave to Nathaniel Graves, that bastard son of a diseased motherless whore, for six long years. No one will suffer like that under my rule. Let them be tortured at the hands of unspeakable atrocities. Let them be devoured for eternity plus a day by packs of Pit Fiends. Let their souls burn forever as they wade through the Lake of Fire. I don’t care. But no one shall be bound to chains and forced to serve. Release them now and prove your loyalty to the new crown.”

“My majicks will be depleted.”

This was a good point. I couldn't let him be powerless. "What if the souls were to stay in the castle, just not in chains? Let them be your servants, but let them be free as well. Will that suffice?"

Wraith nodded. "My power will be lesser for it, but it shall be done." He withdrew a large book from a satchel on his hip and read a quick spell. I could literally hear the chains snapping all throughout the castle. I knew Wraith would have no problem keeping the souls in the castle. Going out into the pit wasn't much of an option.

That left only one thing to do. I eased the mask towards my face and put it on. Flashes of pain and passion coursed through my very essence. The power of the mask was infusing itself to my soul like a leech, but instead of draining me it fueled me. I felt its awesome force and influence and let it overtake me. When the initial sensation had passed and I'd regained my faculties, I looked up at Wraith. The smile had returned to his lips.

"This mask will help you heal. You should be ready to return to your body any moment now. For that, you must let go of consciousness. I can help there." He recited another spell from his book and I found myself suddenly overcome with fatigue. I didn't fight it and drifted off.

When I opened my eyes, I fully expected to see Maelduin. The sight before me startled me enough to shake all vestiges of sleep away. Before me was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I had never laid eyes on her before, yet I knew her face intimately. Her long dark hair partially covered her face but I could still see those stunning almond eyes that had watched over me in my dreams on many occasions. I didn't know her name but I knew her all the same.

"Come with me sweetheart," she said soothingly, causing me to nearly melt. "You aren't quite done yet."

Water splashed on the shore upon which we stood. Behind me was a dense fog and I guessed this was the River Styx. That would mean the lovely woman in front of me was the river's namesake. She was clad in a flowing, translucent black robe that complimented her shapely form. When she introduced herself my belief was confirmed.

"My apologies for not introducing myself sooner, young Patrick. I really should have."

"How could you? We've never met before. Except in my dreams, of course."

"Of course," she said with a chuckle. "Still, I've had opportunities and didn't make good use of them. Not your fault and not what we need to talk about."

“Why does everyone want to talk to me all of a sudden?” I asked, more to myself than to Styx.

She answered anyway. “Because you’re here and we may as well make good use of the time we have. Yes, Wraith could’ve just come up there and told you what he needed to tell you, but what’s the point if you’re going to die and come to him? I mean, really. It’d just be a waste of time!”

“I thought I was supposed to be healed and coming back to life.”

“And you are, you are. But no soul crosses from one realm to another without my knowing it. When you died, I knew. You go back to the living, I know. And as I said, since you’re here...”

We walked up the shores to the foot of a large castle wall. We stopped near three doors set in the base of the wall. Styx told me they led to the other realms. Whatever realm you’re destined for, that was the one that would be on the other side of the door.

“I only really need one. If you’re bound for Haven, any door you open will lead you to Haven. It just makes people feel better if they think they have a choice.”

“This isn’t what you wanted to talk to me about, is it?” I asked impatiently. I was worried about Maelduin and wanted to get back to him.

“Of course not,” she causally replied. If she knew I was anxious to get back to my brother she showed no sign. “Now, I don’t know what all Wraith told you... Wait. Actually, I do know what Wraith told you. Mostly. I was hoping to get to you first. I wanted to see your face without that ghastly mask on. Anyway, about what he told you... what did he tell you about the other prophecies?”

“Other prophecies?”

“That much, huh? That’s what I thought. Lillith probably wouldn’t let him tell you the others.”

“Are you going to tell me or just keep hinting at them?”

“My, aren’t we impatient! Oh, that’s right. Maelduin’s still stuck in the mountain with the dragons. No problem. Tell me, what prophecies do you know?”

I shrugged and answered, “Only the one that says I’ll rule Haedes.”

“Patrick, I know for a fact there is no such thing. Try again.”

“But...”

“No, Patrick, no buts. The prophecies tell you what, not who. There is no prophecy that says you will rule Haedes, just that someone will. So, try again. What prophecy have you been told?”

I shook my head to clear it and recalled what I'd been told.

"It was about the ruler of Haedes and his future wife," I informed her.

When she returned my reply with a scowl I became worried.

"Who told you this?" she asked, quite upset.

"Some little guy in a dark robe."

"Was Wraith with him?"

"No, it was Nin-Gauble."

She shook her head in dismay. "I should've known. He always has to slither his way into things. You weren't supposed to be told those words yet. Not until it was decided who would rule Haedes. That impertinent little prick!" Her lovely face became flushed with anger as she spoke.

"So what's the problem? If I'm going to rule Haedes I would've learned it eventually, right?"

"If you're to rule Haedes."

"And I'm not?"

"Patrick, why do you think you're meant for Haedes?" Styx asked.

"Well, Christi Lona told me I couldn't go to Haven, so I assumed I was meant for Haedes. She seemed to think so too."

"Honey, if you take nothing else away from our little chat, let it be this. Never let anyone decide your fate for you. Just because you aren't meant for Haven doesn't mean you're damned to Haedes."

"What else is there?"

Styx cleared her throat and nodded her head toward the castle.

"Hello? What about Limbo? Better yet, what about Earth?"

Styx's words sank in and filled me with hope. If I was in charge of Haedes, I couldn't be with Maelduin. He wouldn't want to be there and I couldn't force him to stay against his will. "So which one am I meant for?"

"Would you like to find out?" she slyly asked. She motioned to the three doors and said, "Choose. The one you open will tell you to where you are bound. If you see Earth, then Earth shall be your base. If you see Haedes, then that is where you will call home. Maybe you'll even see Limbo. Who knows?" She giggled again and added, "Well, I do, but that's not important. The door you choose now may not be the door you walk through later. Things change if you have the will and the power to change them. So, Patrick, do you wish to open that door now and see what your future could be, or would you like to wait and see what comes from the decisions you make?"

At that moment, I knew what I wanted. I knew where I wanted to go. I wanted my brother. "Send me back. Maelduin needs me."

Styx beamed at my response. Her eyes lit up like royal jewels, sparkling in the faint light. She waved her hand and softly said, "Sleep."

I blinked and was sound asleep. This time, my brother's face greeted me upon awaking. And he looked worried.

Chapter 10

He was facing away from me, looking down a tunnel. I knew it was dark but I could see as if candles lined the walls. I gingerly raised my right arm and felt my face. Sure enough, the mask was there. That wasn't the cause of my brother's uneasiness however. The sounds of dragon's nearby was what I assumed occupied his attention. When I sat up, he continued staring down the tunnel. I looked around and before I could take in my surrounding was overwhelmed with mental images. Everything Maelduin had been through while I'd been dead came crashing into my brain. I grabbed my head in a vain attempt to stem the flood of information but to no avail. As soon as it was over, I glanced at Maelduin and saw he was crying.

All I had been through in Haedes was streaming into his mind. The dark images I'd experienced and found no displeasure in were no doubt extremely painful for him to witness. Not only had I died again but I had resigned myself to my damnation. I had tried to keep my beliefs hidden from him before. Now there was nothing I could do. Maybe my conversation with Styx would give him a glimmer of hope.

I crawled over to him, seeing as how the cave was too low for me to stand upright. I put my arm around his shoulder and he leaned against me. I looked around and saw he'd fastened some lizard skins together and used them to block the cave.

"What's this?" I asked, hoping to get his mind on a different topic.

"Their skins are fireproof," he told me.

"Why didn't you just put me in there?" I jokingly asked.

"You didn't cover the whole entranceway."

"What!" I shouted. Anger rose in my head at the thought of him actually using me to deflect the dragon's flames. "Did you really try that?"

"No, I didn't!" he screamed back and pushed me off of him. I tumbled into the wall of the cave and hit my head. My brother didn't even seem to feel the impact at all. He wasn't finished with his rampage yet. He crawled over, his face contorted with disgust. "Do you honestly think I would use my brother as a shield? Did Haedes influence you that much already? Has your soul withered so much you would honestly believe I would do that?"

His face was inches from mine as he spat out his accusations. I stared into those familiar blue eyes and saw no love anymore. There was only contempt and revulsion. I held up my hand and gently pushed him

back. "Calm down, Mael. If you've seen what I've seen, you've heard Styx's words as well. Nothing is decided yet."

"Isn't it?" he asked brusquely. "Haven't you already made that choice?"

"Maybe not," I mumbled.

"Really? Look in a mirror lately?"

Nothing in my life ever affected me the way a scolding from my brother did. Back at Nathaniel's castle, there was a slave named Anthony that one day decided he was tough. We were in the linen room, where we'd sometimes be put to work washing the bed sheets for the entire castle. The room was long and narrow, with large metal washtubs filled with water on one side. Along the other side were concrete blocks to fold and stack the linens on. Anthony had done something stupid earlier in the day and apparently didn't like me laughing at him about it. As payment for my apparent insult, that day in the laundry he head butted me, breaking my nose. I saw Maelduin flinch in pain as I stared a hole through Anthony.

If you're going to do something as insane as that, you'd better follow up quickly. Instead, Anthony got into a defensive crouch. I charged towards him and drove my fist into his mouth. Teeth shattered like crystal on concrete upon impact. He fell to one knee and I was content to leave it at that. Anthony's insanity was worse than I'd initially imagined. He grabbed me around the waist and tried to wrestle me to the ground. I picked my knee up, catching him square in the chest. He released me and started to get up. When he regained his footing, the first thing he did was take another swing. So I did likewise, only with much more success. From one end of the washroom to the other, I tossed him around like a rag doll. His head slammed off every washtub and numerous cinderblocks. When we finally got back to where it all began, I threw Anthony to the ground, praying for all it was worth that he would just stay down.

I turned and began to walk away when I noticed Maelduin helping him up. In one last crazed bout of dementia, Anthony yelled that we weren't finished yet. When I agreed and came storming back, Maelduin let go and Anthony slumped to the floor.

Even though Anthony attacked me, even though he kept swinging when he should've just given up, and even though I showed what I considered remarkable restraint, Maelduin made me feel bad about it. Since I had laughed at him, Maelduin believed I shouldered part of the blame for what occurred. His dressing-down that day lasted over an hour. I didn't think I'd be so fortunate this time.

“Look at me,” he commanded. I was helpless to resist. Sadness had crept in and pushed away his anger. His eyes welled up and he was on the verge of tears again. “Why, Patrick? Just answer that one simple question. Why?”

“I didn’t think I had a choice. Christi Lona thought I belonged there. Wraith believes I belong there. Apparently, Lillith herself believes it too. Why should I have thought any different?” I kept my voice steady, even though I knew my explanation wouldn’t satisfy him.

To my amazement, he said nothing. He stared at me, looked deep into my very soul and knew I was telling the truth. No amount of scolding was going to change that fact. When he did finally speak, his words were the most encouraging I’d heard in a long time. “There’s still time, you know. I’ll help you.”

“And I’ll take all the help you’re willing to give.” Before he could respond, I held up my hand and said, “But know this, if Haedes is indeed where I’m meant to be I will go without hesitation. If it is to be, it will be.”

Accepting a hard truth was never easy to swallow but Maelduin forced it down. He sorrowfully nodded and said, “So, shall we take care of the present before we start dwelling on the future?”

I pushed myself away from the wall and joined my brother. “Absolutely. First, tell me where we are.”

“We’re in one of the small side caves. Dorma’s lair is past those pelts. The other way just leads deeper into the mountain. A lot of lizards down there.”

“How many of those little buggers did you kill?” I asked. I had lost count while going through his memories.

“Fifteen or so.”

“Not bad,” I complimented.

“Not difficult. Thankfully they aren’t very bright creatures. They never came close to harming me. I did almost get singed a few times while I was putting up the barrier. Had to escape down the cavern a few times before I had it in place.”

I looked away from the skins to the trail into the mountain. There were skeletons scattered about like refuse all along its length. A few still had their weaponry sheathed next to their bones.

“Don’t even think about it. They’re useless. Completely degraded. Except for this.”

Maelduin retrieved a small pouch he’d carried around for as long as I could remember. He kept all manner of objects in there, depending on his mood. This time, he withdrew a gold necklace. Hanging from the

brilliant strands of gold was a medallion. Maelduin handed it to me for a closer inspection. It showed no signs of wear, no dirt or decay on its shimmering face. The pendant was set on an ocean background with etchings of seabirds in the sky, flying gracefully over the calm sea. The sun was just peaking over the horizon and was inlaid with gold. A large letter 'V' made of sapphire dust rose from the water. Above the rising sun was an eye, and one glance told you it was all-knowing. Again, sapphires had been ground to fine powder for the coloring of the iris.

"I know what this is," I muttered.

"I think I know now too. It's my seal, isn't it? Like Vincent's shield in the tavern."

"I believe it is." I handed the medallion back and told him to put it away. No further prodding was necessary. "So, how long has it been since they last attacked?"

"A day or two. I think they've either forgotten about me or figured the lizards got me."

"A day or two? Exactly how long have I been dead?"

"At least three days. It may be four. With no way to see the sun it's a little hard to tell. You needed a lot of time to heal. I actually watched your leg reattach itself to your body. Let me tell you, that was weird."

"Let's hope I never get a chance to see it happen with you. Now, are there any offshoots from this tunnel?"

"Not that I could find. I think the only way out is back through Dorma's lair."

"Then that's what we'll do. Where are those gauntlets I had before?"

"I removed them when we got in here. Why?"

"I can't explain it, but those gauntlets made me feel..."

"Enraged," Maelduin finished for me.

"It's more than that. I felt almost invincible. The rage, the power of my anger and fury, it all came out when I put them on. We'll need any advantage we can get against the dragons and those gauntlets qualify."

Maelduin reached into his satchel and got out the gloves. It was clear he was hesitant to give them to me. He no doubt felt the surge of rage when I'd worn them previously. I held them in my hands and experienced the sensation of their power once again.

"Shall we get this over with?" I asked my brother.

"Now? Are you sure you're up to it?"

"This mask is helping me heal faster. I actually feel a lot better than I did just a few minutes ago."

"A few minutes ago you were still dead," my brother kindly reminded me.

"And I'm feeling much better now."

Maelduin shook his head, knowing the argument was lost. "Are you sure?" he asked in one last futile attempt to persuade me to wait.

"No time like the present. As soon as I put these on, we rush out. I'll lead. You follow and clean up whatever's left over. Got it?"

"No problem," he said, resigned to the task at hand.

I eased the gloves on as Maelduin went over to the curtain of lizard skins. Once they were on my hands, my anger exploded, only this time it was more focused. Maelduin sensed this and threw the pelts to the side. I skittered out of the cave as fast as I could and emerged in Dorma's den with my brother close behind.

It did indeed appear the dragons had given us up for dead. There was only one dragon still present in the grand chamber and it was Dorma herself. She was sleeping next to a mountain of gold coins and jewelry. I became enraged at her causal attitude about our supposed deaths. Here she was, fast asleep in the knowledge her pursuers were no longer a threat. In that she was severely mistaken.

I sprinted at the beast, looking to drive my axe into her skull before she even noticed us. In my haste I kicked a silver goblet away. The ringing of the chalice against the cave floor caused Dorma to stir. When she opened her eyes I was only a few feet away, axe above my head ready to strike.

The dragon reacted quickly but not fast enough. Though my axe didn't find her skull and crack it open like an egg as I'd hoped, I did slice into her uncovered neck as she reared up. She screeched and her shrill wail echoed throughout the cave. I heard rustling and thunderous footsteps beyond the large door and knew reinforcements would soon arrive. Maelduin heard the noise as well and stood facing the entrance. He got out the spellbook he'd taken from Nathaniel's castle and stood ready.

Dorma was preparing to lunge at me when the doors to her chamber opened. Before the first dragon could enter, Maelduin read a spell. It was the same spell he'd used to raise the boulders on our trek to the cave. Instantly, a wall of blinding white light formed in the doorway. One dragon continued forward into the light and quickly backed away from the intense heat.

I saw all of this through my brother's eyes as mine were firmly fixed on Dorma. When the majickal light hit her eyes she hesitated, giving

me enough time to marshal an attack. I ran to her and hurriedly began to climb up her leg. I reached her head before she even knew I was there. Her gigantic head was taller than my entire body, which gave me an idea. Her eyes were still shut tight from the effects of the light. I noticed her eyelids were covered with tiny scales and would deflect any attack. So I waited.

The instant I saw the golden iris I swung my axe downward with all my might. My weapon sliced through her eyeball as if it were mere cloth. She thrashed around in pain but I held on by her ear. I withdrew my axe and continued my assault. Once I had created a big enough hole I swung my legs down and climbed inside.

Fluids and tissue surrounded me. There wasn't enough clearance for me to stand erect as I had initially thought so I dropped to my knees. This also helped me maintain my balance since Dorma's thrashing had increased dramatically. I hacked my way deeper into Dorma's skull, chopping up precious brain matter as easily as I used to split wood back on the farm. Her flaying about lessened with every blow. Her blood, brain matter and bits of bone rained down on me, fueling my drive into the deeper reaches of her head. Finally I had reached the center of her skull. A tunnel had been carved into her brain and I knew she didn't have much time left. I found a large band of tissue at the base of her brain and hacked away at it. When I had completely severed the strands, Dorma collapsed.

The impact of her head striking the cavern floor echoed in her skull. I ignored the thunderous roar and began digging my way out. I could've easily exited the same way I'd come in, but I wasn't finished destroying the dragon yet. With Dorma now dead, cutting through her brain was a much easier task. I sliced away the final pieces of brain matter and found her remaining eye. It took a few swings but I eventually cut the nerves leading to it and pushed. The eyeball dropped out of her skull with a sickening pop. I followed close behind.

Maelduin still had the wall of light up, keeping the other dragons at bay. I could sense his disgust at my actions and didn't care. I had done what needed to be done. I licked my lips, lapping up the fresh dragon's blood. I was covered from head to toe in blood and tissue. Knowing we still needed to get past the horde of dragons behind the wall of light, I picked up the sizeable eyeball and casually walked over to my brother. When I told him to dispense with the light, he remained leery. When I assured him it would be fine, he did as I'd asked. As the light disappeared we found ourselves face to face with a battalion of angry dragons.

I held Dorma's eye aloft and cried out, "This was Dorma's but now it belongs to me. Unless you care to meet the same fate as you mistress you will let us pass unharmed."

A silver dragon stepped forth and replied, "You cannot kill us all, swine."

I smiled at my adversary and said, "Try me."

Noticing my calm demeanor and confident tone, the silver dragon stepped away. I didn't hesitate and started forward with Maelduin by my side. All eyes were upon us as we slowly passed through the entrance hall. My bloody footprints marked our progress, leaving a clear message for any beast that dared tempt fate. The door to the cave was closed and Maelduin asked the closest dragon to open it. He initially refused, until I asked. My tone wasn't nearly as friendly as my brother's but got the desired result. Once out of the cave the door swiftly slammed shut behind us.

Alone again, I awaited the inevitable scolding from Maelduin. I was prepared for him to criticize the manner in which I dispensed of Dorma. I was ready for him to yell at me for my overtly violent attitude towards the remaining dragons. What I was unprepared for was what he actually said.

"You need to clean up," he softly rebuked.

I shrugged and replied, "It was a messy job."

"There were other ways."

"Mine worked just fine, thank you." My irritation with Maelduin's holier-than-thou attitude was growing by the second. That was when I remembered the gauntlets. I looked around for a place to put Dorma's eye. A mischievous smile crossed my lips as I set the offending orb on the dragon's doorstep. Then I removed the gloves and returned them to Maelduin. He wasted no time stowing them away in his satchel.

The sun was high in the sky, telling me we still had enough daylight to complete the journey down the mountain. I wasn't looking forward to the trek. My recovery was sped up immeasurably but I was still a little weak. The long train of boulders that had been in our way was gone thanks to Maelduin, but we still had the large polished boulder at the bottom to traverse. Maelduin assured me we'd be fine and led the way back.

My brother was right again. When we got to the boulder, still firmly in place, I crawled up the wall of the mountain and around. When I went to ask Maelduin if he needed any help, I saw a ray of light emanate from the other side. Soon a small walkway made entirely of light appeared around the base of the boulder. Maelduin casually walked on it

and around the blockage. The pathway of light jutted out over the side a few feet but seemed as solid as stone. I kidded my brother for not doing that earlier as we continued on.

We reached the encampment just as the sun was beginning to duck behind the mountains. The cool air and dim light were a welcome relief from the day's prior events. Joshua was still where we'd left him, and in very much the same condition.

I set about uncovering our friend while Maelduin dug out his spellbook. When all was ready, Maelduin read the reversal spell and Joshua was back to normal. Unfortunately, he was still sleeping. I waved Maelduin over and we shared a good laugh.

"You would think he'd have gotten enough rest while we were away," I commented.

"One would assume. Still, I cast it on him while he was asleep. Maybe he still thinks it's the same day."

"Only one way to find out." I quietly walked over to him and nudged him with my toe. My efforts only garnered me a few stray moans and grunts. "Well, that didn't work. Your turn."

My brother leaned down and poked him gently in the shoulder. That did the trick. Joshua slowly opened his eyes and gave both of us a bleary look.

"Are you guys ready to go up the mountain already?" he asked.

"Been there already, my friend. It's time to head back to Rendell," my brother informed him.

"Done? When? While I was sleeping?"

"In a way, yes," I answered as I searched for a canteen to wash off the remnants of Dorma's brain matter.

"How long was I out?"

"A few days," I offhandedly told him. "We're not sure how many. Not a lot of windows in the dragon's den."

"What?" he exclaimed. My causal attitude assuredly added to his confusion. Thankfully for him, Maelduin took over.

"Joshua, I cast a spell on you to keep you safe while we were gone. I apologize for not telling you of my plan beforehand but I couldn't take the chance of you refusing. As Patrick said, we've been gone for a few days. We knew that could happen and didn't want to put you in harm's way."

"What spell did you cast?" he asked.

"I turned you to stone," Maelduin sheepishly replied.

I was expecting Joshua to be furious. Not only was he left behind, he was the unwilling recipient of a spell that turned him to stone. A

normal person would've been irate. Joshua surprised us both by complimenting Maelduin on his choice.

Our friend recovered rapidly and was up and ready to go in short order. Maelduin and I waited patiently as Joshua collected his gear. We stood beneath a large oak tree as he finished up. I was leaning against the tree when I thought I felt it move. I stepped away and saw Maelduin doing the same.

"Did you feel that?" I asked.

"Sure did. Any ideas?" he replied.

Before I could answer, the trunk of the tree bulged outwards. Maelduin and I lunged backwards, withdrawing our weapons as we did. The swelling expanded and contracted as if the tree were trying desperately to breathe. Joshua had noticed our puzzlement and joined us.

The bulge contracted once more and then began to expand and expand. I thought the tree would explode from the strain. To my amazement, a man stepped out of the wood.

He was pudgy and a little shorter than me with hair that looked as if it were made of bark from the very tree he exited. His skin had an unusual green tint to it making him look somewhat sickly. As he stormed towards us, green robe flowing behind him, he didn't look ill. In fact, he looked livid. Ignoring Joshua, he walked right up to me and slapped me hard across the face. I saw Maelduin flinch at the impact. I was about to lash out when he turned to Maelduin and slapped him too. The stinging sensation from my brother's injury only increased my anger.

"Just who the hell do you think..." was all I was able to shout out. The mystery man raised his hand and vines shot up from the ground. They twisted up my body and wrapped themselves around my mouth.

"You will speak when spoken to," he warned me. To both of us, he said, "You two have really screwed up."

I grabbed the vines on my face and yanked them away. "How dare you!" I yelled. Once again, the vines shot up and covered my mouth. This time, the creeper wasn't so easily disposed of. I struggled but was only able to tear off a few small leaves.

Our assailant got nose to nose with me and said, "You will speak when spoken to and not before. Right now, the vines are outside your body. Do not make that change. Believe me, it will hurt. A lot." He nodded towards Maelduin and added, "Not that you'd feel it."

"Who are you?" Maelduin asked and swiftly covered his mouth with his hand.

The man in green stepped away from me so he could face all of us. Joshua was standing behind Maelduin now, wisely keeping silent.

“My name is Genepool, the giver of life, and you two have made a horrible mistake.”

“And what would that be?”

“You can’t be serious? You mean you don’t know?”

I finally worked free of the vegetation and said, “If we knew, do you think we would’ve asked?”

Genepool glared at me and said, “Cocky, aren’t we?”

“No, just me,” I informed him. “So what is going on? And why did you hit us?” I was almost growling as my words crossed my lips.

“What’s going on is you killed Dorma,” he told us.

“We knew that already.”

“Did you also know that Dorma is the eldest daughter of Zaron?”

“The Ancient Zaron?” Maelduin blurted out.

“The one and only. Killing her daughter caused Zaron to stir.

That could’ve destroyed half the world! Had she woken up, the world as we know it would cease to exist. Your impudent behavior cost me valuable experiments too. The earthquake on Atlantia was catastrophic. And it isn’t done yet. The aftershocks will only cause more havoc. All because you had to listen to that bitch Itna.”

“You don’t care for Queen Itna?” I asked, a smile growing on my lips.

“She kills dragons for their blood and eyes. She destroys whatever creatures she finds offensive with no regard to the beauty of life. Still Patrick, you’re not quite right. It’s not that I don’t care for her. I have nothing but absolute hatred for the woman.”

“The dragons attacked us first,” Joshua meekly added from behind my brother.

Genepool waved my brother to the side so he could address Joshua. “You’re a trusting lad, aren’t you? Tell me, have you ever witnessed a dragon attack?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Of course not. If you had you certainly wouldn’t be here right now. Itna’s told you how her men have fought off the dragons. That’s not a lie but it is definitely not the truth. Her fighters go off into the mountains to slay dragons and the dragons retaliate. Your town hasn’t been attacked, mortal. If it had, it would be in ruins. The dragons simply chase your men home. It is not their intent to destroy you. They just want to be left alone. However, now that Dorma is dead that may change.”

“You think they’ll be looking for revenge?” I asked.

“I would. Wouldn’t you?”

“But it wasn’t Itna and her men that killed Dorma. It was us,” Maelduin stated.

“That won’t matter in the least. They won’t discriminate when they finally show up. And they will. In great numbers. They may even have some help.”

“From who?”

“You’ll see,” he cryptically replied. “For now, you just need to get back. They won’t attack until they’ve regrouped.”

“We only killed two dragons, including Dorma. What regrouping do they really need to do?” I asked.

“Getting two more dragons. It’s all about balance, dear boy. Like you and your brother.”

“You know us?” Maelduin asked.

Genepool laughed and replied, “Of course I do. I know your other siblings as well. They are the epitome of balance. Order and chaos, one forever tipping the scales just far enough to make the other tip it back. You two are destined for a similar existence.”

“You know our futures?” I asked.

“Not entirely. I don’t get told nearly as many prophecies as the other Ancients. Too much time on Earth and all. Too much contact with people who are supposed to fulfill the prophecies. They don’t want me getting involved again.”

“Again?”

“Long story,” he said dismissively. “Still, I know a few things. I won’t go into any more detail lest I get completely shut out. The two of you will have a most interesting life. I will tell you that much.”

His words settled over us like a thick fog, hovering around us and blinding us to the pure truth. His cryptic answers and misdirection left us utterly confused.

“So where do we go from here?” I asked.

“Rendell of course. You both need to finish your training.”

“Itna never promised to train me,” I told him.

Genepool’s smile stretched from ear to ear as he said, “She will send you to be trained. Have no doubt. It will be different from where she sends Maelduin but she will send you away to gain some experience nonetheless.”

“I guess that will have to do.”

“Yes it will. Now, I must be off. I have some experiments to reconstruct.”

He turned to walk back into the tree when I grabbed his shoulder. He craned his head to look at me and saw the anger burning in my eyes.

“Before you go, I want you to know something. If you ever lay a hand on us again...”

“You’ll do absolutely nothing. I know. You didn’t have to tell me.” His voice showed no irritation, no fear. Confidence dripped from every word. He continued on into the tree and disappeared.

The three of us stood in awed silence when Genepool left. Joshua was shaking so much I thought for a moment parts of his body might come loose. He turned and asked Maelduin what had just happened.

“That was Genepool, an Ancient, and apparently we’ve upset him,” Maelduin replied.

“So Itna is responsible for the dragon’s attacking?” Joshua followed up.

“If what Genepool said was accurate then yes, it would seem that way.”

“So what do we do now?”

“We go back to Rendell like the man said,” I answered. “If Itna is killing dragons for their majickal blood and eyes, then anything that happens to her she brought on herself.”

“But what about Rendell?”

“I guess we’ll burn that bridge when we come to it,” I replied half-jokingly.

We gathered up our belongings and began the trek back to Rendell. I was looking forward to confronting Itna with Genepool’s accusations. I didn’t trust her at first glance. It felt good to know I was right.

Chapter 11

Joshua was absolutely fascinated by my mask. Most of the journey back to Rendell was spent trying to explain its origins and powers. Since I still didn't know its full power it was more difficult than I'd thought. What caught me off guard was his casual attitude. Though he had been turned to stone while we were off killing Dorma, though I'd reappeared with a cursed mask on my face, and in light of the fact that an Ancient took the time to chastise us, Joshua's calm demeanor never faltered. I was glad to tell him what I could and actually felt bad when I didn't have the correct answers to his queries. Other than my brother, Joshua was the first person I could truly consider a friend. This fact was becoming clearer every minute.

My death and supposed future had rattled him a bit however. I couldn't very well tell him about the mask and not mention meeting Wraith. Since Joshua was the first person to tell us about the Falling Aseraphim it was only fair. The topic of Wraith held much more interest for him and again I was assaulted by a barrage of questions. Maelduin silently strolled along as Joshua and I chatted all the way back to Rendell. I wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not.

Joshua's friend Matthew was standing guard at the gate when we arrived. He let us pass, but not without asking about my mask first. He seemed satisfied when I told him I found it while we were fighting the dragons. It wasn't a total lie either. Matthew informed us that Itna was eagerly anticipating our return and said we were to go immediately to her palace. I told Matthew to inform Itna that we would see her in the morning. The last few days had been extremely stressful and the last thing I needed was more of Itna's insults and arrogance. The guard was hesitant but agreed, leaving us free to return to Joshua's house.

We weren't two steps inside before Joshua started complaining about being tired. This surprised me, as he had technically been asleep for the last few days. It was probably mental exhaustion more than anything else. He went straight to his room as Maelduin and I put our weapons and remaining supplies away.

My brother and I ventured to the living room, where I flopped down on the couch while Maelduin took a seat in a stuffed chair. There had been a look of concern on his face ever since we'd met Genepool but I couldn't get a good grasp of what was troubling him. When I asked, his answer nearly knocked me to the floor.

"I don't trust Itna," he told me.

"Glad to see you've finally come around," I said with a wide smile after my initial shock had worn off.

Ignoring my blatant sarcasm, he continued on. "I mean, I want to trust her. I really do. But after what Genepool said, and I think he was definitely telling the truth, I have to wonder about her intentions."

"Did you think Itna was lying before about the dragons?"

"No. I think she really believes the dragons are the aggressors. Maybe she's convinced herself its true. I don't know. What I do know is I don't trust her enough to send you off to be trained. It might be a trap."

"Probably is, but I'm not worried about it. I can handle myself. Besides, she seems to like you. At least you'll get trained."

"And you'll get killed," he informed me.

"And I'll come back."

The expression of concern on Maelduin's face shifted to utter despair. He was gravely silent for a few seconds before speaking, gathering his thoughts from the jumble inside his head.

"Patrick, every time you've been killed a little more of your soul has died. I can sense it. I can almost physically feel it. I don't want you to die again, not until we know if redemption is possible. Not until we know if you're actually bound for Haedes."

I understood his uneasiness but was unfazed. "Maelduin, no matter what happens Itna will not let me leave Rendell alive. You know that as well as I do. Whether she kills me here or has her followers do it outside the gates of town makes no difference."

"It does to me."

"I know, and if I could stop it I would. But she's a devious little bitch and no doubt has it all planned out. But no matter what happens to me, you need to accept her offer of training. You'll need it."

"If she kills you..."

"Then just go about your business and wait for me to come back."

A loud banging interrupted our conversation. Someone was pounding on the door. Maelduin rose to answer it and was greeted by six guards. Their weapons were withdrawn and they demanded entrance.

"What is your business here?" Maelduin asked the guard in front.

"We are here to take your brother into custody," he replied.

"On what grounds?"

"Blasphemy, civil disobedience, insulting the queen and murder."

"What?" my brother and I screamed in unison.

"There may be more charges added later at the queen's discretion."

I rose from the couch and walked over to the open door. All six guards took a step back at the sight of me. I beckoned for the head guard to return and asked him a simple question.

“What does she plan to do with me?”

“There will be a trial in the morning.”

“And who is to be the judge?” Maelduin wanted to know.

“Have no fear, sir Maelduin. The queen herself will oversee the proceedings to ensure their fairness.”

“That’s a laugh,” I commented. The guards gasped at my slight and a few even pointed their weapons at me.

“Are you going to come along quietly or are we going to have trouble?” the guard asked.

“I’ll go. I’ll save the trouble for later.”

The guard escorted me out of the house, where he withdrew a set of shackles to bind my hands. I glared at him and dared him to try to chain me up. He wisely thought better of it.

Maelduin stood at the door and shouted to me as I was taken away. “I’ll be at the trial, brother. I’ll get you out of this.”

I yelled back confidently, “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be back.”

It had been weeks since I’d been in a cell, certainly not long enough. I’d never much cared for the cellar back in Nathaniel’s castle but I’d grown accustomed to it after a few visits. The cells here were larger than the ones in the castle but I didn’t think I’d be around long enough to get used to my new accommodations.

I didn’t bother trying to sleep. Even if I’d wanted to, Maelduin’s mental chattering took away the option. He was irate at Itna’s actions. He wasn’t too happy with me either. He knew I’d killed Brad. Neither of us considered it murder since I was saving Patty from being raped. Apparently Itna did. Maelduin was more upset with me for not letting him get involved than my actions. I tried all night to make him see that it was for his own benefit. I was looking out for him. Problem was, he was looking out for me. To do that, he needed to go against my wishes. As dawn broke, I finally convinced him to stand aside and let Itna have her show trial. Should she sentence me to death, then upon my rebirth I would return the favor. I did my best to keep that thought away from the front of my mind where Maelduin might sense it.

The jail was located right next to Itna’s palace. I could hear sounds of people bustling around outside but the barred window was too small for me to find out what was going on. When the guard finally arrived to escort me to the courthouse, I asked what all the commotion

was about. He smiled but said nothing as he unlocked my cage. Two other guards stood beside him with pikes drawn. I calmly walked out of my cell, grinning as I strode up to the armed guards. I had no fear of them, just as I had no fear of my coming trial. Nothing these mortals could do to me would be lasting. They were only kidding themselves. Unfortunately for them, I was the only one that knew it other than my brother, and he wasn't going to say anything.

When we stepped outside, my eyes were assaulted by the overbearing brightness of the day. It took a second for my eyes to adjust but once they did everything became clear. As we walked the short distance from the jail to the palace, I saw people setting up a pyre. Boughs and branches were being thrown onto a big pile, with one guy going around spreading jars of oil on them. A huge pillar arose from the pyre with chains and shackles attached. Apparently the trial had taken place without me. That suited me fine. I was looking forward to them carrying out my sentence.

The trial was pretty much what I had been expecting. I was given no advocate for my defense and no chance to question or call witnesses on my behalf. Every time I tried to speak up to object to the lies being told about me, Itna shouted me down. Maelduin attended at my request. I wanted him to see how good of a person this Itna truly was. If she could proceed with such a mockery of justice, then surely he could use her hospitality and awe of him to get trained and not feel the slightest twinge of guilt about it.

It wasn't the lies that people like Philip, Rodney and William got away with that bothered me the most. It was when someone like Patty spoke that I got infuriated. Patty tried to tell them I had killed Brad defending her and her honor. Itna didn't want to hear it. At one point Patty was nearly pleading with her beloved queen to be allowed to tell the full story, how I was a hero in her eyes. Itna yelled at her to be quiet and Patty ignored her. Itna finally had her forcibly removed from the courtroom and her testimony stricken. She claimed Patty must've lost her sense of good judgment due to my evil influence and her testimony could no longer be trusted.

After the parade of witnesses against me had ceased, a list containing many people I had never met, Itna was ready to render her verdict. Predictably, I was guilty of all charges. She told me to stand and accept my sentence.

"Itna, I will accept your sentence whatever it shall be," I said menacingly. "But know that I do not accept your judgment of me or my actions. You are not worthy to pass..."

“Be quiet!” she yelled.

“NEVER!” I roared. My voice reverberated around the great chamber, shaking the chandeliers in the ceiling. Itna cowered in fright, her pale skin turning as white as new fallen snow. “You will be silent and hear my words. I have heard yours as mine have been shut out. You would not hear me then. You *will* hear me now.

“Itna, you are not worthy to pass judgment on one such as me. I am more than you, in your pathetic shell of a life, could ever hope to be. I am to be judged in time, but that time is for Styx herself to decide. When she has me open that door to my place in the afterlife, then I will heed her judgment. Until then, no judgment passed onto me by a man or woman shall affect me.

“Do what you will, Itna. Know, however, that you will reap what you sow should you proceed as I believe you will. Not all that dies is gone forever.”

Her shaking hands told me Itna hadn’t completely regained her composure. She did have enough of her faculties left to order the guards to take me to the pyre for execution. My sentence was to be burned at the stake.

The guards wanted to chain me but I smiled and assured them there was no need. I was more than willing to go. I had said what needed to be said. They were confused, both of them looking at each other for a clue to my calm attitude. Had they only been in the cave when we were fighting Dorma they wouldn’t be so lost.

I was disappointed with the crowd for my execution. I had expected a healthy throng to bear witness to the burning of the evil, vile beast in their midst. As we proceeded, Itna dismissed some of the guards since I was being so oddly cooperative. She’d taken up station on a stage set up just for this event. Seated behind an ornate wooden rail, she barked orders to her minions and watched them scurry around like rats.

“*So what now?*” Maelduin asked. I could see him walking away towards the exit of the main square.

“*Well, I’m pretty sure their plan is about to backfire,*” I replied with a small chuckle. The guard leading me up the pyre almost fell backwards when I laughed for no apparent reason.

“*And what then? Don’t you think they’ll just try something else?*”

“*Probably, but let them. Right now, it’s probably for the best anyway. You won’t get anyone to help you with studies or training as long as I’m around. That’s why this needs to happen.*”

“*I love you, brother,*” he said, holding back the tears.

"And I you. Now, do as I ask and wait for me to come back." I was at the top of the pyre and chained up tight. My execution was about to begin.

"I'm sorry," Maelduin said, catching me off guard. Before I could respond, they lit the pile of wood at my feet.

My hands were securely shackled behind my back around the stake. I was about five feet off the ground, standing atop a good-sized pile of tree trimmings. They had done a good job getting it together in such short notice. I knew the fire wouldn't hurt me, so I let my mind drift to such trivial thoughts. I noticed the people gathered for the show. Most of them were guards and others that had testified against me. Others were just curious onlookers. Most of the town seemed not to care. I spied Joshua in the crowd standing next to Patty. She was crying on his shoulder, his arm around her for comfort. He looked at me and I saw anger in those eyes for the first time. He had watched the trial and knew this was a fraud. Worse, he knew his queen was a fraud as well. Finally, I spotted my brother. He was standing near the main gate to the square, talking to the guard manning the station.

The flames began to lick the bottom of my feet and I pretended to feel the heat. I cried out in mock terror at the impending flames and almost laughed out loud when I saw Itna enjoying the spectacle of her making. The flames were up to my ankles and I was really pouring it on. I thrashed and flailed around, trying to get away from the fire. I theatrically kicked my feet at the flames, as if physically attacking the growing fire would extinguish it. The crowd began to cheer, drawing more people from their homes. The crowd's numbers swelled the more I screamed in pain, so I gave it all I had. I shouted and wailed, acting as if there was fire inside as well as outside. By the time the flames had reached my waist, the crowd had more than doubled its original size. And I had gotten bored.

I let out one more ear-shattering scream to make sure I had their undivided attention. Before the echo of my cry was done reverberating through the square, my cries of agony morphed into laughter. It was the laughter of madness, of sheer depraved insanity. The crowd watched in horror as my merriment grew. I spied Itna from the corner of my eye. Terror lined her ashen face, shocked by my reaction to my impending doom. I turned to face her and smiled. Abject fear washed over her, causing her to faint. I spun back to the crowd and roared.

With one strong tug I broke free of the shackles, slicing my wrists with the broken restraints in the process. The splintered metal braces hung limply from the stake, dripping with my blood. I stood atop the

burning pyre untouched by the fire surrounding me. I lowered my head and closed my eyes, concentrating on the next act of the exhibition. Slowly, black flames began to form at my feet. At first it was intermixed with the orange flames from the burning wood. In due time, it was able to overtake the natural flame and continue to grow. From foot to face, I was coated in black flame. The townsfolk began to flee in horror.

I jumped down from the pyre and grabbed the first person running by. Before I could spin him around, I was struck from behind. I staggered forward from the impact and lost my grip on my first intended victim. He ran off, shirt smoldering from my touch. A guard had apparently taken it upon himself to restrain me. As I went to swing at him, he lurched forward and fell on his face. Standing in his previous spot was Joshua. In his right hand was his sword, now coated in fresh blood. In his left was my axe.

"I think you're going to need this," he said as he handed my weapon to me.

"What are you doing?" I asked angrily.

"What is right." Again, his steely resolve left me impressed.

Itna had regained consciousness and beckoned for more guards. In my mind, I saw Maelduin react to Itna's command. With lightning quickness, he knocked out the guard at the gate and swiftly closed it. Itna's reinforcements were trapped on the other side. One of them went for the controls on his side but Maelduin pulled out his sword and cut the rope. Now the only way they were going to get in was to lift the heavy iron gate themselves.

Joshua and I were back to back, him wisely staying a few steps away so as not to get singed by the black flame aura emanating from me. Itna finally noticed I had an ally.

"What in Tag's name do you think you're doing, Joshua Callahan? Either kill that vile man or stand down!" she commanded.

"I will do neither," he replied defiantly. Gone was the normal meekness and child-like tenor of his voice. This was the voice of a man, and one that had something to say for all to hear. The crowd drew silent at his reply. Not one set of eyes were cast my direction. All attention was on Joshua.

"You would side with a demon?" she shouted.

"This man is no demon!" he cried out. His sword was pointed at the ground, as no one advanced on us while he spoke. "You see only the evil in his heart, for that is all you wish to see. Though hatred lies within him that is not all he is. I have known this man longer than you. I have traveled in step with him for days on end. He and his brother befriended

me. They didn't have to, but I'm glad they did. I have seen the goodness and love in both of them. Have you even bothered to try?"

"How dare a lowly guard speak to me like this? Somebody seize him!" she bellowed. And no one moved, except Joshua.

Joshua had worn his guard's uniform to the trial, presumably so he could attend without arousing suspicion. He raised his sword above his head, tip pointed at the ground. With a hearty thrust, he spiked the gleaming silver weapon into the earth and released it. With one swift movement, he pulled his guard's uniform over his head and threw it in the dirt. With just a loose white shirt now covering his upper body, he pulled his sword from the ground and pointed it dead at Itna.

"Let them try and take me, Itna, for they will not be taking a guard of Rendell. They will be taking a man who chose to do what was right when those in power said it was wrong. Your judgment of him has been wrong from day one. To you, he was guilty of crimes just by setting foot in Rendell. In your eyes, he was guilty of crimes *before* he set foot in Rendell.

"And these crimes you say he's committed, what of them? Murder? He killed Bradley Malloy to stop him from raping and possibly killing Miss Patty. Would you have thought better of him if he had left well enough alone? Or would you prosecute him for allowing it to happen? There would be no justice for him no matter what course of action he chose. His very presence is enough for you to levy accusations, isn't it? Had he sat alone in a darkened room his entire stay here, you would've found something to blame on him.

"And what of the trial where your judgment was handed down? Why would you not hear what Miss Patty had to say about that fateful night? Were her words not to your liking? Did they not follow the story as you had spelled out? Would you let her speak now, here, in the town square? Or would she suffer at your hands for her disrespect? I say to you now, I would have done the same thing to Brad that Patrick did had I been there. I would never have allowed a disgusting, amoral wretch like him lay a hand on someone as kind and sweet as Patty McFarland. Would your judgment of me have been the same, Itna? If you say yes, then you say you have no problem with Patty getting violated by scum like Bradley Malloy. If you say no, you're a hypocrite. Tough choice, I know. But it's a dilemma of your own creation. Now you must live with the consequences.

"I was a loyal guard and devoted follower, Itna. No more. You do not know what the true path of light is. You have substituted your judgment for those more worthy and wise than you. My loyalty and my

faith are all I have to offer this world. You once had that loyalty, Itna. No longer. Do not see me as loyal to an evil man, a so-called murderer. I am devoted to my friends. This man is a friend. His brother is a friend.

“So let this play out as it may, my former queen,” he said as he wagged his weapon menacingly at her. “Should I live, I will face my penalties with a clear conscience. Should I perish, I die knowing I died for what is right.”

Silence dominated the square, with the crackling embers of the execution pyre the only audible sound. Everyone was focused on Joshua. I even had to fight the urge to turn and face him as he was speaking to Itna. His words melted into the ears of every man, woman and child present, their rapt attention his reward. Someone’s paralysis must’ve broken because I spotted some movement from the corner of my eye. Someone was raising a crossbow and aiming at Joshua.

I wheeled around just as he fired. I slung my arm out and deflected the bolt with the blade of my axe. The projectile flew off and sunk into the railing in front of Itna. Her shriek of terror brought the rest of the crowd around. Suddenly, guards noticed we were armed and threatening their queen. Also, I was engulfed in black flame and not getting burned. The realization of the moment, and the accompanying shock, caused the guards to attack en masse.

Joshua was very good with a sword and easily fended off his assailants. I didn’t see him actually run anyone through. Mostly he just battled them back. I, on the other hand, killed many men that day. Every guard that approached me met their demise. My axe was painted in blood after just a few short minutes. The guards Maelduin trapped outside the square finally found their way into the battle. Most of them, after witnessing their comrades falling to my blade, decided attacking Joshua would be a wiser course of action.

Three guards rushed at my lone ally from behind. I had just sliced open a guard’s belly and was fighting off another. There was no way I could get to him in time. Out of nowhere, a large tree limb was thrust into the onrushing guard’s path just above the ground. All three fell face first into the dirt, sparing Joshua’s life. One of the guards saw who had tripped them and grabbed her by the hair. Patty let out a scream, garnering Joshua’s attention.

He spun around and slammed the butt end of his sword into the guard’s back. He let go of Patty and grabbed his wound. A small speck of blood formed on the back of his shirt from the blow. Before he could recover, one of his cohorts was up and preparing to strike Joshua down. I quickly disposed of the guard I was entangled with and darted over. With

one fell swoop, I loosened his head from his neck. I kicked away the guard's severed head and went to assist Joshua. The guard that had grabbed Patty pushed him into me, sending me backwards into the third remaining guard.

I never saw who was behind me. I only knew he had his sword up and pointed my direction. I fell straight into it and watched as its gleaming tip exited from my chest. In my mind, I heard Maelduin scream. I wasn't sure if it was from the pain or my eminent demise. At least my death this time would be less gruesome than in the dragon's den. I had taken days to recover from my wounds then. A simple stab to the heart wouldn't keep me away long. Unbeknownst to me, my old nemesis Philip had other ideas. As soon as he saw me get impaled, he ran over with an executioner's axe.

I saw Joshua being restrained by a contingent of Itna's guards as Philip approached. My friend had lost his focus when I got stabbed and was easily brought under control. There would be no one coming to my rescue this time. The first blow to my neck wasn't fatal. Blood showered Philip as he raised his axe a second time. I had heard Maelduin bellow in pain from the first blow and knew the second wouldn't be any more pleasant than the first. I weakly looked over to Joshua and smiled, hoping he knew how much I appreciated what he'd done. He smiled back, right up to the moment Philip's arms came crashing down.

His second blow did the trick. And all was dark.

Chapter 12

I woke up in Haedes at the base of the stairs of Lillith's castle. Wraith's description didn't do it justice. It was a stunning example of evil elegance. Towering high into the red sky, the castle was formed from the blackest stone I'd ever laid eyes on. Dark glass covered every window, from the lowest level to the highest spire. Shadows swirled over the impressive structure just as Wraith had described. As I concentrated on these living shadows I could almost feel them examining me.

The pitch black stairs leading to the entrance stood before me, flanked on either side by statues of a woman. Darkly beautiful, her black wings were unfurled and the shadows seemed to drip from them. I was so captivated by the statues as I climbed the steps that I didn't notice someone waiting for me at the top.

To say she was beautiful would mean giving the word a new definition. She was the picture of sensuality and seduction. Most of all, she radiated pure evil. She was dressed head to toe in black leather that clung to the curves of her exquisite body, though there wasn't really all that much material to speak of. Her long coal-black hair fell over her shoulders, lying across her dark leather top. As I neared, I noticed her eyes were but black pools. I felt like I was being pulled into her gaze and feared if I did that I would never return. When I reached the top of the steps, she called me over to her. There was never a doubt in my mind that I would obey.

"Patrick, it is so nice to finally meet you," she said. Her voice was too smooth and I was left to wonder if her affection was genuine.

"This is Lillith's palace, isn't it?" I asked, awestruck by its beauty as well as hers.

"It most certainly is. In fact, Lady Lillith has been expecting you for some time now."

"I'm at a bit of a disadvantage here. You know my name but I don't know yours," I mentioned.

A tiny chuckle escaped her, as if trying to flee in fright. "Where are my manners? My name is Harbinger, dear Patrick. I am Lillith's eldest daughter as well as leader of the armies of Haedes."

"I thought that was Loathe's position."

"At one time it was. He now serves Lady Lillith as chief guardian of the entire realm. That job takes up most of his time, so I was given command of the armies."

"Fight many wars lately?" I asked jokingly.

“No, not really,” she replied with obvious disappointment. “But things change and we’ll be ready when the time comes.”

“And when will that be?”

Harbinger laughed heartily and said, “My my, you do ask an awful lot of questions. I think it would be best if you saved them for your audience with Lady Lillith. I’m sure she’ll have the answers you seek.”

“When do I get to meet her?”

“As soon as I take you to her. First, there are some people I’d like to introduce you to.” She paused and said, “Now, before you ask any more questions, just relax and let me guide you. I have no intention of hurting you or leading you astray.”

“Why should I believe you? I was told the residents of Haedes were all liars,” I informed her.

“Indeed we are,” she said cheerily. “But one never lies all the time. Lies, deception, deceit, these are all just means to an end. If one indulges in falsehoods too often, eventually that individual will never be believed. A smidgen of truth is an essential tool for a good liar. Besides, I’ve found you can get others, especially those weak-minded mortals, to do your bidding so much easier with lies than you can with the truth.”

“I’m not a mortal,” I angrily told her.

“And you aren’t weak-minded either. I wasn’t referring to you, Patrick. Now, shall we go inside? I’m getting bored with your constant questioning and the twins are quite eager to meet you.”

“Twins?”

“Yes, my younger sisters. Two cut from the cloth of one. Much like you and your brother Maelduin.” Harbinger opened the large blackened steel door to the palace and went in. I followed closely and resumed our conversation.

“Maelduin and I aren’t exactly similar.”

“And neither are Ferlash and Vintric. Though both resemble our mother, neither could be said to be exactly like her. Ferlash possesses our mother’s political acumen. Vintric is more like me.”

“I take it you’re more like Lady Lillith overall,” I commented.

Harbinger smiled, bearing her pearly white teeth. “Fortunately I am, without a doubt, my mother’s daughter. There’s just no denying it. Much like you are, unfortunately, very much your father’s son.”

“The Beholder.”

She let out a displeased grunt at the mention of his name. “So you know of your father. Be glad he no longer roams free. The man is utterly contemptible.”

“You’ve met him?”

"Never had the displeasure," she replied. The hatred she held for The Beholder was written all over her exquisite face. I decided to let the topic drop and surveyed my surroundings. The darkened windows left the hallways of the palace in deep shade. Not one bead of the red sky's light passed into the corridors yet I could see clearly. I looked past the darkness and scanned the walls. They were adorned with paintings and tapestries of bloody episodes from the past. Every piece of artwork was brilliant, painted in dark colors that matched their surroundings.

Down the gloomy hallway we went, turning whenever Harbinger instructed. After what seemed like an eternity treading the corridors of the palace, Harbinger stopped at a door and reached for the handle.

"We are about to enter the anteroom to Lillith's courtroom," she informed me.

I sighed in frustration. "Not another courtroom," I spat out.

Harbinger laughed at my response. "Patrick, have no fear. You are not going to be judged by Lady Lillith. The only one to judge you today will be yourself. However, that is for later. For now, let me introduce you to my sisters."

She opened the door and allowed me past her. She followed close behind and secured the door. The room was barely larger than one of the cells Nathaniel used to throw me into. The walls here were empty, bearing none of the striking artwork from the hall. A lone door stood closed at the far end of the room. The only furniture in the room was a table. The large, black wooden structure took up most of the floor space. Seated at the table were two women. They both rose to their feet when I entered. One of them even bowed slightly.

The one to my left was attractive in a forceful sort of way. Her hair was dark brown and set up in a bun on her head. Her hairdo was held in place by several severe looking pins. Her eyes were as brown as her hair and were the only feature one could call beautiful. She had a stern gaze, much like Itna's. The main difference was that Itna couldn't back up her ill feelings. I knew this woman could. She was slender but gave off an air of toughness that belied her slight form. She introduced herself as Ferlash, heir to the throne of the Nightmare plane. Being an heir to a kingdom of Haedes would explain why she didn't bow when I entered.

The one that did bow walked over to me, unlike her twin, and told me her name was Vintric. Her attitude was completely opposite of her twin sister's, as was her looks. Where Ferlash was cold and distant, Vintric was very physical. Vintric grasped my hand as she introduced herself and didn't immediately let go. Her voice was melodic, almost as if

she was singing as she spoke. Her coal black hair hung down below her waist and covered her likewise black eyes from time to time. I found her more attractive than Harbinger herself. Harbinger was stunning to look at, but you couldn't help but feel a tad unnerved by her too. Knowing she was the leader of the armies of Haedes meant she had to be a fierce opponent in battle. That could be disconcerting. Vintric, on the other hand, shared Harbinger's slim physique but carried herself much differently. She was seduction on two legs, and any man she wanted she would have. I couldn't believe any man wouldn't want her. She radiated lust and desire. She took my hand and led me to the table so I could sit down for a talk. Harbinger stopped her, telling her younger sister that time did not allow it.

"But Harbinger," Vintric whined. "There's always time if you make time."

"You heard what she said," Ferlash interjected. "Lady Lillith wants to see him now and we cannot go against our queen."

"Ah, but our queen is also our mother. I'm sure she'll understand if her daughters wanted some time alone with such a fine specimen." She began softly caressing my arm until I pulled away from her. Though I found her totally captivating, there was something about her forwardness I found unsettling. "Why are you running away, Patrick? I've been waiting a long time for this moment. Haven't you been waiting to meet me?"

"I didn't even know you existed until a few minutes ago," I told her.

"But you've been waiting for me nonetheless, haven't you? That is, if you've heard what I've heard and believe as I do."

The prophecy I was told in my dream rushed into my mind. I briefly recalled it when Harbinger mentioned her sisters earlier. Now the words were as clear as a cloudless night.

"I think we should do as Lady Lillith wishes," I suggested, much to the dismay of Vintric.

"Fine. Since mother has been waiting for you I guess we should go. Maybe we'll have time later..."

"No, we won't," Ferlash said, cutting her off. "Patrick will most likely have other business to attend to after speaking with mother. If all goes well, that is."

I was going to ask her what she meant but thought better of it. Everything would surely be answered soon enough. Harbinger walked past me and across the room to the other door. We followed her out into another hallway. Harbinger and Ferlash were walking a few paces ahead

of Vintric and me. Vintric had locked her arm in mine as we strolled down the short corridor. This time I didn't bother pulling away. I had the feeling she was not going to give up.

We soon arrived at a large iron door. Harbinger pounded on the door three times to signal our arrival. The deafening sound echoed down the hall and I was left to wonder what it sounded like on the other side. As the door slowly swung open, I was left in awe at the scene unfolding before me.

As I stared into the grand courtroom I was left to wonder how exactly it fit inside the palace's walls. We were entering from the far corner in the back of the room, so I was able to see everything at once. The room was cavernous, almost as large as Dorma's lair had been. The only illumination in the room came from the few candles lit in the grandiose chandeliers hanging high above us. Rows and rows of darkly polished pews formed an aisle leading to the front of the room. Seated in the pews were every variety of creature known to roam the land of Haedes. Pit fiends, pit lords, imps, gremlins and more swarmed over one another to get a better view of the new arrivals. They were packed in so tight that some of them began to fight for position.

The three sisters and I started down the aisle towards the front of the courtroom. High above the regal seating stationed at the front of the room were three levels of balcony. Again, every seat was occupied with curious onlookers. These spectators were different, as every one of them was scribbling away on some tablet. They were Dark Clerics, each and every one of them. A sea of scribes watched me and recorded every step I took.

The crowded pews were vibrating with expectation. Without warning, an imp, a sickly little bluish thing with large pointy ears and sharp, jagged teeth, jumped from the pews and directly at us. With the grace and quickness of a rabbit, Ferlash reached up and pulled out one of the pins from her hair. In one motion, she flung it at the imp, catching it dead center in the chest. It fell to the floor with a shriek and began to writhe around. Thick, black foam bubbled out of its mouth as it thrashed around in agony. It only lasted a few seconds until it finally came to rest. Dark blood seeped from its oversized ears. I was impressed with her skills and started to say so when Vintric spoke up.

She still had her arm locked in mine as we walked on. I wasn't totally comfortable with it but didn't want to upset her. "You'll have to excuse my sister, dear Patrick," Vintric said as she caressed my arm. "To go along with her quick temper, she has a habit of being overly violent."

"I don't know. I kind of like it," I said with admiration.

With a grunt of disgust, Vintric finally released my arm. She folded her arms over her breast and moved away. Ferlash glanced over her shoulder, apparently reacting to our conversation. She flashed a knowing smirk before turning back around. I had to assume she enjoyed upsetting her sister.

As we continued down the long walkway, I noticed something odd. A few of the denizens packing the pews kneeled as I passed by. It was mainly the pit fiends and pit lords but a few other creatures followed suit. One of the pit lords, basically a pit fiend that looked to actually have intelligence, snuck a peek at me as I walked by. When he noticed me looking back, he quickly lowered his head again and mumbled an apology for his insolence. These were Wraith's followers, therefore my followers. The mask Wraith had given me was a symbol for all denizens of the Pit that I was their new lord and master. The reverence they showed to me told me I was on the correct path.

We were close enough to the front of the room for me to get a good look at Lillith's station in the courtroom. In front of her bench was a large pool of blood. The walkway went around the edge of the pool until it neared the walls. Here the lake tapered off into narrowed ends. The walkway rose above the blood to allow passage to Lillith's bench. I could see a current in the small channel leading out of the far wall and surmised that this was where fresh blood was imported. In the center of the bench was a small, never-ending fountain of blood. It emptied into a reservoir beside the center seat and then into the main pool. There were three elaborately decorated chairs behind the bench. All of them were polished the same shade of black as the pews. The only difference was that these seats were empty.

The three sisters stopped in front of the crimson lake and told me to continue onward. I walked around the edge and up to the bench. As I stood there, looking out into the assembled masses, I was amazed at how many citizens of Haedes had come to bear witness to my meeting with Lillith. What amazed me even more was the deafening silence. All heads were turned to the front, watching and waiting for the show to begin, and all waited with reverent quietness. There were a few pit lords and fiends still on bended knee, so I decided to see how far their allegiance stretched. I calmly told all to rise, and as one they obeyed.

"That was quite impressive, Patrick," a voice said to me. I whirled around to see a talking shadow standing next to a large, blue behemoth of a man. After closer inspection, I could see that this was no man at all. It was a demon, and a very unhappy one.

I hadn't noticed Lillith enter from a door behind the bench, so her words caught me unawares. This was most definitely the queen of Haedes in all her splendor. She was in a moderately human form, with the noticeable exception of her black wings. I could make out her face in her shadowy form and was taken in by her beauty. I bowed my head in respect and in reverence to the leader of this realm.

"Raise your head, child. There is no need for such formalities here," she said and I readily obeyed. "I have been waiting for this moment for ages, as have many others as you can plainly see. So let us talk as equals, if you will. Come, sit down and make yourself at home."

The blue demon pulled out the middle chair and offered Lillith the seat. As he moved to sit next to her, Lillith stopped him. "Loathe, allow Patrick your seat at the table, if you don't mind. There is much we need to discuss and we shall need our privacy. See to it that my daughters are taken care of."

Loathe grunted in response to his marching orders and moved away from the chair. As he passed by me I thought I heard him growl. I had the distinct impression that he didn't like me very much.

"How are we supposed to have privacy here?" I asked as I took my seat.

"They will not be able to hear all I have to say. Many of them wouldn't understand what they were hearing anyway. Besides, they didn't all gather today to hear me talk. They can do that anytime. They came to see you."

"But why a courtroom? The last time I stood for judgment things went quite badly for me."

Lillith laughed at my statement. The sound of her merriment was like a sword scraping against stone, grating and shrill. "You are not here to be judged by me, dear child. Your judgment shall be by your hand alone and your sentence the same."

I paused, letting her cryptic words echo in my mind. I glanced around the large chamber again, admiring the dark beauty of the room. "This is an incredible palace you have here, Lady Lillith. From the outside, I didn't think a room this size would fit."

"Isn't it amazing what one can hide in the shadows, if the shadows are willing to cooperate that is."

"And your daughters are quite interesting as well," I commented, eliciting another piercing laugh from Lillith.

"They are indeed."

"So who's their father?"

"That isn't really important right now," she replied sternly.

“But I want to know.”

Lillith sighed and gave in. “Their father is a mortal, one held in very high regard amongst the hierarchy of all the realms. My daughters were supposed to roam the land of the living to continue my works but it simply wasn’t meant to happen. Their father had sired three other children to my sister Christi Lona, meaning if my daughters ventured to Earth, so would they. It was decided that if my children stayed in Haedes, Christi’s children would stay in Haven. Not a compromise I wanted, but it was the best one I was going to get.”

I was going to ask for this mortal’s name, but figured that if she didn’t offer it to me during her initial explanation, she wasn’t going to tell me now.

“So why all the fuss over me?” I asked, much to Lillith’s delight.

Her smile, dark and captivating, beamed back at me as she replied. “Don’t you know of the prophecy?”

“I know of a prophecy,” I told her.

“Yes, the one about your bride.”

“If I am the one to...”

“Oh, I have no doubt that you are, young Patrick,” she interrupted. “That is why you are here today. There are more prophecies than you can imagine. Most of them are given out by the Dark Clerics. I believe you’ve seen a cleric before, have you not?”

“Yes. Nin-Gauble was with him at the time,” I said in disgust, spitting out the name of the mysterious man that had told Nathaniel Graves to purchase us years ago.

“Do not concern yourself too much with Nin-Gauble. He is but a messenger now. Some clerics obey him, yes, but they do not serve him.”

“Who do the clerics follow?” I asked.

“That would be Wraith. You’ve met him, I see,” she replied, motioning towards my mask.

I had become so accustom to my new mask that, when still alive, I barely noticed I was wearing it. It had become almost a physical part of my body in the short time I’d been alive with it on. Here in Haedes, it felt like a surging source of boundless power.

“It was a gift. He said someone else had another such present for me. Was he talking about you?”

“I’m most certain he was not. Though I do have something for you, it most assuredly isn’t what he was hinting at.”

“And what gift will I receive from you?” I pondered aloud.

“In time, child. In time.” She looked at me wistfully and continued. “You know, I have met your other siblings before. I have

looked into their faces and spoken with them and to them. I even gave them the pleasure of my council. Yet you are the one I've been waiting for. You are the one I wanted to speak to all this time. And now I don't even get to see your true face. Why don't you relieve yourself of that mask while we talk so I can gaze upon you in your natural state?"

Though her request sounded innocent, I was well aware that if she was asking, there was no true innocence to be found. "I'm sorry, but I've gotten used to having it on."

"Not even for me?" she cooed. I shook my head and she carried on dejectedly. "Very well. I'm sure it was the mask the residents of the Pit were reacting to anyway. In any case, I will have to have a chat with my brother in the near term."

"You refer to Wraith as your brother..."

"He is," she interjected.

"So my mother is your sister as well."

"She is."

"So does that make you my aunt?"

Another harsh laugh escaped her as she responded. "You're still thinking like a mortal. In common terms, I guess you could say I am. If it is familial bonds that concern you, have no fear. We are family, but we are not bonded by blood. At least not yet."

I didn't think asking for her to explain further would do any good so I let her disclosure pass. "So why exactly am I here?" I asked.

"Because you died," she answered with a moderately condescending tone.

"I know that. What I mean is, why am I in your courtroom talking to you?"

Lillith leaned closer, her voice barely audible over the throng gathered in the chamber. "You are here because I believe you are the one that will claim the throne I currently occupy. I may be wrong, it has been known to happen, but I don't think I've erred in my assumption."

"If you think I'll overthrow your rule someday, why help me now?"

"Why not? Better to make an ally than an enemy, is it not? Besides, I may be wrong about what the future holds for you. Your sister has quite an aptitude for doing bad works too, though admittedly most of the time they happen by accident. She is an inveterate liar and would fit in wonderfully here. Still, it is not for me to decide if you are the one who will claim my throne. That decision is your own. First, you must speak with someone who has the information you so desperately seek.

Unfortunately, he doesn't want to see you. Not in your present condition, that is."

"You mean because I'm dead?"

"No, Patrick. I mean because you still harbor a shred of humanity and love in your soul. Your brother, Maelduin, has been nothing but a negative influence in your life. His good deeds, his honesty, his overwhelming sense of honor, all these things have clouded your true calling. The effect has tainted your soul with the light of Haven. If you'd like to hear what your future may be, you'll need to rid yourself of that burden."

"How do I do that?" I asked without thinking.

Lillith snapped her fingers and a lesser minion scurried off through the door behind us. A moment later, a large man with black plate armor stepped out carrying a chalice. The cup was forged in black steel and dotted with rubies and obsidian. He carefully gave it over to Lillith, handling it as if it were a priceless work of art.

"Thank you, Knightsabre. You can go now," she told him. Turning back to me, she said, "One of our military leaders."

"And he runs errands for you?"

She shrugged with a smile and replied, "It comes with the power of my position. All beings in Haedes obey me. With one notable exception, of course."

"Nacht," I assumed.

"Actually, my father and I have a very good relationship. Personally, I'm a little surprised to hear you mention his name. You know of Nacht?"

"I've heard of him."

"And he has heard of you," she hinted but said no more. "But it is the Titan Zomb that continues to deny me. We have an accord, one that allows him to do as he wishes in his kingdom as long as his works do not interfere with any of my plans."

"Can't you just kill him?"

"If it were only that simple, child. I cannot dispose of Zomb. It isn't my responsibility. He will be dealt with eventually, but not by me."

"Let me guess. I'm supposed to kill him."

Lillith's laughter didn't get any more enjoyable no matter how often she unleashed it. "If only you could. No, it isn't your responsibility either, though you will have to deal with him if you truly want to rule in my stead."

Silence fell between us like a physical force. Her eyes, inky black pools of nothingness, stared at me with admiration. Behind that

reverence was just a touch of hatred and fear. She believed I was going to be the one to overthrow her. Loathe must've felt the same way. It would explain his attitude towards me upon our meeting. Being her protector, knowing he would someday fail in his task would certainly upset him. We stared into each other's eyes for a good minute, listening to the murmuring of the crowd gathered for this momentous occasion.

I could feel her trying to pry into my mind. It felt like a large hammer slamming into the walls of my skull over and over again. I knew she wanted me to trust her, to listen to her. Most of all, she wanted me to obey her. I wasn't prepared to succumb to her wishes.

"If I wanted to leave now, would you let me?" I asked her.

"You aren't ready to leave yet, young Patrick. Your body has sustained considerable injuries. It will be quite a while before you're ready to walk the Earth once more."

"You're wrong about that. My mask will heal me."

"Your mask will help, but there is only so much it can do. Speaking of, what do you know about your mask?"

"Not much. Just what Wraith told me when he gave it to me."

"He told you about the ability to shadow teleport?" I nodded in agreement before she continued. "Then you know that, here in Haedes, it takes you to the Shadow plane."

"I do."

"And it is there that you must visit before you leave this realm. First, there is something you must do."

"There isn't anything I must do," I replied indignantly.

"Yes, yes. Free will and all that. You really must get over that pesky humanity of yours. Still, if it is a choice you desire, I will give you one."

Lillith turned away from me and grabbed the goblet. She stuck it underneath the fountain of blood, filling her cup with the red liquid. Drops of blood dripped from the rim as she set it on the counter in front of me.

"If you wish to continue on the path you're presently on, you can choose not to drink from my chalice. If you want to know the path you are meant for, then by all means, drink."

"It's blood," I mentioned.

"It is that and so much more," she corrected.

I looked long and hard at the chalice before me. The jewels appeared to contain whirlpools of light. The rubies glistened in the dim light, swirling silhouettes dancing in their depths. The obsidian looked like small vortexes, the blackness fading into itself. The sight of it all

mesmerized me. The jewels had seemed normal before Lillith filled the goblet. Now they came to life.

I slowly reached out for the cup, grasping it by its elegant stem. One last glance at a wickedly smiling Lillith told me I could be making the wrong choice. Still, if I wanted to find out what I was truly meant for, this looked as if it might be the best way. With no hesitation, lest any of my rampant uncertainty become apparent, I drank the cup dry.

The pain I felt was unbearable. I could feel parts of my soul being violently ripped away. I collapsed, my body turning to mush. I slid out of my chair and fell to the floor. Daggers of agony coursed through my being as I writhed around on the cold, stone floor. When the pain at last subsided, I felt a welcome relief. Not only that the pain was gone, but also because I knew I was now different, changed in a fundamental way. I didn't know what the blood had done to me but I knew how to find out. I slowly but steadily got up to my knees. I looked up at Lillith and noticed her smiling. That wouldn't last long.

With a quickness that surprised even myself, I reached up and grabbed Lillith by the throat and squeezed. "What did you do to me?"

There was no pain on her face nor did she struggle to get free. She only answered in her cool, nonchalant manner. "I didn't do anything. You did. You asked for a choice and I gave you one."

I rose to my feet without releasing my captive. As I stood, I lifted Lillith out of her seat and held her in mid-air. Gasps of shock and horror arose from the congregation. From the corner of my eye I saw Loathe coming closer. Lillith waved him away as I spoke. "What did you do?" I repeated.

"I helped you. You needed to rid yourself of your humanity and integrity before you could become what you were meant to be. If it matters at all, I personally believe you made the right decision." I let go of Lillith's throat and she gracefully landed on her feet. Her smile never faded and that only increased my fury. "Patrick, you needed this. You needed to be free from conscience and consequence. In your heart, you believe as I do. Limbo is not for you. Haven most definitely is not for you. Earth is still fair game, but it's here in Haedes that you belong. To truly belong, you needed to change. And, as you can see for yourself, you have."

I looked down and saw my aura had drastically changed. Where before I had shades of gold, silver and black in almost even amounts, now all but the faintest speck of gold and silver remained. The rest of my aura was as black as Lillith's. I felt the evil pulsating in my mind. The urge to kill, maim, torture and destroy any and all who crossed me was

overwhelming. I knew then that no one in this room was more powerful than me. Not Loathe, not Harbinger, not Lillith herself held the power I did. I knew this as well as I knew what Maelduin's reaction would be. He would be severely displeased with this development. For the first time in my life, I almost didn't want to be around him. I didn't want this feeling of absolute power to go away. I wanted to see him to explain why it had to happen, though I still wasn't completely sure myself.

"So what now?" I growled at Lillith.

"Now, you need to go to the Shadow plane," she said, satisfied that I had calmed down enough to listen to reason. "There you will meet Shaddo himself, the leader of that plane. He will assist you with the remainder of your journey here."

"And after that?"

"After that, I will wait patiently for your coming again. I'm sure your next visit will be even more enlightening."

I scowled at her, having grown tired of her cryptic replies and non-answers. Without a word, I concentrated on teleporting to the Shadow plane. I had never used my mask to teleport and wasn't sure how to do it. I didn't want to ask Lillith. I didn't want to hear another word that issued from her lips. I closed my eyes and thought only of the land of shadows. In my mind, I could picture it as Wraith had described. A dark land and darkened sky, with ground strewn with seemingly bottomless pits, the picture was easier to imagine than I'd believed possible. When I finally opened my eyes, Lillith was nowhere to be seen. The courtroom was gone as were the many lesser creatures that had gathered to witness my transformation. All I could see was shadows, and I stared right past them.

It was like looking through fog, only fog never seemed to be alive. Swirling shadows appeared to sprout from the ground before me. Everything was in darkness but I could still see somewhat clearly. I could detect forms in the distance that looked almost human. I had to wonder what unlucky soul got sent here for his misdeeds in life. I spotted one close by and decided to find an answer to my question.

It was definitely a human soul. Its aura was dull silver but still shone bright enough for me to recognize it. As I neared, I could see it was a man. I couldn't imagine a woman surviving here for very long. He never heard me approach until I was nearly on top of him. I erupted in black flame, hoping to strike fear into his heart merely for my own enjoyment. I cleared my throat to get his attention. When he spun around I had to fight back my laughter. It was Brad Malloy.

The black flames didn't cast much light among the shadows but it was enough. He took one look at me, screamed in terror and ran. He only made it a few steps before he abruptly stopped. He was waving his arms out to his sides as if trying in vain to maintain his balance. I casually walked over to him as he regained his footing. Before him was a large pit. Obscene growls and menacing snarls issued from the pitch black hole in the ground. Wraith had mentioned the creatures that lived in the canyons of this realm and I couldn't believe Brad would last too long down there.

I stood next to him yet he was unaware of my presence now that the flames had died away. When he went to go back the way he'd come, he ran right into me. Fear lined his face as he tried to figure out which would be the less painful fate, the pit or me. In his absent-minded state, he staggered backwards and slipped. I wanted to find out more about this place before meeting Shaddo and figured Brad could help. As he fell, I dove for the pit, grabbing his arm just as he was about to plummet to the bottom. He clenched down on my forearm, hoping to stave off his imminent demise.

I began to pull him up when I thought I heard movement behind me. I nearly let Brad fall into the chasm when I looked behind me. I couldn't see anyone, yet couldn't get over the feeling that I was being closely watched. As I went to pull Brad back to the surface, a voice spoke from the shadows.

"Why not let him fall? It would serve him well." The voice was grainy yet authoritative. Most of all, the voice sounded extremely old.

"It certainly would," I replied, "but I'd like him to stick around a while longer."

"Then get me out of here!" Brad yelled from the hole.

"Why should you care, Patrick? Aren't you the one that sent him here?" the voice asked.

I was having trouble concentrating on the conversation while pulling Brad out of the pit. He was almost to the point where he could grab the rim of the pit. With one good yank, I pulled Brad up high enough for him to hold on to the edge of the chasm. Seeing as he was now somewhat secured, I turned my attention to my mysterious visitor.

I stood and surveyed the scene. All there was to see was shadows piled on top of shadows. My vision wasn't affected by my gloomy surroundings yet I couldn't find who was talking to me. It wasn't until he wanted to be seen that I found him. A man about my height, at first glance he appeared to be dressed from head to toe in black. It wasn't until he came near that I realized he was coated in darkness. His eyes

were red, glowing orbs on his face, yet no light penetrated the darkness. He floated over to me, and that was when I noticed he didn't have any feet or legs to speak of. His body wasn't shrouded in shadows. His body was made from them.

"Let him fall, Patrick," Shaddo said. "I'm sure my pets in the canyon could use a new plaything."

"I'm sure they could, and if I had my way I'd see to it that he faced an even more violent end. But not now and not here."

"His life means that much to you?" he asked, taken aback by my response.

"His life means nothing to me, but we aren't talking about his life. We're talking about his afterlife. Besides, if it weren't for him I wouldn't be here. On some level, I guess I owe him a debt of gratitude."

"And sparing him from eternal torment repays that debt? He'll suffer for eternity anyway. Whether it be here or elsewhere, it will happen."

"Then let it happen. Just not now."

"As you wish," he said stately. In a barely audible whisper, he added, "I know why you're here. You wish to speak with Nacht."

"I guess so. You know more than I do. I was told by Lillith to come here."

"Ah yes, Lady Lillith. Wonderful woman," he said wistfully. "I'm surprised she didn't tell you more about your mission here. Just as well, really. Nacht will not speak to you right now anyway."

"Excuse me?" I blurted out. "Why not?"

"Because it is not time for you to hear his words."

I moved towards my adversary, getting as close as I could before falling into the shadows he was composed of. "That is not for you to say. Let Nacht tell me himself."

"On this matter, I speak for him."

My anger rose in my mind as I listened to Shaddo. All I had endured, from my deaths to my transformation in Lillith's courtroom, had apparently been for naught. "Lillith believes me to be worthy to seek his guidance."

"She is wrong."

His condescending tone infuriated me. I couldn't stand to hear one more word from him. There was a pit directly behind him and I knew that one good shot would send him tumbling to the beasts below. Without warning, I swung with all my might. My fist passed through him with no resistance.

“Did you really think that would work?” he laughed. “I am Shaddo, child of the Ancient Darkness. Here, I am king and no one shall upset my rule.”

“You bow to Lillith,” I growled, “just as you will bow to me someday.”

His raspy laughter enraged me even more. “I bow to no one’s wishes but my father’s. Now and forever more. Lillith and I have an accord but she has no more power here than you do, or ever will.”

I swung at Shaddo again, hoping to catch him off-guard. Again my arm sank into the shadows and passed through with no effect. The only difference this time was that Shaddo had clearly tired of my disrespect for him. When a shadow sprouted from him and formed into an arm, I remained unfazed. I surmised that, if I couldn’t hit him, he clearly couldn’t hit me. I was dead wrong.

His phantom arm crashed into my face with such force that it knocked my mask off. “That will be enough of that!” he bellowed as I staggered backwards from the blow.

I ignored the pain in my jaw and wheeled around to face him. My mask was still on the ground, revealing my true face. I couldn’t see what I looked like without it, but from Shaddo’s reaction I knew it wasn’t pleasant. He took a few steps back until he was hovering over a dark crater.

“And that will be the last time you ever lay a hand on me!” I yelled back. “How dare you attempt to strike me down? I may be lesser in your eyes and not worthy of Nacht’s council, but that will change soon enough. If you care to keep your position of power you will apologize now or forever regret your decision.”

Shaddo continued to float above a hole in the ground as he contemplated my offer. After a minute’s thought, he drifted over to me and bowed his murky head. “My humblest apologies, Patrick.” Raising his head, he looked me in the eye and said, “Now, let us put this unpleasantness behind us and discuss this matter like civilized beings.”

“Fine with me,” I snarled, “but don’t think your stare intimidates me.”

“I only keep my eyes on yours so as not to have to catch the merest glimpse of your entire face. If you don’t mind?”

He pointed down at my mask, lying on the ground. I flashed Shaddo a sly grin as I bent down to retrieve it. My smile faded when I spied a slick black mass pulsating on its interior. I picked up the mask and examined this new discovery. The dark matter was beating as if it were my heart, throbbing in a steady rhythm. As I drew the mask towards

my face for a closer look, I realized the mass occupying my mask lined up perfectly with the scar on my face. When I placed the mask on my face, the small piece of my aura that had remained in the mask reattached itself.

I rose to face Shaddo once more and saw he had relaxed a bit. His cloudy form had retreated a few steps and he waited silently while I straightened my mask. Once settled, our conversation began anew.

"I believe you may have misunderstood my previous statement to you, Patrick," he began. "I was not the one that deemed you unworthy to hold council with Nacht. It was Nacht himself. He is eager to pass his wisdom along to you, but as long as you retain even the faintest hint of humanity and purity you cannot be graced by his presence unless you enter the Void. The problem is, the Void would reject you out of hand because of that very humanity and purity you hold onto."

I re-examined my aura and noticed the small glint of silver and gold in my chest, right where my heart would be. It was Maelduin's love for me, and mine for him, that was keeping Nacht away. If that were true then Nacht would have to wait a long time to speak to me. That was the one thing I knew I'd never lose.

"Then I shall wait as long as it takes. I'm sure what he has to pass along will be worth it," I commented.

"Indeed it will," he assured me. "Believe me, you're patience will be well rewarded."

"I'm sure," I said skeptically. I still wasn't completely sure what Nacht wanted to discuss, but Shaddo made it sound vitally important and I was in no position to disagree. "So what now?"

"You mean, where do you go from here? Back to life, of course. Your aura is already starting to dim. You must feel the pull by now."

I could indeed feel my soul yearning to return to my body. I didn't think our conversation was finished yet. However, I didn't think I'd have much more time to complete it either.

"Will I have to sleep for it to happen?" I asked.

"Of course."

"How will I know I'll be safe while I'm asleep?"

"You have my personal guarantee," he said, smiling as best he could. Shadows rearranged themselves into a mock smile. I was sure it wasn't an expression he'd had much occasion to use.

"Can I get one other from you?"

"And what would that be?"

I motioned to the pit that Brad was still clinging to. The creature's howls from below his dangling feet had grown into a frenzy while Shaddo and I had our meeting. "Train him. That is all I ask of you for now."

Shaddo floated over to Brad and lifted him effortlessly out of harm's way. Still looking at me as Brad hung in the air, he asked, "Why would you have me train a zero such as this mortal? What possible use could he be to you?"

I flashed Brad a malicious smile and said to him, "Bradley Malloy, will you serve me and my mission, both here in Haedes and on Earth?"

"I'll do whatever you want," he pleaded.

"That's not good enough," I told him. "Will you serve me with all due loyalty and vigilance?"

Brad's face became relaxed as he willingly answered, "I will."

"Will you listen to all Shaddo has to teach you and learn from him his ways?"

"I will."

"Will you put all your energies into his lessons of darkness and violence so as to better serve me when called upon?"

"I will."

I looked at Shaddo and said, "And that is why I want you to train him. He is a willing servant of evil and will be a grateful student when all is said and done."

Shaddo looked upon me with awe. My reasoning had caught him off guard but he seemed to agree with it. "Very well, Patrick. I will see to it that he becomes more than the zero his is now."

Shaddo still had Brad in the air as I finally succumbed to the urge to sleep. "That is all I ask for now," I repeated groggily.

"Sleep well, Patrick. Your first minion's duty will be to watch over you as you rest. Should anything happen to you before you are reborn, you know who to blame."

"Thank you, Shaddo."

"And you as well, Patrick. I believe I'm going to enjoy working with you in the future."

With that, the land of shadows faded before my eyes. I slept, knowing when I woke Haedes would be gone from view. The world of the living awaited me. Little did they know they were waiting for someone new.

I awoke inside a coffin. I wasn't completely shocked by this, just dismayed. I had hoped my brother would've found a better resting place

for my corpse. As I awaited the anticipated flood of memories from Maelduin, I noticed a piece of paper tacked to the inside of the coffin. Written on it in Maelduin's handwriting were two simple words.

“Wait here.”

Chapter 13

By the time all Maelduin's memories had finished running through my mind I thought my head would explode. I hadn't been in Haedes long, it hadn't even been a day, but clearly I was dead longer than that. From what I could tell from Maelduin's remembrances, I must've been gone for weeks. When Dorma had killed me I was back in a few days, and she tore up my mortal shell fairly severely. I had to assume decapitation just took longer to heal.

My time away had been most beneficial for my brother. His training had commenced and he showed a willingness to learn everything asked of him. His combat training was an immense help. I saw though his memories that there wasn't a swordsman in Rendell that could best him. In hand-to-hand, the only one that could stop him was himself. His teachers had to remind him several times that he was expected to injure his opponent. Maelduin just couldn't bring himself to actually hurt someone on purpose. Any and all free time was spent in the library with Michael going over the lessons of our family. He used this knowledge to address the citizens of Rendell once a week, regaling them with tales and the lessons to be learn from them. The town square was pack full every time he spoke, and not a soul uttered a solitary word during the sermon. Itna was apparently right in at least one regard. The people of Rendell loved my brother.

I heeded my brother's advice and waited for him to come to me. I could see him in my mind and he didn't look happy at all. The joyous reunion I had hoped for wasn't going to happen. He didn't say anything to me directly but I could read his feelings. Every time I pried into his mind, all that was returned to me was a wave of disappointment. I tried to ask him why he was so despondent but it was like talking to a brick wall.

As I patiently waited for my brother to come for me, I listened to the sounds outside my coffin. I heard footsteps passing by constantly and had to wonder exactly where I was. I figured Maelduin would've kept me hidden lest Itna decide to desecrate my lifeless body in some fashion. Hours past and the foot traffic around me began to fade. I could only assume the day was getting late and people were heading back to their homes. Soon it would be time for me to do the same.

My mind wandered as I lay in repose. I thought back to my experiences in Haedes and found I was glad things turned out the way they did. I didn't trust Lillith. That was the one thing I was most sure of.

Everything she told me contained an emptiness, holes that she either couldn't or wouldn't fill in. I knew in my heart she was afraid of me. She believed I would take her throne and therefore her power. It was certainly the reason Loathe was so surly upon our meeting. Shaddo, on the other hand, said he was looking forward to working together. It made me wonder what he knew that he wasn't telling me. Contrary to the way Lillith acted, Shaddo seemed to know quite a bit and probably would've told me more had I asked. And, though our encounter didn't go too well at first, in the end I felt he actually liked me. Maybe he just liked what I would become.

As I thought about Shaddo, I heard noises from outside my coffin. I didn't have my axe anymore, leaving me defenseless. I tensed, ready to pounce should my visitor prove to be someone other than Maelduin. It was, but I didn't attack. The lid to my coffin was removed and I found myself staring into familiar eyes.

"Welcome back," Joshua said cautiously. He appeared happy to see me, but his smile seemed forced.

"Good to be back," I tried to say as pleasantly as possible. It must not have come out like I had hoped, for Joshua took a precautionary step away from the coffin.

"Come on. There's no one around. Lord Maelduin's looking forward to seeing you."

"Why do I not believe that?"

"Patrick, he's missed you," my friend said sheepishly.

"I don't doubt that. But still, I'm sure he's not as eager to see me as you think."

Joshua put a hand on my shoulder as I crawled out of my coffin. The sadness in his eyes was evident as he said, "Actually, he's quite eager to see you. You, however, probably won't like what he has to say."

"I don't doubt that either."

I surveyed my surroundings and saw I was in the town square. Itna had put my casket on display for all to see. Choosing to make an example of me was brash, even for her. It also must've kept Maelduin from hiding the coffin. At least the lid was closed so no one could witness me healing. That certainly would've made things more complicated for all involved.

Joshua led the way, weaving down various side streets. Dim light was visible from a few houses, but other than that all was dark. Joshua knew the streets and had no trouble making his way along. I thought we were going to go back to his house. But like much I'd assumed lately, I was once again wrong.

We arrived at a non-descript little house halfway down an alley. It looked abandoned save the one candle glowing in the window. Joshua assured me it was safe to enter so I opened the door and went inside. Joshua did not. He stayed outside, silently standing guard by the door.

I walked into the room and saw that this house had indeed been abandoned at some point in time. There was no furniture except a rickety old table with two chairs positioned in the center of the main room. Sitting at one of these chairs was Maelduin, and he was not happy. I didn't need to hear a single word from him to know it either. The expression on his face was evidence enough.

"Welcome back," he said unemotionally.

"Good to be back," I returned in kind.

"We'll see about that." Maelduin rose from his seat and walked over to me. He was decked out in armor bearing the symbol of Rendell. I'd seen the advances he'd made in his training and figured they would recruit him into their regiment of guards. He locked me in a tight embrace, sending small plumes of smoke into the air. When he pulled away, I saw that his armor had singed my flesh wherever it came into contact.

His gaze bore down on me, making me feel small and weak. I hated that feeling and had never before experienced it because of Maelduin. It was a development I wasn't prepared for and didn't know how to react. We stood in silence for a minute, waiting for the other to speak first. When he did, his words cut deeper than any knife could.

"You can't stay here," he simply said.

"So where are we going to go?" I asked.

His stare intensified as he replied, "I'm not going anywhere."

The anger in his tone reminded me of a voice I'd heard quite often. He sounded almost exactly like me. "What's going on here, brother."

"And that I still am," he said. "Your brother. And I will always love you like a brother. But you cannot stay here. They'll just kill you again."

"Let them try," I said menacingly.

"And that is why you have to go. I still have some training to do. I won't get to do that if you keep killing people."

"I didn't kill anyone that didn't try to kill me first."

"Haven't you ever heard of restraint?" he shouted. His blue eyes were glowing faintly as his temper flared.

"Haven't you ever heard of retribution?" I yelled back.

"There was no need to kill those people. Brad maybe, but not the rest of them."

"They were trying to execute me!"

"And they failed! Don't you get that? You could've come down from that pyre and left town. I probably would've gone with you. But you wanted to die. You wanted to go back to Haedes."

"That's not true," I said.

"Don't lie to me!" The sky blue light beaming from his eyes lit up the room. I noticed a mirror hanging on the wall as the light reflected off of it. "You didn't even think about other options. No Limbo for you. No Earth. It was all about Haedes. After Joshua was released, he kept an eye on your healing. What he told me chilled me to the bone. I was hoping he was wrong but I can see now he was indeed telling the unfortunate truth. Do you want to see what your most recent visit has brought?"

Maelduin pointed to the mirror on the wall and I made my way over. The mask was still on my face, but now three small horns poked through the holes on the brow. My damaged eye seeped blood constantly causing blood to run down the face of my mask. My teeth had changed as well. My incisors had curled downward into small fangs, making me look somewhat animalistic. More than animalistic, I looked demonic. A smile crossed my lips before I could contain it and I knew Maelduin saw it. Not wanting to continue the lecture I was getting, I decided to change the topic.

"What did you mean when you said after Joshua got released?" I asked.

"He was sent to prison for helping you. Thankfully he didn't kill anyone in the fight. That small fact was the only thing that saved his life. I asked Itna to release him this morning, right after I felt your presence on this plane again. I didn't tell her why."

"So no one knows but you, me and Joshua?"

"That's right. And that's the way it's going to stay. If you leave now."

"You'd turn in your own brother?" I was stunned at his assertion.

"In this case, I'd have no other choice."

"There's always a choice Maelduin. Isn't that what we learned?"

"And your choice leaves me no other. I'm willing to bet you made your choice a long time ago, probably when Christi Lona expelled you from Haven. Don't tell me if I'm right. I don't want to know. Just keep that fact hidden, okay?"

The blue light from his eyes had faded and he was back to normal. There was still fury in those eyes and I knew he felt bad about it. Not completely, but there was undeniably regret in his mind.

"It's what was meant to be," I told him.

"It's what you wanted," he curtly answered back. "Now, please, for your benefit as well as mine, you need to leave. Your soul is tainted beyond repair and it hurts me to even look at you."

"So that's it? You're abandoning me," I said, dejected and outraged.

"Patrick, it is you who abandoned me with the choices you've made. Maybe someday, hopefully someday soon, we can put this past us and reclaim the bond we once had. But I fear for now that bond is broken."

Again, silence fell between us. I couldn't get into his mind like I had in the past. This time I could only get vague emotions and feelings. Even without being able to hear his thoughts, I knew there would be no changing his mind.

"Fine. I'll leave. But where am I supposed to go?"

"That is entirely up to you," he replied, much calmer now that I had agreed to his request.

Maelduin stepped forward for one last embrace before I departed for lands unknown. I moved away, denying him. I couldn't embrace someone who wanted me out of his life, especially Maelduin. In my wildest dreams I never expected this day to come. Now that it had, I wasn't furious. I wasn't even upset. I was disgusted. Those proclaiming to be the most pure of heart had sentenced me to die after a rigged trial and my brother had taken their side. I had told him not to interfere for his own safety and so he could get trained. I didn't expect him to get brainwashed in the process. He had made his choices too, and I didn't agree with them one bit.

I turned and headed for the door when Maelduin spoke up once more. "Don't you want your axe?" he asked.

I looked back at him and gave him my most wicked smile. "If I want it, I'll come back for it." With that said I continued on my way out, leaving my brother to contemplate our futures and what may come.

Joshua was still outside, standing at attention. When he saw me exit the ramshackle house, he wished me well. I wasn't mad at him even though he knew what Maelduin was going to say. He was just following orders like a good soldier. I told him to keep my brother out of trouble and asked for the quickest exit out of town. Joshua gave me directions to a small, unmanned gate along the west wall.

I found the gate easily. Once I'd opened it, I gave Rendell one fleeting glance and vowed to return someday soon.

There weren't many paths to follow heading west but I carried on regardless. The fewer paths I followed, the less people I'd encounter. In my present state of mind, I couldn't imagine leaving them unharmed. I badly wanted to take out my aggression on someone, anyone. Itna had made a fleeting reference to giants living to the west of Rendell. Unarmed, I would be no match for giants. I had to hope I'd come across a human. I wouldn't need a weapon to utterly destroy a mere human.

Alas, there were none to be seen the entire morning. In fact, there were no signs of life to be found anywhere. As I trudged onward, deeper into the dense forest, I didn't spot one rabbit, I heard no birds singing in the trees, nothing. I hadn't seen a forest completely devoid of life before. The various trees were bearing fruit. There were bushes with plump, bluish berries scattered about. Everything a thriving forest and its inhabitants needed to survive was here in abundance. Yet I didn't see so much as a squirrel.

Thinking about the lack of life in the forest kept my mind away from thinking about Maelduin. Part of me understood his reasoning. He did need to finish his training and, more importantly, Itna would surely see me killed again. If she was wise, and I'm sure she believed herself to be, she wouldn't take any half-measures the second time. My heart would be quartered and the pieces spirited off to the far corners of the earth. All that considered, Maelduin should've let me kill her. That would've solved the problem. Granted, it would've caused several more.

Letting my mind wander back to Maelduin caused my anger to flare up again. Thankfully, a young doe crossed my path. It was the first living creature I'd seen in the forest since I'd left Rendell. More importantly, it was food. I hadn't eaten in a while and felt the urge for a bite. The doe stood stone still, staring at me with no fear in its big brown eyes. I remembered all the times that Nathaniel Graves had sent me hunting barehanded. I never failed to bring something back. I had hunted down deer twice the size of the one before me now. This would be a simple task, or so I thought. Maybe the animal heard my thoughts, or maybe it just smelled something in the air it didn't like. Either way, it jumped backwards, turned and ran off quicker than a bolt of lightning. Not wanting to be denied a good meal, I gave chase.

The doe knew the woods much better than I and used that knowledge well. It darted this way and that as it ran, never keeping a straight path for too long lest I gain ground. Up ahead I saw the thick

forest begin to thin out. I would be able to catch up to my running meal if it opened into a clearing and didn't have to dodge so many damn trees. The doe broke left and dashed into the clearing I was hoping for. I was stopped cold by what met my eyes when I exited the forest into the open ground.

There was a small cabin that looked like it could fall down at any second. Small plumes of smoke drifted out of the chimney, telling me there was someone home. The door to the cabin was shut and the windows were covered, so I didn't know how many people were inside. But it wasn't the cabin that made me stop. It was the animals. Virtually every woodland creature from miles around had gathered here, encircling the ramshackle cabin. Birds of all kinds and colors lined the rickety roofline and perched on the crumbling chimney. Deer, rabbits, chipmunks, snakes and even a few bears were standing guard outside. I could only assume that was their intent. When I appeared, sprinting out of the tree line, some of the larger animals moved closer to the door. Now they paced back and forth in front of the entrance.

The door slowly opened as I stood marveling at the scene in front of me. I had never seen so many animals gathered together in one place. They were all watching me until the door opened. When that happened, their attention was instantly directed there. I recognized the person who'd opened the door and knew I wasn't going to be able to let out my aggression on her.

"Shoo! Go away!" Valencia pleaded with the menagerie. "He's here now. I'm sure he won't let anything bad happen to me."

The animals all looked at her then, as one, they turned back to look at me. One of the larger bears let out an impressive roar, apparently not willing to leave his station quite yet. I roared back at him, causing the smaller creatures to scurry away to seek safer ground among the trees and bushes. The bears didn't move. When I moved towards the cabin, Valencia again told the bears to go, and this time they listened.

I walked up to my sister, who was standing just outside the cabin watching the last of the animals wander back into the forest. The only one that remained was a lone raven perched on the chimney. Its coal black eyes stared down at me intently, watching my every move. There were a lot of things I wanted to ask her, like what she was doing in a cabin in the middle of a forest. But all that came out was, "What was that all about?"

She shrugged and replied, "Animals love me. I'm not sure why." With that said, she quietly turned and walked back inside. I followed close behind, closing the door as I entered.

As soon as we were safely inside, Valencia spun around and almost knocked me over with the ferocity of her embrace. "It's so good to see you again, Patrick. Especially alive. Seeing you dead isn't fun at all," she remarked.

"Being dead isn't much fun," I told her.

She released me and said slyly, "Oh, I seriously doubt that."

Valencia walked over to the fireplace as I surveyed the room. Her bright white outfit and blonde hair were in stark contrast to our present surroundings. The cabin was in the same state of disrepair as the house Maelduin had been in earlier. The table looked sturdier and the two chairs flanking it didn't look quite as old. Other than that, the cabin looked as if it had been abandoned years ago. Valencia threw another log on the fire and asked me to take a seat. I went to pull out a chair when she abruptly stopped me.

"No, no. Not that seat. That's mine," she said.

"Sorry," I mumbled. I noticed a cudgel leaning against the table leg next to the chair and assumed it was hers. Maybe she just wanted to stay close to her weapon. I sat down in the other chair per her request. In one fluid motion, she plopped down in the other chair and gracefully swung her legs up to rest her feet on the table.

"No apologies necessary. It's just that I've been waiting for this moment for weeks and finally figured out how I wanted this to go."

"You planned out our meeting?"

"Not planned. I don't like plans. More like a general outline of the conversation. Where it takes us, it takes us."

Her smile was infectious and I couldn't help but match it. I didn't know much about my sister Valencia other than the fact that she didn't get along with our other brother too well. The last I'd seen of her was when she was arguing with Vincent right before we left Nathaniel's castle.

"You've been waiting here for me?"

"Sure have," she said cheerfully.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long."

"No, not long at all. Actually, your timing couldn't be better. I finally got what I was waiting for."

"And that would be?"

"In a minute," she politely admonished. "First, I wanted to talk about you. You've changed since the last time I saw you, and I don't just mean your appearance. Still, changes have to happen. I can only assume all this happened while in Haedes, correct?"

"It is."

"Is that the only other realm you've been to, other than that initial trip to Haven of course?"

"No. I've been to Limbo, or close to it. I'm not really sure. It was all very confusing."

"Confusing?" she laughed. "Then you were most certainly in Limbo. Did you meet Styx?"

"Sure did. And she did nothing to dispel my confusion."

"Oh, I'm sure she added to it. Personally, never having died I've never had the pleasure of meeting her. I've heard great things about her though."

"She was okay I guess."

"And Lillith? What do you make of her?"

"I'm still working on that," I honestly replied.

"Not sure what to make of the queen of lies. Why does that not surprise me?"

"She spoke well of you," I told her.

"Really? She did?" Valencia's smile was ear-to-ear and lighting up the room more than the meager fire.

"She said you'd do well in Haedes, being a liar yourself."

"Well, I am a liar. Though I may be lying about that."

I went to respond until I thought about what she'd just said. If she was lying about being a liar, that would mean she wasn't a liar. But then she would've just lied about being a liar, making her a liar. My mind simply couldn't grasp her logic.

"You can really give a guy a headache, you know that?" I informed her.

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

"You said you wanted to help me," I reminded, hoping a change of topic would quell the ache behind my eyes.

"Sure did," she gleefully agreed.

"Why?"

The smile faded from her delicate face in a heartbeat. "Why not? You're my brother after all."

"Are you helping Maelduin too?"

"Nope."

"And what about Vincent?"

"Why would I help him?" she spat out. The mere mention of his name caused her entire body language to change. She tensed as the anger rose in her eyes.

"Isn't he your brother as well?"

"Yes, he is. And there's nothing I can do to change that."

“So why me?”

Her smile returned as quickly as it had faded. “Two reasons. First, you weren’t given a choice in how your life would play out. I don’t think that’s fair and I don’t think its right.”

“I’ve made my own choices,” I remarked.

“When you’ve been given the opportunity. Think about it. Every choice you’ve made has been either pre-determined for you or you’ve been punished so as not to make the same choice again. When you sacrificed your life for Maelduin’s, you were basically told it was for naught. When Christi Lona said you weren’t allowed in Haven, she sealed your fate by sending you to Haedes, where she and others believed you belonged. It is these same people that believe you’re the one that will take over Haedes.”

“My fate isn’t sealed yet. What about Limbo?” I asked, remembering the words Styx had told me.

“Did Christi Lona mention Limbo to you at the time?”

“Just in passing as she was telling me about our family and my history.”

“But where did she send you when she cast you out of Haven?”

“Haedes.”

“Right. She made the choice for you. She should’ve sent you to Styx and let her be your judge. How could you possibly believe you could be meant for any other realm? You saved the life of the one person you’d come to love and depend on, and Christi Lona decided that, not only were you not worthy of Haven, you didn’t even merit a meeting with Styx. That wasn’t her choice to make.”

Valencia’s voice had grown as her anger at Christi Lona increased. I was quite taken aback by her attitude. I thought I was the only one with ill feelings towards Christi Lona and her ilk. “You don’t like her very much, do you?”

“Oh, I love her. I just don’t always agree with her. Just like Lillith. I love Lillith. I just don’t always agree with her either. I make my own decisions, my own choices. I’ve been allowed to. You haven’t. And that is one reason I want to help you.”

“So what’s the other?”

“Sympathy. Not just for the lack of choices you’ve been given, but more due to the fact that the first time I saw my little brother he was dead.”

“I’m fine, Valencia.”

“Please, call me Val if you want. We’re family after all.”

“Fine. Val it is.” I couldn’t help but laugh a little at her casual attitude. It was such a change from a few seconds ago when I thought she was going to declare her own personal war on Haven. “But as I said, I’m fine.”

“You could be doing better. You’ve been held back, having to learn most of your true talents on your own. You’ve been the ‘other’ sibling all the time. I can tell. It’s written in your eyes. Sorry, eye. Top that off with the lack of freewill and I can’t help but feel badly for you. On top of all that, the first time we met was when you died. I can’t not feel bad for you.”

“I don’t want your pity,” I grumbled at her.

“Well, you’re getting it. It’s not a bad thing, you know. Having someone that’s willing, by her own volition, to help you out because she feels somewhat sorry for you is a good thing. Trust me.”

“How can you help?” I asked, more out of curiosity than the belief that she could do anything useful.

“By looking out for you. By taking a vested interest in your life. Mostly, by giving you this.”

She swung her legs off the table and reached down for the cudgel. She raised it up so I could get a good look at the weapon. It was a simple club, not made of wood but some dull gray metal. At first glance, it didn’t seem all that spectacular. A few more glances gave me the same impression.

“It’s a cudgel,” I said blankly.

“It’s not a cudgel,” she said, reveling in my confusion.

“Looks like a cudgel.”

“Sure does. But it’s not a cudgel.”

“Okay. I give up. How is it not a cudgel?”

“Because it can do this.”

She turned her wrist ever so slightly around the handle of the weapon, causing the most amazing sight. The club changed from its simple appearance to something more impressive. Spikes at least nine inches long shot out from the meat of the weapon. Every one of the tines looked razor sharp, able to inflict massive damage to anyone unlucky enough to be on the receiving end.

“That’s not a cudgel,” I said in awe.

“I told you so,” she said back, all proud of herself. She turned her wrist again, making the spikes withdraw into the club again before laying it on the table between us. “But this is only what it does for me. It reacts to the person wielding it. The longer you own it, and the more you use it, the more it can and will become.”

“And you’re giving this to me?”

“I sure am. According to Wraith, it’s called the Entropic flail. I know, it doesn’t look like a flail, but it’s what he called it and who am I to argue?”

“Wraith gave this to you to give to me?”

“No, I asked him to make something for me that I could give to you. After our first meeting, I bumped into Wraith less than a mile away from the castle. He noticed me crying over what had happened to you and tried to comfort me. Not an easy task, let me tell you. But he did a good job.

“You see, Wraith and I have a history. I made a deal with Vincent centuries ago. I would stay in Egypt while he traveled the globe doing whatever it is he thought he needed to do. I hadn’t seen him in thousands of years before he came to get me that fateful day. Now, it can get lonely living underneath a pyramid for a couple of millennia. So to pass the time I’d occasionally summon Wraith. His summoning spell was the first spell I ever learned. Most of the time he wasn’t happy to be interrupted from whatever it was he was doing but he never got mad at me. Over time we established a rapport. Even more, we gained each other’s respect.

“When I saw him that day, I told him I wanted to do something to help you. A few suggestions were made and we settled on a weapon. He returned to Limbo and charged Bedlam himself with its creation, hence the chaotic nature of the weapon. It is my gift to you, with the hope that you can use it as you see fit. Let it become part of you, just like your mask.”

I was stunned. I barely knew Valencia and here she was going out of her way to give me this wonderful weapon. I could only imagine what the weapon would be like in my hands and was eager to find out. I picked up the Entropic flail and flicked my wrist much like Valencia had done. Again, spikes shot out from it. It was even more remarkable close up but I couldn’t help being a little disappointed.

“Why did it do the same thing for me as it did for you? I thought you said it would react differently to me.”

“And it will, I’m sure. You just have to give it time. Right now, all you’ve seen it do is create the spikes. When your mind is more open to all the available possibilities I’m confident it will do more.”

I examined the weapon closely before returning it to its dormant state. “Thank you,” I said appreciatively.

“No need for that, little brother. I’m happy to help. Now I think it’s time I got back to Egypt. I told Vincent I was going to hang around

for a while but I didn't think I'd be away from home for quite this long. If he knew he'd have a fit."

"You aren't afraid of him, are you?" I jokingly asked.

"Of course not! It's just that we have a deal and I don't want to be the one to break it. I keep my word to my family, unlike Vincent."

She stood up from the table and I did likewise. Once again she locked me in a tight embrace. I wrapped my arms around her, returning the gesture. My fondness of her was genuine and I wanted her to realize that before we parted.

"So what now?" I asked.

"Personally, I'd recommend continuing west. The giants live that way and they may be useful."

"Useful for what?"

"Whatever you can get them to do for you."

We walked over to the door and I half expected the animals to have returned. They didn't and Valencia seemed relieved. I stepped out but she remained inside.

"Aren't you going to head back to Egypt?" I asked.

"In a little while," she said, seemingly fighting back tears. The sadness in her eyes vanished in a flash as she said, "One more bit of useful advice, if I may?"

"Anything," I responded.

"Just this. Swing through."

"Swing through?"

"That's right. Swing through."

"I'll remember that," I said, wondering exactly what she meant. Her advice was puzzling, but seeing as how she was the essence of Chaos that was to be expected.

She stood in the doorway, watching me as I walked away. Before I re-entered the forest on the far side of the clearing, I looked back to see her wiping a tear from her cheek. A raven circled overhead as I entered the trees, one last vestige of my time with my sister. The sight of it made me feel as if she'd be watching over me for a while. Seeing it following me, I was becoming more optimistic about what may lie ahead.

There was no path to follow as I continued westward into the dying day, yet I knew I was heading in the right direction. Whenever I had doubts I would just look to the raven overhead. It seemed to know where I wanted to go. I wasn't sure how but I knew it was true all the same. Maybe Valencia had charged the blackbird with escorting me on

my journey. She did seem have a way with animals, even if she wasn't quite sure why.

I still hadn't gotten the bite to eat I had hoped for. My hunger wasn't overwhelming but it still needed quenching. As the clouds above darkened along with the night, I decided to seek shelter instead of food. As I searched for an abandoned cave to settle down in for the night, luck intervened. A buck with a full rack stepped into my path, oblivious to my presence.

In the darkness I had the advantage. I could see the male deer clearly as it grazed on a berry bush. Remembering what Wraith had taught me about my mask, I attempted to teleport through the shadows to surprise my prey. I stood in place and concentrated on the shadow located directly behind the deer. I closed my eyes and felt my body fade into the shadows around me. When I opened them back up I was where I had hoped to be. The buck never saw me appear and hadn't moved.

I sprung, wrapping my arms around the buck's thick neck. With one practiced move, I snapped its neck as if it were nothing more than dry wood and watched it fall to the ground. I licked my lips, eager for a taste of the fresh meat. Something inside me wanted more than that, and wanted it badly. I knelt down next to the dead deer and sank my feral teeth into its neck. Fresh blood gushed into my mouth as I ripped open an artery with my fangs. I stayed there, drinking the blood of my kill, until the rain began to fall. As the first drops hit my flesh, I stood up from the animal and prepared to drag it off to whatever shelter might be available.

I looked around for the raven and found it sitting silently in a nearby tree. It cawed once and flew off. I assumed that to mean I was to follow and I turned out to be right. The raven zigzagged between the trees and I had some difficulty keeping up while trailing a large deer behind me. When the bird finally slowed, it perched on a low hanging branch near the entrance to a cave. Without thinking about it, I thanked the raven and instantly felt stupid for doing such an absurd thing. Oddly, the raven cawed once and appeared to nod at me before flying off into the night.

I ventured deep into the cave and into the deepening darkness. Since there was no wood for a fire this far back in the cavern I simply created some black fire. I ripped one of the buck's legs off and held it over the dark flames. I could smell the meat cooking but no longer hungered for meat. All I wanted was blood. I pulled the leg from the fire and took a bite of the still raw meat. Its bloody juices flowed into my mouth, energizing me. The taste of the bloody, raw meat was much more

satisfying than any cooked meal I'd ever eaten. I let the fire die out since I could see everything in the dank, dark cave as clearly as if it were daytime.

I didn't sleep during the night. I couldn't. My mind was in constant motion. One thought pounded away at me. My brother had forsaken me. He didn't want me around, lest I corrupt him or kill someone. He wouldn't stand by me, to defend me, should I decide to do something he deemed wrong. He didn't care anymore. Even though Valencia had shown that someone cared about my well-being, it wasn't the same. Maelduin had always been the one keeping me grounded. Now there was no one. Even the raven had flown away.

Not much penetrated the blanket of storm clouds covering the night sky. Not even a single stray beam of moonlight found its way this deep into the cave. I had rounded enough corners to put the entrance well out of view. In the midst of that dark, eternal night I had an epiphany. I didn't have any restraints anymore. There was no one to stop me from doing as I pleased. More to the point, we were gods, whether my other siblings wanted to admit it or not. Not only didn't I have restraints, I shouldn't have them. If I wanted to kill Itna, I should be free to do it. There were only three others like me on the planet and only they were powerful enough to stop me. I didn't think Valencia would stand in my way. She probably thought much like I did anyway. There was the possibility of Vincent stepping in. At our one meeting, he came across as somewhat strict and probably wouldn't appreciate a person of my temperament. Still, I didn't know enough about him to make a solid judgment. Then, of course, there was Maelduin.

It was time for me to see exactly where my brother's loyalties truly resided. I needed to know if he would stand with me, against me, or just stand aside. We wouldn't be in our present situation if it weren't for Itna and her followers. It was her that asked us to kill the dragons in the beginning. She was the one that judged me when she had no right. It was her ruling that sent me to my execution. She was the one that smiled as they lit the flames beneath my feet. Even though my sentence wasn't carried out as they'd hoped, they did succeed. This time it was her that condemned me to Haedes. The more I thought about Itna, the more my blood boiled. I made up my mind then and there to kill that heartless bitch. It would be the prefect test for Maelduin. I needed to see if he would intervene.

Valencia had suggested I continue west towards the land of the giants. She even mentioned that they could be useful. I had a feeling she was right.

Chapter 14

I had finished off the rest of the raw deer meat by the time the sun came up, leaving behind nothing but bare bones scattered throughout the cave. All night long, as I devoured the dead animal, I thought about a plan to kill Itna. I had an idea of what I needed to do to enlist the giants. That was the easy part. It was the rest of the plan that had a lot of flaws and wishful thinking. No matter what course of action I chose, I was going to be forced to do something I didn't want to. I was going to have to talk to others and make some deals. Diplomacy wasn't one of my strong points.

Once I'd decided on an acceptable strategy, I exited the cave and journeyed on to the west. I wasn't sure how far I was from the giants' lair. I wasn't even sure how far I was from Rendell. Yesterday was mostly a blur, nothing more than a streaked painting in my mind. All I could think about now was killing Itna and everything I needed to do to accomplish that task.

The sun was just beginning its voyage towards sunset, beating down on my body as I walked on. I had no clue where I was going and was beginning to doubt I would even see a giant. Thankfully, the forest was beginning to thin out. I wasn't completely surrounded anymore, making the journey less strenuous. I decided to take a break from the blinding sunlight and attempt to get my bearings. Leaning up against a tree, I found the coolness of the shade relaxing. Maybe it was more due to the fact that the shadow of the large tree comforted me in some way. Knowing I could simply drop into a shadow and reappear nearby fueled my belief in my godlike status.

There was a rustling nearby, snapping me away from my modest rest. I peeked around the tree hoping to spy the cause of the sound. At first I didn't see anything, just more trees. When I spotted one of the smaller trees move was when I got excited. A giant was traveling the same direction I was and apparently hadn't noticed me. Since I had the upper hand, I chose to use it. In the blink of an eye, I jumped from the shadow under my tree to the one the giant had just passed.

It was a male close to fifteen feet tall, with large, fleshy legs and arms. His head was enormous, with a low, protruding chin and sloped brow. The man's gut hung over the burlap rope he used as a belt to keep his clothes in place. Most importantly, he had a huge wooden club in his hand. I knew one good swing with that would send me airborne, so I became as silent as possible as I trailed behind the behemoth.

An hour passed and the giant never had a clue he was being followed. The forest had pretty much cleared out, leaving me less places to hide. As luck would have it, it turned out I didn't need them. The giant slowed his pace as he met up with three others of his kind. I listened to their conversation from behind a tree a safe distance away but couldn't understand most of what they were saying. I used the time to review my options. On one hand, I could've cautiously walked out and introduced myself, hoping they would greet me kindly. Since that never happened before, and I didn't expect it to happen now, I chose the second option. I would attack and try to get an early advantage for the upcoming negotiations.

I ran out from my hiding place, expecting to catch them by surprise. As I rushed at them, spikes on my weapon exposed, they turned as one and stood their ground. The giants had been waiting for me. Clearly I wasn't as stealthy as I'd imagined. The four of them all had large clubs, which made my choosing a target easier. Since they were all equally armed I just attacked the nearest one.

The giant was over twice my size but I had the advantage of quickness. The giant took a lumbering step towards me as I neared. I leapt at him and swung, sinking my weapon into his chest. When I tried to pull my weapon free from his sternum, I found it to be stuck. The spikes had dug into his meaty flesh and lodged in his ribcage. I turned the weapon back to its dormant state just as the giant slapped me from his body as if I were nothing more than an insect. I flew a few yards, landing on my back and sliding. I jumped to my feet in time to watch the giant fall. Blood poured from his chest and cascaded down his belly, creating a waterfall of crimson falling to the earth. He clutched his chest in a vain attempt to stop the bleeding but was unsuccessful. More life-giving blood flowed past his fingers as he collapsed.

The blow I'd taken from my now fallen foe had dazed me but not much. I was already running at another giant, continuing my assault. The three that remained spread out, with one charging at me. The other two circled around in an attempt to flank me. I sprinted at the oncoming giant and released the spikes in the Entropic flail. I reared back with the weapon as I ran and took a hearty swing at the giant's knee. This time I swung through, as my sister had recommended. The giant dodged a direct hit and I only succeeded in ripping a large chunk of flesh from his leg. It was enough however, as the giant fell to the ground writhing in pain.

I jumped onto his head, having more than enough room to stand on his forehead. I peered down at him and held the flail directly above

his eye, pointed downward. The fear within his eyes energized me. Though I could've easily killed the giant, it was now time to talk.

I cried out to his companions, "I don't want to have to kill him. All I want is to talk."

The two giants that had been circling around behind me instead changed course and strode over to their fallen brethren. I wasn't sure they were going to stop at first, so I lowered the flail a little. That stopped them in their tracks.

The one standing to my left took charge and asked, "If you don't want to kill him, why don't you step down?" His voice was deep and slow, making him sound somewhat dim.

"Because this way, if you try anything funny I can drive my weapon into his eye until I touch brain. Are we understood?"

"We are," he said with a knowing nod. "So what is it you wish to talk about?"

"Are you the leader of your clan?" I inquired.

"No, I am not. Dvorn is."

"Then you will take me to him."

"And why do you think he will speak with you?"

"Because I'm the one that felled Dorma, daughter of Zaron."

That had the desired effect. The two standing giants stepped back in awe and began chattering among themselves. After a few seconds of what looked like an intense conversation, they finally spoke to me.

"As you wish. You are something of a hero and a heretic among our kind. Dvorn would want to meet with you."

"Hero and heretic?"

"Yes. For killing Dorma, you are revered. Having Ragnarok and Taladek replace her has made you hated."

"That's not my fault," I told them as I jumped down from my fallen prey.

"Had you not killed Dorma, we would only have to deal with one child of Zaron."

I conceded his point but held firm to my belief that I was blameless as to Dorma's replacements. It wasn't a point I wanted to debate at the moment. The two healthy giants helped their comrade to his feet as they told me to follow them to their village where Dvorn awaited.

The village wasn't far yet the walk was lengthy due to our slow pace. Since one of them was badly wounded, the other two had to help him along. We didn't speak to one another, so I passed the time going

over my plan in my head. It had worked out well to that point, but now I was coming to the difficult part.

There were no walls enclosing the village. Anything large enough to attack giants would have no trouble getting over, or more likely through, any walls they constructed. The homes scattered about were nothing more than crude huts. Though made of simple logs, branches and mud, the construction must have been very demanding. The huts were much larger than normal homes, made to accommodate the race occupying them. The giant that I'd spoken with sent his companion off to seek medical attention for their wounded comrade. He nodded and complied, taking the injured giant with him. The lone remaining giant waved for me to follow him into the town proper.

There wasn't much to see in the village, just more huts and the occasional store or blacksmith. Commerce didn't seem to be a big concern for their race. Even the blacksmiths weren't very busy. Their wares, mainly shovels and picks, sat lined up in neat rows in front of their shops. No forged weapons were to be found anywhere.

I followed the giant to the center of town where we finally came to a halt. I was asked to wait outside the largest hut I'd seen in the entire village. The giant went in and announced my presence to their leader Dvorn. I could barely hear their conversation, but again couldn't understand their language. After a brief minute or two, the giant exited the hut and told me to go inside.

The hut was essentially one large room, divided by a single wall down the center. Dvorn waited alone, seated on a huge oak chair. Apparently I had interrupted his meal. On a plate in his lap was what looked like a large roasted chicken. He resembled the others of his kind physically but the intelligent gaze he cast upon me told me why he was their leader. Since there was no chair available for me, I stood before Dvorn and returned his stare, locking my gaze with his. A tiny grin formed on his ample face before he finally broke the silence.

"So you're the one that brought Ragnarok and Taladek to our domain?" he asked. His deep, rich voice was steady and resolute.

"I'm the one that felled Dorma. I am not responsible for the other two's arrival."

"But isn't their sister's death the reason they're here?"

"Indeed it is, but that is not my concern. More importantly, it shouldn't be yours."

"And why not? The dragons are our enemies. We're in constant conflict with them."

“And why is that anyway?” I interjected. “It would seem to me that your two races would have more in common than in opposition.”

“The dragons are greedy. They steal our gold. We find it and dig it up only to see the dragons swoop down and snatch it away from us.”

“Have you any idea why they do this?”

Dvorn laughed as he ripped a wing from his dinner. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe they don’t like being eaten.”

“Eaten?” I asked, stunned by his claim.

“Yes, eaten.” He gnawed on the wing a moment as it all became clear. He was eating a dragon right in front of me. He licked his lips and threw away the inedible bits of the dragon’s wing. “Their young are very tasty. Since they steal our gold, we eat their young.”

“I’m sure they would say that they steal your gold because you eat their young,” I surmised.

“I’m sure they would, but they would be wrong.”

“Maybe so. Personally, I don’t care. I don’t care if you eat their young. And I certainly don’t care if they steal your precious gold.”

Anger rose in Dvorn’s face at my callous attitude. I saw no reason to be interested in their petty differences. There were greater matters at stake. Dvorn did not see it that way.

“Our gold is our life!” he roared. “Your lack of concern shows you have no respect for me or my kind.”

“On the contrary, I have a great deal of respect for your race. That is why I don’t care about your gold or your conflict with the dragons. Those issues are minor compared to the true cause of your suffering. Queen Itna.”

The giant’s face flushed red at the mention of the queen. “She has killed almost as many of us as the dragons. She is a scourge on the land.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said brightly, aiming to calm the giant. “And with my help you can be rid of her once and for all.”

My calmness had its desired effect as Dvorn smiled warmly at my suggestion. “Why would you help us kill Itna?” he asked skeptically.

“Truth be told, you would be helping me. That vile bitch is the cause of my current ills. She staged a fraudulent trial, where I was convicted and sentenced to death. For that she should suffer. She has also driven a wedge between my brother and me that cannot be repaired. And for that she must die.”

“Sentenced to death were you? You appear mostly unharmed,” the giant commented.

“My scars are not from her doing. I carried these marks with me into Rendell.”

“And your face? Why do you keep it hidden?”

I shot him a wicked grin and replied, “Would you like me to take off my mask?”

The giant thought it over and made the right decision. “No, I think it would be best if you didn’t. I’m sure you have your reasons for donning such an item.”

“Indeed I do. Though Itna is not responsible for my obtaining this mask, it was her doing that put me in position to receive it. You see, I was killed in Rendell, but even the bonds of death cannot hold me. Itna believes herself superior, not just to me but to the dragons and your kind as well. She sentenced me to death as cold and callously as she kills all beings she deems a threat. And that is what you are. A threat. You threaten her way of life and her belief that she is the most powerful person in the land. You can change that.”

“By helping you.”

“And by joining with the dragons.”

This idea did not go over well. Dvorn angrily stood up, his plate crashing to the floor as he rose. “Never!” he bellowed. “I would sacrifice my reign and my life before I ever teamed up with a dragon!”

“Can you defeat Itna without them?” I asked calmly.

“I admit we cannot. But there is no way we can ever reach an accord with the dragons. Not until they apologize and promise to stop stealing our gold.”

“As I said before, I don’t care about your petty differences with the dragons. This is about Itna. If you can establish a temporary alliance with the dragons, your two races can continue to kill, eat and steal from each other until the world stops turning for all I care. But we all share a common foe and it is time to put differences aside and join together.”

Dvorn slowly sat back down and waved his hand dismissively. “Even if we wanted to, there is no way the dragons would agree.”

“I’d like the chance to talk to them and see for myself.”

Dvorn’s laughter was not encouraging. “I’m sure Taladek and Ragnarok would enjoy talking to you too. It might be a much shorter conversation than you think.”

“They will listen to me.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“If they don’t, I’ll just kill them,” I offhandedly replied.

Though my words came out easily, the fury in my eyes remained. My steely gaze bore into Dvorn as he let my words sink in. Finally, he beckoned for another giant. Once his orders were given, the giant quickly left the room, only to return a short while later with a large crate covered

with a blanket. Dvorn removed the blanket to reveal a baby dragon. It was silver and no bigger than a dog.

"I will send this young one off to the mountain," he said as he opened the top of the crate. "He will pass a message along, but I cannot guarantee the message will be well received."

Dvorn held the dragon by its wings and made his way to the door. Once there, he spoke to it in an unfamiliar language and released it.

"I always hate to see a good meal fly away," Dvorn said.

"It's for a good reason," I told him.

"That remains to be seen."

"So what message did you send?"

"I told Taladek and Ragnarok to meet us in the clearing a mile south of here."

"How long until they get there?"

"If they decide to show up? A few hours. They'll probably wait until sundown."

"Good. That gives us time to get your men ready and moving."

"Wait. The dragons haven't agreed to anything yet."

"Yet," I repeated. "They will. And we need to be ready. Shall we step back inside and go over the plan?"

Dvorn reluctantly agreed and we ventured back into the house to discuss the next step. After all was said and done, he agreed to the plan and even appeared motivated to make it happen. He called for the leader of his guards, which happened to be the one that had led me here. His name was Diascro and he was not at all happy about our proposal. Thankfully Dvorn was able to pacify him. Diascro set off to gather up all able-bodied giants and begin the march towards Rendell. Dvorn then informed me it was time to head out for the clearing.

The giant and I reached the clearing well before sundown. Since I couldn't walk as fast as the giant due to his long strides, I rode in on horseback. My steed, at first unwilling to take me on as a passenger, was now securely tied to a nearby tree. Dvorn wanted to get there early so as to not give the dragons the upper hand. His trifling disagreements with the dragons were beginning to aggravate me.

As the sun slowly sank behind the mountains, I looked to the sky. A reddish haze surrounded the few scattered clouds above. The sun had not yet finished its path behind the far away mountains when I spotted two figures in the sky a fair distance off. The figures grew larger as they approached and I saw that it was the two dragons we'd been waiting for.

Ragnarok and Taladek landed gracefully in the clearing, keeping a safe distance between them and us. Dvorn had described them to me before we'd left the village and his portrayal was very accurate, much to my dismay. Taladek was slightly smaller than his sister, maybe forty feet in length from head to tail. Unlike his siblings, he was a black dragon and had extra scales standing up along his back. Ragnarok, on the other hand, was huge. The red dragon was almost twice his brother's size, but that wasn't what worried me. The fiery look in his eyes told me he wasn't in the mood for a conversation.

I stepped away from Dvorn and approached the dragons. Before I could get a word out, Ragnarok leaned down and roared. I kept moving forward, head up and unafraid. Ragnarok must've taken my approach as a sign of aggression and attacked. A column of flame shot from his enormous maw and I found myself standing amidst a torrent of fire. I was unharmed by the fire, and once the flames had died down I glanced back at Dvorn and saw a look of utter confusion on his face.

I turned my attention back to the dragons when I realized Dvorn was unharmed as well. "Are you done now?" I asked of Ragnarok with sufficient cockiness.

"I've only just begun," he replied and went to step forward. Before he could, the ground began to shake as a wall of rock and earth shot up from the ground in front of him.

"That will be enough for now," Taladek said to his brother. He waved a talon at the wall and it sunk back into the earth.

"Thank you, sir dragon," I said to Taladek.

"Don't thank me yet. We're here more out of curiosity than anything else. When our sworn enemies tell us they've teamed up with the one that killed our sister, and that they want to meet, we can't help but be interested. Know that our patience is limited, so speak your peace."

"First, I want to do something very much against my nature. I'd like to apologize."

"Do you honestly think your insincere apology would mean anything to us?" Ragnarok bellowed.

"I am not insincere. My brother and I were lied to by Itna and tricked into killing Dorma. Genepool himself reprimanded us for our insolence."

"You've met Genepool? Interesting," Taladek commented reflectively.

Taladek's eyes held an peculiar gleam, causing me to change tactics. "You know who I am, correct?" I asked the black dragon.

"We do. I must say that Ragnarok doesn't really care. I, on the other hand, care very much. Only a child of the Aseraphim would be able to fell a being as powerful as Dorma. Though the death of my sister angers me, in an odd way you have my respect."

"So you know any aggressive act towards me would be futile."

"I wouldn't say that exactly."

"Then kill me now. I will come back stronger than before. Every death has led me to greater power. Crush my bones to dust and I will heal and return to fulfill my mission. I will not stop until I've succeeded in my task no matter how many times I initially fall."

Silence fell between us as I stared intently at the dragons. The only audible sounds were that of nature itself. The birds in the trees around the clearing sung in hushed tones, as if awaiting our next move. Once Taladek came to the conclusion that I was indeed serious in my threat, he continued.

"We will listen to what you have to say. However, we can make no guarantees that we will comply."

"That is all I ask. Hear me out and I think you'll agree with my plan," I replied. "Again, let me apologize for slaying Dorma. Though I am the one that delivered the fatal blow, her fate was sealed by Itna. She is the one that sent my brother and me up to the mountain under false pretenses. She is the one responsible for killing your brethren. Her crimes pale in comparison to mine."

"You killed our sister!" Ragnarok needlessly reminded me.

"On Itna's request. Had she not deceived us, Dorma would be alive today. It is her cavalier attitude towards your race that you should be concerned about."

"So what do you propose?" Taladek asked.

"Simply put, an alliance."

"With the giants." Disdain dripped from every syllable as Taladek spoke.

"There is a proverb my brother read once. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Itna seeks to destroy all races she deems inferior to her. She uses your blood for her own majickal needs. I haven't a clue why she longs for the destruction of the giants, only that she apparently does."

"Gold," I heard from behind me.

I spun around and saw Dvorn walking towards us. "I beg your pardon?"

“Gold. We’re miners. All the various metals hidden beneath the surface are of use to us. But gold is the most valuable. Itna slays our people and steals our gold as often as the dragons.”

“If your people would stop devouring our young,” Taladek pointed out, “we’d leave you alone.”

“We only eat your kind because you steal our gold!” Dvorn shouted back.

“Enough!” I roared. Birds flew from the trees in fright as my voice echoed throughout the clearing. “Your differences must be put aside for now. After Itna is gone, your races can continue this cycle of blame for eternity for all I care. But for now, we have to come together. Itna is our concern. Not gold. Not roasted baby dragons. Not Dorma’s killer. Itna, and Itna alone, is the crux of the problem.”

“And after Itna is gone?” Taladek inquired.

“If all goes well, Rendell will no longer be a threat to any of you,” I replied confidently.

“So what is this grand plan of yours?”

“I will go over the specifics later, but simply put we lay Rendell to waste. Clearly, you will lead the aerial assault.”

“Kill them all, man, woman and child. That’s your plan?”

“No. The children will be spared, as well as one, no two, certain men.”

“Let me guess, you want us to spare your brother,” Ragnarok stated with utter contempt. “Give me one good reason we shouldn’t take an eye for an eye and kill him.”

“Because it would be the last thing you ever did. That is no idle threat, great dragon. It is a promise.”

My cold gaze bore into Ragnarok as I stared up into his eyes. He got the message loud and clear. “And the other man?” he asked, his tone now almost polite.

“My brother’s associate, a man named Joshua. He wears a chain with the an ancient symbol, the sign designated to my brother.”

“You want us to leave them unharmed,” Taladek stated.

“Not necessarily. They may take up arms against you. If that happens, feel free to knock them unconscious. Just use care to not kill them.”

Taladek appeared confused and voiced his bewilderment. “I can understand why you would want your brother to live, but why this man?”

“Because other than our initial confrontation, he has never judged me. He looks upon me as a man. Not a child of the Aseraphim, not a demon, a man. For that I am indebted to him.”

“Very well. Still, I think we should kill them all, your two exceptions noted.”

“No, it is important that the children live.”

“Why?” Taladek’s confusion hadn’t yet been quelled.

“Because they must live on to tell the tale. If you want to live without the threat of Rendell in your lives, you must instill fear into their hearts. Let them watch the folly of their elders. They will tell the tale of the massacre for generations to come. Fear will keep them from ever attempting any aggressive acts against you. Fear will keep them complacent. Once Itna is dead, they will be submissive.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Remove the head and the body dies. You’ve been attacking the village, the body. Itna is the head.”

Taladek looked over to his brother and spoke in their native tongue. While the dragons discussed matters amongst themselves, I asked Dvorn if he thought they would agree to our plan.

“It is difficult to tell,” he replied. “They have their own agenda.”

“But this time, their agenda matches ours.”

“We’ll see.” I sensed doubt in his voice and wasn’t pleased to hear it.

Finally, the dragons finished their conversation and turned their attention to us once again. Taladek slowly moved towards us and, in a gesture that absolutely stunned me, bowed.

“We shall abide by your wishes. Our quarrel with Itna takes precedence over any grievances we may have with you and the giants.”

I nodded respectfully to the black dragon and said, “You have made a wise decision, Taladek.”

“That remains to be seen. So what is your plan of attack?”

I spent the next hour going over the battle plan. Ragnarok, putting aside his hatred of me, got more enthused about the proposal as I spelled it out in detail. Halfway through, Taladek sent his brother back to the mountain to get the other dragons ready for battle. I told Dvorn to return to his people, who by this time should be in position to attack at dawn. The giant was eager to get back to his brethren and lead them in the invasion of Rendell.

Taladek and I were alone in the clearing, save for my horse. I had almost forgotten about my steed and glanced over that direction. To my surprise, the horse was lying on its side dead. Taladek laughed at my bewildered reaction.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“You didn’t know you killed your mount?”

“I did? When?”

“Earlier, when your bellowing chased the birds from the trees. He died of fright.”

I smiled at the revelation. I had done that once before, back in Nathaniel’s castle before we left for parts unknown. I mentioned this to Taladek and he showed no surprise.

“How much do you know about me anyway?” I asked.

“Enough to know not to trifle with you. It is a lesson Itna should’ve learned before now.”

“She’ll learn it soon enough.”

Chapter 15

The first rays of dawn had yet to break the horizon as I waited in the woods west of Rendell. A few stars remained in the sky, yet they grew dimmer with the closeness of the coming day. The full moon above refused to be shunted and settled in the northern sky as the sun crept over the mountains. The scattered clouds dotting the sky bore the orange color of the impending daylight, signaling the birth of a new day. Unknown to many in Rendell, it would be their last.

My plan, though simple, would be devastating if all went well. I also knew that the odds of everything coming off perfectly were slim. I had felt Maelduin prying into my mind earlier in the evening. I tried to shield him from much of it but I knew he'd learned enough to be able to thwart my efforts. What I really needed to know was if he'd act on that information. A smile crossed my lips as I considered his options. He would have a difficult choice to make. I hoped he'd make the correct one. I didn't want to have to hurt him.

My rage grew as the dawn edged closer and closer. When the first ray of light lit up the horizon, I looked southward. The dragons were airborne, soaring with a grace unmatched by all the birds in existence. Slowly they flew towards Rendell, spread out in an attack formation. I had the Entropic Flail out and ready, its finely honed spikes exposed. My sign to move would be the last and my thirst for blood was growing with every passing second.

The guards manning the south wall were totally unprepared for such a massive assault. Seven dragons total, including Ragnarok, swooped out of the sky and unleashed their fury on the unsuspecting sentries. Huge balls of fire rained down on Rendell, igniting two unfortunate guards. They staggered around, screaming in agony, before falling off the wall to the hard ground below. One dragon spewed a green mist at a guard. When he became enveloped in the haze, he took one breath and collapsed. He grabbed his throat and clawed at it, desperately hoping to find a way to let more fresh air into his lungs. His efforts were fruitless and he finally succumbed to the poison he'd ingested. All the guards fell quickly and without firing a single arrow. They were able to ring out an alarm bell before they perished but nothing more. The dragons flew straight up into the air as they finished their initial assault and circled back around.

The citizens of Rendell were quicker to respond than I'd anticipated. Fifty men deftly began to scale the south wall. They climbed

up the ladders like lightning and manned the stations previously occupied by their now fallen comrades. I was glad to see neither Maelduin nor Joshua had chosen to join them. The dragons hadn't turned back to Rendell yet, giving the guards plenty of time to set up for the next assault.

The seven dragons turned as one and resumed course for Rendell. The garrison awaiting them wasted no time attempting to repel the attack. As soon as they were in range, scores of arrows, some flaming, soared into the breaking dawn. Though the dragons were remarkably agile, they were also big targets. I saw a green dragon take a direct hit to the soft flesh of its neck. It spiraled downward and fell to the ground. The impact shook the ground beneath my feet. Oddly enough, it brought a wider smile to my face. I knew what was to come next.

Right as the dragons were within striking distance of Rendell, a thunderous rumbling came from the other side of town. I couldn't see what was happening but I knew nonetheless. The giants had stormed through the east wall of Rendell. The second wave had begun.

Earsplitting screams found my ears as the giants ran amok inside the village walls. The guards on the wall were distracted enough to allow the dragons unfettered access to their numbers. Again they attacked as one, sending several guards to horrific deaths. The airborne dragons circled back once again as the guards regrouped on the wall. Some of them turned their attention to the giants, firing flaming arrows at the humongous creatures. I only had my ears to inform me of the progress, but from all accounts I had to believe we were succeeding. The next wave would be the most telling.

Down to six dragons, they chose a different pattern and a different course towards Rendell. Instead of coming straight at them, the dragons swooped in from the southeast, bringing them closer to the giants. Mass chaos reigned on the wall, as the guards had no idea where to direct their attack. Some fired aimlessly into the air while others targeted the giants in town. Their confusion was writ large once the dragons on the ground charged. The remaining dragons from the mountain, led by Taladek himself, stormed the city's south wall, which still held the main contingent of guards. The wall crumbled as Taladek used his majicks to remove the earth beneath it, burying several guards beneath the rubble. The dragons in the air flew deeper into the heart of Rendell, exterminating all those it found on the ground. The screams of the dying sounded like chamber music to my ears. Soon I would hear their desperate cries at close range.

I exited the woods and casually made my way to the unguarded west wall, weapon in hand. The small gate I'd used when leaving the other day was hanging wide open. I knew there would be no guards standing nearby. They would've run off to the other side of town when the battle began. I also knew I wouldn't get into town unmolested. Waiting patiently for me a few yards from the open gate was my brother.

There was no anger on his face, only regret. I knew from the muddled thoughts running through his mind that he was at a loss over what steps to take next. I walked right up to him and made up his mind for him.

"I came back for my axe," I said unemotionally.

"And you didn't come alone," he mentioned as the cries of the dying filled the air around us.

"I wanted to be sure I'd be able to retrieve it safely."

"Why, Patrick?" he asked despondently. I knew full well we were no longer talking about my forgotten weapon.

"You know damn well why."

"Fine. You came back for Itna."

"It's more than that, brother," I said with evil glee. "It's about making these mortals realize that we are not like them. We stand above."

"If we want to co-exist..."

"Why should we?" I bellowed. "They are beneath us, Maelduin. Whether you want to admit it or not, we are as gods. We are the most powerful species on the face of the earth. Why would you want to associate with these insects?"

"We can help them evolve, become more than what they are," he said, his stare boring into mine.

"You're wrong. They can never become more because they aren't us. We are special, and if you try to convince them that they can be like us you end up with people like Itna. People who think they aren't just like us but better than us. That will be the downfall of mankind. As soon as they all think they're the predominant species on earth, it'll all come crumbling down around them."

"But why destroy the whole town?"

"The town will survive. Once Itna is taken care of, this will all end."

"Do I have your word on that?"

"Certainly. Despite what I may have told my current allies, this was never about Rendell. It's all about her and those of her kind. Now, what about you?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

“You have a choice to make. You know how much I favor choices.”

“I will not fight against you,” he assured me.

“I know that. However, that only makes your decision more difficult. The way I see it, you can either fight with me or get out of my way.”

I reached into my brother’s mind hoping to get his answer before he spoke. All I got in return was a deep feeling of sorrow. Without a word, Maelduin stepped aside to let me pass.

I moved to go around him when a thought hit me. “Where exactly is my axe anyway?”

“Where I left it. The old house we met in before.” His voice was filled with guilt as he answered. “Can you find it on your own?”

“No problem.”

As soon as I was one step past Maelduin, I heard someone running towards us. I turned to see a guard charging at me, sword raised and at the ready. His reckless advance proved his downfall. I easily moved out of the way, swinging through with the Entropic Flail with all my might as I did. My weapon caught him at the base of his neck, leaving his head dangling by a mere thread of skin attached to his shoulder. His body became limp in an instant and collapsed to the ground, coming to rest in a pool of its own fresh blood.

I smiled at Maelduin and said, “You should have a sit down with our sister some time. She gives pretty good advice.” Maelduin gave no response as I continued into Rendell to get back my axe. He merely turned away and, with head bowed in shame, slowly walked off.

After strolling through the utterly deserted section of town and retrieving my axe, I decided to see how the battle was proceeding before searching for Itna. I also wanted to make sure my temporary allies had heeded my warnings. If I found any children being killed, or worse Joshua, I was going to have to break allegiances and slay the one responsible. I made my way to the fight, following the cries of anguish floating through the air.

The scene I came upon was gruesome, which earned a grin of satisfaction. The chaos in the southern part of town was total and complete. The field of battle was lit more from the fires burning brightly from several buildings than it was from the morning sun. The heat was intense even at a distance. I found it refreshing, but many of Rendell’s guards certainly felt differently. I could see piles of charred bodies, their blackened corpses just thrown aside to rot. Chunks of flesh fell from

their fly infested bodies and created a smaller, rotting pile of their own. On top of the pile was a man not yet dead, his smoldering body thrown onto the pile with the other burn victims to await death's coming.

A few officers of the guard corps were shouting out orders, trying to mount some sort of defense against their raging foes. No one was really listening but that didn't stop them from yelling louder and longer. I reveled in the chaotic scene before me as I ventured into the fray.

They never heard me coming. I had come at them from behind their lines and implanted my axe into the back of the first guard I saw. His screams of pain and surprise elated me, driving me to seek more spilt blood. I withdrew my axe from his body and continued chopping at his chest as if trying to fell a mighty oak. After four solid swings the upper half of his body slid effortlessly away from the rest. Other guards had heard his cries yet not one made any attempt to stop me. All they did was look on in fear.

The giants had mounted an impressive frontal assault. I saw a few fallen giants strewn about the battlefield but their losses were minimal. They were advancing on the same guards I'd encountered while the dragons were facing off against another contingent. As I sliced a path towards the front lines I saw another giant go down. The man that had defeated the mammoth man quickly ran over and began fighting another. There was no hesitation, no apprehension as he attacked. From behind all I could see was long, black hair against his bloodied white shirt. Still, I recognized him right away.

Ten guards fell at my feet before I reached this warrior. As I neared I saw a giant attack him from his blind side, sending him flying through the air from the impact of his club. The giant he'd been battling was standing over him before he hit the ground, club raised for the finishing blow. Seeing this, I slipped into a nearby shadow and reappeared via the shadow at the giant's feet. He was starting his downward arc as I materialized, unaware of my presence until I raised my axe and shouted at him. It was too late. The momentum from the behemoth was too powerful to stop quickly. The club crashed into my weapon, saving Joshua from a deadly blow.

I leaned down to get a close look at my friend. He was unconscious but breathing. I reached into his shirt and pulled out the chain he wore around his neck.

"This is the one I told you about," I informed the giant. "He lives or you all die."

"Yes, sir," he replied without hesitation. Without another word, he turned his attention to some other poor soul.

I was at a loss at how to protect Joshua in his present state. As I pondered this, a fireball flew over my head and landed in the middle of the guard's ranks. Inspiration hit me as I cried out for Taladek. The dragon heeded my call and came storming through several lines of guards before reaching me.

"This is Joshua, a good friend of mine and my brothers," I informed him.

"Yes, the one that we're supposed to leave alone. Looks like someone didn't listen," he responded.

"In the end he did. I can't keep him safe like this. Is there anything you can do?"

"Absolutely," he said with a grin. The black dragon closed his eyes and muttered something I couldn't hear, and probably wouldn't have understood if I did. In a brilliant flash, a lighted dome appeared over Joshua's body, encasing him in its glow. I was skeptical as to how light would protect him until Taladek majickally threw a rock at him. It hit the dome and bounced harmlessly away. Satisfied that Joshua was safe, and that things were well under control here, I figured it was time to find Itna.

I left the main battlefield and started walking towards Itna's castle. Before I'd gone fifty feet I saw a familiar face and decided Itna would have to wait just a little longer. At the edge of the battle was Philip, the guard that had unceremoniously beheaded me. Killing me wasn't what raised my ire. It was the pain he'd put Maelduin through by not finishing me off with one blow. My eyes cast a red glow all around me as I strode over to my next victim.

Fighting men surrounded me, yet none of them attempted to stop me. My face was contorted by my evil grin as I calmly made my way through their ranks. Philip eventually saw me and ran from the giant he was attacking. I had expected him to run away but he showed more courage than I'd given him credit for and charged at me. I met his advance, axe poised and at the ready. He let out a scream as he lunged at me with his sword. I batted his weapon away and countered, narrowly missing his shoulder. Philip recovered and continued fighting but never got close to landing a serious blow. After a minute or two I came to the conclusion that he knew he was going to die. He simply wanted to go out fighting. I planned to make his wish a reality.

His thrusts were getting more haphazard as the fight drew on and I knew my opportunity would present itself soon enough. It happened when he finally scored a hit. He feigned to my left, drawing me that direction, and swiftly jabbed the sword into my shoulder. I grabbed the sword and watched the steam rise from my grip. I pulled the silver

weapon towards me, digging the weapon deeper into my sizzling flesh. Philip unwisely refused to release his weapon and got pulled in with it. I flashed him my kindest smile and laughed as I brought my axe crashing down into his neck. It didn't take two shots for me. One strong slice and his head was neatly separated from his body. It landed on the ground and rolled a few feet away as his body slumped to the ground. My laughter grew in volume as I stepped over his dead body, pulling the silver sword out of my torso and casting it aside. As I passed, I threw my axe into his chest, leaving the weapon impaled in his dead body. For my next kill, I wouldn't be needing it.

The throng thinned as I made my way in the direction of Itna's palace. A few stragglers ran at me in vain. One in particular stuck in my mind. He ran at me at full speed, sword out in front of him as he advanced. I swatted away his feeble attack as if he were nothing more than an annoying fly. I grabbed him by the arm, spun him around and snapped his neck as easily as dead wood. I never broke my stride as I continued onward after his lackluster performance. I had to wonder, however, why so many people would be willing to die for someone like Itna. Her leadership was based on total devotion, yet these people had to know she was no one special. I couldn't for the life of me figure out where this undying devotion came from. Any one of the citizens of Rendell could rule as effectually as she did. There was nothing great about her at all. Maelduin and I deserved their adulation. We were the ones truly worth following, the ones worth worshipping, and the ones worth dying for. Mortals worshipping mortals made no sense to me. These people would fight and die for a worthless cause. And if that was how they wanted it, I was more than willing to give it to them.

Itna's castle was only a few yards away when a thought popped into my head. Had it been one of my own I would've dismissed it. Since it was Maelduin's thought I paid close attention. I heard his pleading and ignored it. What I couldn't ignore as easily was his location. I told him to wait and I would be more than willing to let him get out what he wanted to tell me. It probably wouldn't change anything, but when Maelduin wanted to talk I could hardly refuse.

He was sitting on the bottom step leading to Itna's palace, head in his hands. He looked up as I neared, a single tear cascading down his face. He stood and faced me but I spoke up before he could.

"So, did you change your mind?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

He sighed and said, "No. I was hoping you'd changed yours."

"Why are you here, brother? There's nothing you can do for her."

"I know that, but this isn't about saving her."

"It's about saving me. Right. I know," I said derisively. "Did you ever once stop to think that I don't want to be saved? Maybe your idea of salvation is, to me, a fate worse than death. Maybe this is what is supposed to be."

"I can't believe that!"

"Believe it!" I shouted back. "My fate is written. The clerics have already given me enough hints to tell me that I am the one destined for Haedes. Why can't you just let it be?"

"But..." was all he got out.

"No, no buts. I am to fall and I will fall. I've already started down that path and I continue on of my own free will. There will be a time when you will see this for the truth that it is. Just as I believe that you are destined to lead in another realm. Have you ever stopped to consider your future, Maelduin? Have you ever thought about what will happen after you die? If I am bound to Haedes, where do you think you'll end up? Haven, of course. You will be as powerful there as I am in Haedes."

"You don't know that," he said.

"And you don't know that I'm wrong, do you? Let it happen, Maelduin. It is what is supposed to be."

"And if you're wrong?"

I smiled broadly and said, "I'm not. Now, have you changed your mind about joining me or not?"

"I can't," he answered in dismay.

"Then stand aside."

Maelduin did as I asked and stepped out of my path. As I passed him, he said, "She won't be alone."

"Brother, that's just fine with me."

I climbed the steps leading to the grand wooden doors Maelduin and I had passed through our first day in Rendell. I expected guards to be around every corner and wasn't disappointed. Every few feet a guard or two would jump out of some hole in the wall and attack. Their efforts were beyond futile. My rage couldn't be stopped. My thirst for blood could not be quenched. Every guard that tried to impede my progress was just another test run for what I would do to Itna. Some I killed quickly, either by crushing their skull with the flail or just breaking their necks. Others met a more grisly fate, as I made sure my initial blows weren't fatal, just excruciatingly painful. One guard got impaled at least ten times by the spikes of my weapon before I finished him off.

One by one all who came before me fell. I had weaved my way through the castle's halls until I finally reached the throne room. I had no idea what awaited me on the other side of the doors but I was eager to find out. I threw the doors open and stood in the doorway. The chamber was darkened but I could still see clearly. There just wasn't much to see.

"Itna!" I screamed into the darkness. "Step forward and greet your fate honorably, if you have any honor to speak of."

"You will not live to see another day, demon!" she shouted back from parts unseen.

"I will see more days than your pathetic little mind can fathom, bitch." The dim courtroom carried my menacing tone for a few seconds, letting it reverberate off the walls. Though I couldn't see her, I could smell her fear even at a distance.

I took one step inside the chamber and saw several glowing orbs ahead of me. Before I could figure out what they were, they were flying at me. Twelve flaming arrows were heading my direction, fired without warning. I raised my hand to the incoming objects and the fire contained on their tips rapidly spread. The arrows burned down to ashes as they reached me, the only impact coming from their sooty remains.

I strode forward undeterred. Before another salvo of arrows could be fired at me, I decided to make the viewing easier for all present. I raised my hands, bringing forth black fire out of the nothingness. The dark flames covered the walls from floor to ceiling. It wasn't much brighter but it was enough for me to see my foes. There were twelve guards, each with arrows and swords, standing in front of their queen. Itna was seated nonchalantly on her throne, assuming the ordeal wouldn't take long.

"Gentlemen, today will be remembered for all history," I said to the battalion. "It is the day Rendell was rid of the true evil in its midst. I do not refer to myself but the woman you have sworn to protect. She has put herself above beings she has no reason to think she is even remotely equal to. She kills majickal creatures because they threaten her rule. She has men like you attempt to slay dragons so she can consume their power and make it her own. I do you a favor by killing her. You just need to step aside and let what needs to be done, be done."

"We will fight you to the death to protect our queen," one of them shouted back as I approached.

"I'm sure you will, sir, but what about the rest of you? You can go now and live to tell future generations of the folly of Itna, former

queen of Rendell, and I will let you go unscathed. Or you can stay and meet a violent, agonizing demise. The choice is yours. Choose wisely.”

I was back where I'd been seated for my travesty of a trial. Itna was no more than a few feet away. I could again smell fear in the air, this time coming from the guards. When no one moved, I raised my hands to bring forth more black flames. As I did, three of the guards sprinted away from their comrades and flew right past me. I let them go unharmed, keeping my word.

One of the guards went to bring up his bow to fire another shot but was stopped short when the flaming arrow he'd knocked in place exploded in black fire. The sinister blaze crawled from the arrow to his bow and onward until the flames overcame the guard. He was not alone. All nine remaining guards were swiftly engulfed in black fire. Their screams were a symphony to me, their cries of anguish a song from the choir. All of them threw themselves to the floor and began rolling around in a futile attempt to douse the flames. None were successful. Smoke rolled off their charred bodies and the scent of their singed flesh was overwhelming, fueling my thirst for more.

Itna rose from her throne, seemingly unafraid. She stood erect and stared at me intently. I stepped to move towards her when she spoke. The words made no sense to me until I realized she was trying to cast a spell on me. Her words grew in volume until her voice echoed throughout the chamber. When she finished, a ball of energy not unlike the one Nathaniel had produced flew from her hands. I stopped and was about to dodge the projectile when a voice in my head told me to stand still. Instinctively I listened and obeyed. The orb kept coming, making me second-guess myself until it exploded little more than two feet from me. When it did, the symbol on the chain Maelduin had found appeared as a glowing shield in front of me, protecting me from Itna's assault.

“I wouldn't recommend doing that again,” Maelduin said as he emerged from the shadows in the back of the room.

“What are you doing, Lord Maelduin?” Itna shrieked at him.

“Protecting my brother,” he steadfastly replied. “You see, had he attacked you I would've stayed out of it. But since you took it upon yourself to strike first, I felt it necessary to shield him.”

“He aims to kill me!”

“And isn't that your aim as well? And did you not just initiate the confrontation? Until he decides to attack, he remains under my protection.”

“He slaughtered my royal guards!”

"But not you," he gently reminded her.

"I don't need your help," I heatedly informed him as he drew near.

"I'm not helping you, Patrick. Just doing what is right," I heard in my head.

Itna looked away from Maelduin and back to me. I glared back at her, beaming malevolently. "You do not know your power yet, evil one," she said. "I know what you're to become. I've studied your kind. It has been written that your death at Rendell shall be celebrated among the followers of Tag for ages to come. That death is to be by my hand. It is my destiny and it shall be fulfilled."

"If you believe that to be true, then by all means, give it your best shot," I taunted. Then I turned to Maelduin and said, "And you stay out of it."

The words to my brother were barely past my lips before I was darting at Itna. In the blink of an eye she disappeared. I came to an abrupt halt and looked around for her but she was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, out of the nothingness surrounding me, another majickal orb flew at me. I ducked and watched it pass overhead, missing me by mere inches. I called forth a column of black flame directly under where the orb had appeared. I heard Itna squeal as the flames erupted near her. I couldn't see her, but I could detect her scent in the air all around me. Now, acting on the sounds she'd made, I lunged. I grabbed at nothing but air and caught a queen.

The moment my hands had obtained my prize she became visible once again. My hands were firmly clenched around her upper arms as she writhed around, struggling to break my grasp. There was no way she was getting free until I wanted it to happen. I pulled her upwards so I could look her dead in the eye.

"See me now, bitch. See what you've helped to create. This mask, the scars, the horns atop my head, all these things are from the doings of others. People like you that only care to see me dead. You failed to learn the lesson others were violently taught. You cannot destroy me, Itna. I am forever. There will be no death for me today. There will be no destiny fulfilled by you. There will only be pain for those who choose to stand in my way as you have. Call me evil if you wish, but I have a place of honor in this world and the next. You have no standing in either. You are worthless compared to me and my siblings. For you to think you could defeat me is pure hubris on your part. Your inflated sense of self-worth is what caused your downfall, Itna. I knew it would be the death of you. From our first meeting I knew you were nothing

more than a cold, heartless bitch.” I pulled her close until her nose was touching my mask. I finished by menacingly growling, “Now it’s time to make my judgment of you a reality.”

Without warning, I tossed Itna high into the air. Her back slammed into the ceiling as I withdrew the Entropic Flail. As she began her descent, I thought about what I wanted to do to her. When I did, it made the flail’s appearance change. The spikes still sprung forth but now there was something else. Four sharp, curved blades now extended from the top of the weapon as well, forming a broken circle. I glanced up and saw Itna falling rapidly. I jabbed the weapon at her, pointing the newest addition straight at her chest. She landed full force onto the blades. She hadn’t yet touched the floor as she remained suspended in the air only by my weapon, now lodged deep into her body. Blood gushed from her chest as I twisted the flail deeper into her body. With one hard tug, I pulled the flail back out, bringing her heart out from her chest. I smiled as Itna’s corpse fell to the floor with a sickening thud. A lake of crimson quickly spread from her dead body, widening my wicked grin. I withdrew the blades back into the flail, deftly catching Itna’s heart before it could finish its fall.

My work here in Rendell was now complete. I had come back determined to kill Itna and I had succeeded. I wasn’t going to be able to enjoy my victory however. I scanned the grand chamber looking for Maelduin and found him sitting quietly in a pew towards the back of the room. With Itna’s heart in my hand, I bent down and grabbed one of her lifeless arms. Dragging the dead queen behind me, I made my way to my brother.

“I didn’t need your help,” I told him again.

“I know. It was my choice. I couldn’t fight with you, considering what you had planned. But I couldn’t just stand aside either. Protecting you seemed like a good compromise.”

I leaned close and whispered crossly, “Next time, stick to the choices I give you.”

I continued past Maelduin on my way to the exit. As I reached the door Maelduin spoke up one more time. “So this is over, right?”

I ignored him and left him alone in the courtroom. I would end the battle raging outside as I’d promised. He knew I would keep my promise. There was no reason for him to ask. Just the fact that he did kept my anger in full bloom. I weaved down the corridors of the castle, dragging Itna’s bloody corpse behind me. A trail of blood marked our path down the hallways, staining the marble floors a wonderful red. I reached the main doors and threw them open. The battle had found its

way north and was now being fought in the town square in front of the palace.

I picked up Itna's limp body and threw it into the crowd. Screams of horror and shock flew to my ears. More importantly, the giants and the dragons ceased attacking the moment Itna's body landed on the bare ground. The guards were too stunned to take advantage of the reprieve, dazed by both the break in the fighting and the sight of their dead queen.

I stood at the top of the steps looking out at the battle that had come to a standstill. I raised Itna's heart into the air and addressed the masses.

"People of Rendell, your queen is dead," I shouted. "Her impudence was her downfall, her overblown opinion of herself her undoing. Lay down your arms and live to see another day. This fight is over."

No one moved an inch. The giants and the dragons had formed a semicircle around the human fighters, backing them towards the palace. Though I had the attention of everyone present, no one relinquished their weapons. I needed to make my point a bit clearer. I moved my arm, bringing Itna's heart over my head. I turned my face skyward and gently squeezed the heart. Blood trickled from the organ into my waiting mouth. I drank heartily, lapping up every drop. I tightened my grip to extract every last bit of refreshing blood. Once the heart was dry I returned my attention to the crowd. Several citizens of Rendell were doubled over and vomiting in reaction to my deed. I made my way down the steps and into the assembled throng.

"Hear me now, Rendell. I am the lord of Fear. I have come to free you from Itna's false reign. She did not fear me and it led to her demise. She believed herself to be more praiseworthy than others, including the giants and dragons you now find yourself pitted against. They hold no issue with you, only Itna. She is now gone forever, killed by my hand. In the end, I saw fear in her eyes. Even then, when she knew death was imminent, she did not fully understand the error of her ways. Her fear was the fear of death, not of me. I say, fear me above all. Your days of fighting the majickal creatures of this land are over. This is your only warning. Fear my coming again should you disobey."

I had made my way through the entire crowd until I found myself standing in front of Ragnarok and Taladek. The two head dragons were gazing down at me approvingly. I held out Itna's deflated heart to the dragons as a token of my appreciation. Ragnarok nodded approvingly as he carefully took it from my hand with his gigantic talon. No words were

spoken and none had to be. My allies knew their purpose and their mission. Both were now accomplished.

I turned back to the crowd and said, "Now, go home if you have one left. Collect your dead and mourn if you need to. Do what you must, but never let another one of you aggress against these beings. Should you choose to ignore me, should you choose not to fear my words, you will join your queen in judgment before Styx."

Upon completion of my warning, the giants and dragons retreated, turning south towards the ruins of the town's walls. The residents of Rendell still had no idea what to do next. They stood like statues in the courtyard, gawking at the scene before them. Finally their paralysis was broken by a most unexpected source. Michael Malvern, Itna's advisor, had climbed the steps to the palace and was addressing the crowd. They heeded his words and departed for their homes. I had to assume Michael was taking command. Maybe that was the destiny he'd spoken of when we'd first met. If so, I was glad to have played a part in it.

Everyone had left the field of battle, leaving me alone in the town square. Unfortunately I was never really alone. In my mind I could see Maelduin walking towards me. There was no anger clouding his mind. No guilt from his acts was evident. The only thing I could sense from his mind was relief, and that had me confused. I waited silently for him to arrive. No words were spoken between us as he approached and I decided to let him have the first word when he got to me.

"You kept your word," he simply stated as he strolled up next to me.

"As I said I would," I retorted.

"I think Michael's going to be their new leader."

"Good for him."

Maelduin's calm veneer finally broke. On the verge of weeping, he said, "Please don't be mad at me, Patrick. I couldn't let you face Itna alone. I knew she'd be no match for you but I wanted you to know that I understood why you felt the need to be rid of her. She wanted to believe that what she was doing was the right thing to do, the good thing. She was misguided, vain in her own glory. One cannot be good while imposing malicious standards on others. While you were gone I witnessed firsthand her penchant for harsh punishment. Citizens were..."

I spun around and got nose to nose with my beloved brother, interrupting him. "You really think I care what she did to, or for, these

people?” I irately asked. “I don’t. It was all in how she looked at me. People like her will never see true evil or true good, just what they believe it to be. Maybe I am evil. If so, I can live and die with that knowledge. I’ll be the first to admit that Itna wasn’t evil, but she wasn’t good either. Maybe a few centuries repenting her sins in Limbo will change her outlook on things. I doubt it, because people like her never learn the truth about themselves. But to think that her actions towards anyone but me weighed in my decision to kill her is false. I do not have an over-inflated sense of importance. I know exactly how extremely important I am. I know how important you are, and our other brother and sister. Would Itna have treated them any differently than she treated me? Would they not have reacted the same way?”

Maelduin took a step back, putting some distance between us. “Maybe they would have, Patrick. And I probably would’ve treated them the same as I did you.”

“Would you have shielded them from her attack too?”

“Absolutely.”

“Even if they didn’t ask for, nor want, your help?”

“Absolutely,” he repeated.

“And would you expect them to be grateful?”

That quieted him down. I could tell part of him wanted me to thank him for standing by my side, even if it was only until I initiated an attack. I wouldn’t do it. The choices I gave him were the only two I wanted him to pick from. He did not fight with me. He did not stand aside. He imposed his own choice on me by protecting me. I was fully able to protect myself without any help from him and he knew it.

After a moment’s thought, he finally answered my question. “No, Patrick, maybe I wouldn’t expect them to be grateful. Maybe I shouldn’t expect you to be either. But I’d like a chance to make it up to you.”

“How?”

“Stay,” was his meager reply.

“Never,” I growled.

“Patrick, you said this was about Itna. Now she’s gone. You can stay here with me and...”

“And what? You honestly think I’ll be welcome here? No, Maelduin. This place isn’t for me. Stay if you like. In fact, I’d prefer it. We have different paths to tread in life, and more importantly in death. Stay here and do what you deem right. I’m sure we’ll be together again in future days.”

Before Maelduin could raise any objection, I turned away from him and headed for the southern part of town, exiting through the ruined walls of Rendell.

Chapter 16

Maelduin's voice echoed in my mind as I left the ruined city of Rendell. He wasn't talking to me exactly. It was more like he was chastising himself. If he thought I was going to be swayed by his self-pity he was mistaken. I had made up my mind to move on alone and that was that. There would no doubt come a time when we could find a way to be together. First we had to learn more about ourselves and our destinies.

I was a few miles away when I saw Maelduin find Joshua among the walking and wounded. He had a nasty headache but otherwise appeared unharmed. Had I not found that giant in time it would've been a completely different story. I heard Maelduin tell him about Itna's death and my departure. To my amazement, Joshua scolded my brother for letting me go. Joshua knew who we were and what we were meant for but couldn't grasp the concept of our separation. No matter how Maelduin tried to calm him down, Joshua continued to protest. I felt a smile cross my lips as I watched Joshua implore my brother to follow after me. He was the only mortal I'd ever liked. I was going to have to keep an eye on him.

The two of them made a temporary peace and went on looking for other survivors. As I watched Maelduin administer much needed first aid to an injured guard, I was struck violently in the chest. I flew backwards down the path, tumbling over and over again with the object that had collided with me. At first I thought someone had thrown a boulder at me. That was until the thing snapped its jaws in my face. I pulled my legs up and planted them into the unknown beast's midriff and thrust upwards as we tumbled. The creature flew off my body and landed a few yards away. I jumped to my feet and examined my assailant.

It looked somewhat human but not enough to be mistaken for one. The beast's head was that of a snarling wolf, drool and spittle dripping from its foaming jowls. It was hunched over so I couldn't get a good fix on its height. Long, strong arms hung almost to the ground and I figured this thing could run on four legs just as well as with two. It snapped its jaws at me again and I hurriedly pulled out the flail. Red glowing eyes stared back at me as we circled each other, each of us begging for a clean opening.

I heard Maelduin scream something to Joshua, warning him of some eminent danger. When I heard the word lycan I knew he was talking about me. Maelduin's self-education from his days in Nathaniel's

library had paid off. I was trying to recall all we'd read about lycans when the beast sprung.

The quick lunge caught me off guard and I was barely able to step into a shadow and out another one nearby. What made matters worse, when I teleported through the shadow I felt as if something was tugging at me, trying to keep me in that darkened doorway between realms. That was a matter for a later time. I had a vicious lycan to worry about first.

While its back was turned, I launched the flail at it. Because of my sour mood intertwined with my elation at killing Itna, the Entropic Flail had reacted oddly when called upon. Spikes still jutted out from it but the blades that had removed Itna's heart were no longer present. What was truly unusual was the amount of tines on the flail. Countless glistening razor sharp points dotted the weapon. When it impacted with the lycan's back, it stuck and had no chance of falling out. The lycan fell to the ground and writhed around in the dirt, trying mightily to remove the offending weapon from its back. Every time it grabbed at it, all it got in return was numerous spikes into its hand.

I casually strolled over and stood over the wounded beast. Kneeling down, I grasped the handle tightly and jumped to my feet. The weapon was dislodged, as were several meaty chunks of the lycan's flesh. That made the thrashing stop in a hurry. I picked a tiny piece of meat from the flail and sniffed it before swallowing it whole. It didn't taste very good yet I felt invigorated. My meal was unfortunately interrupted by three more lycans walking out of the nearby trees.

I drew the spikes back into the weapon and watched with amusement as the bits of flesh and muscle plopped to the ground. Once the weapon had been cleaned off, I set it back to its brutal form and charged at the lycans. I never made it.

I closed the distance swiftly but before I could lunge I was hit in the side by a lycan that had remained hidden in the trees. I was thrown sideways into the woods. Luckily, the lycan had rolled off of me after it made contact. I got to my feet, weapon at the ready, as the lycan attacked. I heard something behind me and it distracted me at the crucial moment. The lycan swung its clawed hand, a disfigured mash of a human hand and a wolf's paw. It was only able to scratch its claws down the front of my mask, leaving me unscathed.

I recovered faster than my adversary and was able to plant my flail into the back of its head. One good tug and I freed my weapon and killed another lycan. I wheeled around to find out what was sneaking up on me. There was nothing I could see, but what I could hear and smell startled me. It was death, come to walk the planet in physical form. The smell of

death filled my nostrils as it hung in the air like a thick fog. Unnatural life slithered stealthily through the trees and underbrush, carefully positioning itself for the proper moment to strike. I scanned the area and saw tall weeds moving and nothing else. The three lycans I'd seen come out of the trees were still on the path. At that moment, the path felt like a better option than the woods.

The three lycans were waiting at the roadside but didn't immediately attack. Instead, and much to my surprise, they broke apart and attempted to encircle me. I wasn't worried as they were pretty easy to kill up to now. My attitude changed when several more lycans came out of the trees and joined the circle.

I stopped counting at thirty. They didn't stop coming. I just stopped counting. Lycans were circling around me four-deep within a minute of my stepping out of the woods. It seemed like the perfect time to bring up some black flames. Before I could think long enough to make it happen, a lyan pounced. In a blink of the eye, the air was filled with leaping, snarling half-breeds. I pulled the spikes back into the flail and aimed for the closest one. Leaning into my swing, I splattered its head as if it were an overripe melon. Since the tines were absent I didn't have to worry about it getting stuck. I just had to remember to swing through.

I dodged and parried. I killed lycans and threw others off to the side. This went on for what felt like an hour but couldn't have been more than five minutes. I had taken some good shots and was bleeding from my arms and legs where the lycans had sliced me open. As sudden as that first assault had been, the lycans just as abruptly stopped their attack. Every remaining beast slumped down, acting like beaten dogs. That was when I detected that smell in the air again.

From the tree line to my right, a rustling deep in the underbrush was causing all the other animals of the woods to run away in dire fright. A flood of rabbits, squirrels, deer and other woodland critters rushed across the path, seeking sanctuary in safer parts of the forest. I thought I even saw one of the bears that were waiting outside the cabin Valencia had been in. Some of the smaller animals didn't make it to the other side as they were snatched up by random lycans as a mid-morning snack.

The evil being in the forest, for I knew in my heart it was indeed evil, came closer and closer with no hesitation. When it emerged I took a step back, a tinge of fear entering my own soul. It was the largest lyan by far, with eyes as black as a starless, midnight sky. Blood and spittle dripped from the end of its elongated snout. It bared its teeth, showing me rows of sharp visceral fangs. The other lycans slinked away, following

the other forest creatures to safer ground. A part of me felt like joining them. But I would not run. Not now and not ever.

Wanting to get the upper hand I decided to take the initiative. I ran at the beast, weapon drawn and spikes in full bloom. With one easy swipe I was knocked aside by my foe. The flail slipped from my grasp as I flew through the air and landed deep in the woods. The blow had taken a lot out of me and I was already a little weakened from fighting off the pack of lycans earlier. I tried to get to my feet and only accomplished it with some difficulty.

There wasn't much time to recuperate. The monster was so agile I never heard it approach. It slammed its muscular arm into the back of my head, dropping me to my knees. I heard Maelduin's cry of anguish when the beast had swept me aside like a gnat. The blow to the head had sent him to the ground too. He'd quickly left Rendell with Joshua trailing behind when I came under attack, attempting to come to my rescue. It took me a moment to realize that fact. Being on my back and getting bludgeoned in the head by a huge lycan caused me to miss a few details. I was still conscious and struggling to fight back. My efforts were for naught and when the knock out blow finally came it was almost a relief.

My mind changed when I felt the lycan's jaws gnawing into my chest. I was jolted back to reality, flailing my arms at the monster with every ounce of energy I had left in my body. I heard my ribs snap and the lycan growl. Then everything went black.

When I could see again I almost preferred the darkness. Something wasn't right and I could sense it the second my essence appeared in Haedes. Maybe it was the fact that I was in Lillith's courtroom, standing before her as I had done not long ago. Maybe it was the look in her black, unfeeling eyes. Mainly, I think it was Knightsabre and Harbinger standing on either side, blades drawn and pointed a hair's breadth away.

Lillith was seated on her throne, relaxed and at ease with her surroundings. Sitting on either side were her other two daughters, Ferlash to her left and Vintric to her right. Her brother, the fallen Loathe, stood just behind her at the ready, his legendary halberd in hand. Not everything was bad however. Chained to the wall behind the dark queen, and in obvious agony, was Nathaniel Graves.

"Welcome back, Patrick," she said coolly.

"Good to be back," I replied cautiously. Considering what had happened on Earth I wasn't being completely dishonest.

"We'll see about that."

“Mind if I ask what’s going on here?”

Lillith leaned back in her throne and said, “Why whatever do you mean?”

“Well, things were going so well before. Now I’ve got these two standing guard over me,” I replied as I jerked my thumb at Harbinger and Knightsabre.

“Oh, that,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “They’re just here to make sure you don’t do anything rash during your trial.”

“Trial? For what?” I asked in genuine shock.

“The charges against you are treason and heresy, master Patrick,” I heard from the doorway behind Lillith. I couldn’t have forgotten that cold, venomous voice if I had wanted to. As his words finished echoing throughout the chamber, Nin-Gauble walked into the courtroom. He paused before Nathaniel Graves with the sole purpose of spitting in his face. The spittle must’ve been poisonous or corrosive, I couldn’t tell from my position, because Nathaniel began to scream in pain. Finally, Nin-Gauble took up station next to Lillith opposite Loathe. A cleric was by his side and I wasn’t surprised to see it was the same one from my dream.

“Patrick, I’m sure you remember my good friend,” Lillith stated with a casualness that I couldn’t help but find mildly disturbing. “You really have him to thank for your presence here. I never would’ve been able to enlist Pak’s help without him.”

“You sent him to kill me? Why?” I raged.

“Because I gave you a chance to change and you could not do it. Because I offered you an alliance that you rejected. And to think, I even killed Graves as a token of my esteem and still you rejected me. But mainly because your death means the prophecy cannot be fulfilled.”

“I won’t be dead forever. You know that as well as I do.”

“Without your heart? I doubt it. The only way to get your heart back would be to slay the lycan that Pak infests. There is no one on Earth capable of that feat.”

“My brother won’t rest until he does,” I confidently replied.

“Your brother is also being devoured by Pak as we speak,” Lillith said with a smile.

I couldn’t control my rage any longer. I thrust my arms out to my sides, throwing Harbinger and Knightsabre to the floor. In one swift movement, I lunged at Lillith, leaping over the pool of blood in front of her bench and landing on a small area of flooring before her. Loathe was just a tad quicker and positioned himself in front of his sister, halberd drawn and pointed at me. I was barely able to halt my progress a mere inch from the tip of his weapon.

"Now, now Patrick. You really must control that temper of yours," she mockingly cackled. "I'm not sure what would happen to you if you were to die here in Haedes. Were you a normal essence you would simply be dispatched to the beacons, forever crying out to be released from that ministry of lost souls. But you aren't normal, are you? Truth be told, I'm not even sure you can be killed here. Let's not find out, okay?"

Before I could respond, I was grabbed from behind and returned to my previous location by Harbinger. This time, Knightsabre stood behind me, the point of his blade resting on my back.

"Mother, this isn't right," I heard Vintric whisper to Lillith.

"This is none of your concern, my dear," she replied out loud. "If you want to retain power by my side this must be done."

"But he's done nothing wrong."

"Not yet," the queen of Haedes snarled in reply.

Her terse response to Vintric's words gave me a glimmer of hope. Lillith was worried about the prophecy being fulfilled and losing her throne to me. I needed to play on that fear.

"So the charges against me aren't about what I've done," I observed, "It's about what I will do."

Lillith's laughter was like rusty nails being dragged across broken glass. "What you will do? Dear boy, you assume a great deal about things you know nothing about. You speak of overthrowing my rule because you were told a prophecy foretold it. Yet you've never even heard the words of the prophecy you've put so much faith in."

"Then please, enlighten me," I said with a smile.

"Sorry. That I cannot do." She gazed at the ceiling in reflection for just a second before continuing. "Well, I can. I just won't."

"Are you so afraid of me and what I am that you refuse to even tell me of my fate? And yours?"

The smile vanished from Lillith's face as if someone had smacked it from her lips. "There is nothing about you that I fear, Patrick."

"Fear. You use that word as if it has never applied to you. Yet I look at you now and cannot help but see it written all over your face. If you truly have nothing to fear, why assign two of your most trusted minions to stand guard over me? Why have your brother stand by your side, armed and ready to strike me down?"

"Enough!" she bellowed, her furious scream shaking the rafters. Lowering her voice, she stared daggers into me. My total lack of reaction only increased her anger. "You think you know what you are? You have no idea. Those assembled here know. They know evil when they see it,

as do I. But you have no clue as to the power of the dark. For generations, evil beings have worked together to regain our rightful place. Cooperation between the heads of the various planes, the Titans and earthbound creatures such as the lycans is vital for our continued existence and supremacy. You wish to control it all and that will not suffice. You want to upset that balance because you think you are more powerful than the rest of us. The callousness of youth is writ large in you, Patrick. Until fairly recently you didn't even know you were a child of the Aseraphim. Now you proclaim yourself to be the future leader of Haedes? Your impudence is your weakness, child, for what you are is nothing compared to what you will become. And I care to delay your awakening for as long as possible."

"Because of your fear of me," I stated confidently.

"Because it is what needs to be done. I plan to reign over this realm for as long as possible. I don't need an insolent child distracting me from my goals, the goals of all evil beings. Maybe your time will come and you will gain control of my realm. Now is not that time. And if I have my way, it will never be."

A cheer rose from behind me and for the first time since my arrival I realized that our proceedings were being watched by others. I turned around to see who had assembled in the gallery, catching Knightsabre unaware. He pointed his sword at my chest and I simply batted it aside. I made no move towards the congregation. I just wanted to see if there was anyone that would come to my defense. Alas, there was no savior for me. Baal and Natas had taken seats in the first pew and were staring intently at me as I scanned the crowd. I was looking for Wraith, hoping he would be able to talk some sense into Lillith. Regrettably, he was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't even spot a single Pit Lord or Pit Fiend. It was as if every denizen of the Pit had been denied invitations. Other minor demons dotted the pews, which weren't quite as packed as my first visit to Lillith's courtroom. Still, there were many here to witness my trial.

Turning back around, I held my head high and told Lillith, "If I am to be tried before you, then let it be done. I'm done listening to your incessant blathering. Do what you think is best, but know that whatever punishment you may deem fit for me will ultimately backfire on you. I will not be denied my rightful place on your throne."

Lillith's smile returned as she said, "Your arrogance knows no bounds, does it?"

"My arrogance should be the least of your concerns."

"Very well. Let the trial begin."

As a roar went up from the gallery, a strange thing happened. Vintric stood up and said to her mother, "I will not stand by and watch this travesty."

"Sit down, daughter. You know as well as I..."

"I know that you want to punish him for things that have not yet happened. That's wrong, and I will not bear witness to it."

"His crimes will be proven," Lillith proclaimed.

"His crimes are trivial, and I know your punishment of him will not be. I'm sorry mother, but I cannot take part in this disgraceful proceeding any longer."

Without another word, Vintric turned and walked out the door Nin-Gauble had recently entered. Lillith's rage increased at her daughter's disrespect, causing her to shriek in anger. The pool of blood flowing in front of her bench rippled into waves as it streamed by, splashing droplets of crimson on all who stood too close, myself included. I dabbed my fingers in the spray upon me and licked the blood from my fingers, making me feel better than I had since I'd arrived.

"Read the charges against him please," Lillith growled at Nin-Gauble.

"Patrick McFaen..."

"Refer to me as the Lord of Fear, peon," I demanded.

"Lord Fear," he resumed, "you are hereby charged by Lady Lillith with heresy and treason. Do you understand the charges against you?"

"Does it really matter?" I replied.

Nin-Gauble shrugged and said, "No, not really."

"Then stop asking stupid questions and get on with it."

"Your attitude isn't helping matters, you know?" Ferlash commented.

I wheeled on her and growled, "Was I talking to you?"

Ferlash jumped to her feet, incensed at my disrespect. She withdrew a pin from her hair, holding it at the ready. Lillith stayed her daughter and told her to sit back down.

"Now Patrick..." Lillith began.

"I prefer Lord Fear."

"I don't care," she replied, ignoring my preference. "As I was saying, these are serious charges. Treason against the throne of Haedes is normally punishable by expulsion to the beacons. Same with heresy. But since that isn't an option we'll have to decide on a different punishment for you."

"Wait a second," I chimed in. "We haven't even started the trial and already you're talking about sentencing?"

“How can you possibly deny these charges? Have you not proclaimed yourself a god?”

“I have said that my brother and I are to become gods, yes.”

“And that is heresy.”

“But am I wrong?” I asked with a wicked grin.

“It is wrong to assume god-like status before your time. The only ones that can honestly claim deity status here in Haedes are my brothers and, of course myself. You are not our equal, let alone greater than us.”

“Not yet,” I reminded her.

“And not for a long time to come. You don’t understand. Thinking you’re a god does not make you one. That comes with time, and time is something that you do not have. No, Patrick, you are not a god. You are a child, and like a child you believe yourself to be more than you are. Your power and your influence pale in comparison to mine.”

“For now.”

“And for all eternity. So on that charge, you are most definitely guilty.”

“No, he isn’t,” came a voice from behind Lillith. It was a voice I knew almost as well as my own.

Lillith stood and turned to face Nathaniel Graves. “Do you have something to add?” she asked spitefully.

“Nacht himself wanted him protected on Earth and charged me with the task,” Nathaniel said. “If your father knows what he is to become, the power he possesses, then how can you deny his god-like standing?”

Ferlash, still with the poisoned pin in her hand, stood and jabbed it into Nathaniel’s neck. His cries of agony echoed throughout the courtroom for a full minute, reverberating off the walls and shaking the chandeliers overhead. The crowd crowed in approval at her actions as Nathaniel fell silent.

“Hmm. Who would’ve thought he would come to your defense?” Lillith asked to no one in particular. Bringing her attention back to me, she continued with the hearing. “Now, as for the second charge. Treason. Do you wish to deny this charge as well?”

“I haven’t attempted to overthrow you yet, so yes, I do.”

“But have you not enlisted the allegiance of Wraith, lord of the Pit?”

“I have,” I acknowledged.

“And have you not spoken to Shaddo and gained his trust and respect?”

“Possibly.” I still wasn’t entirely sure Shaddo was on my side.

“Therefore, you have sought influence in two planes of Haedes. You have attempted to form alliances with those that serve under me in my reign. I cannot bear dissention among my ranks.”

“Then maybe you need to be a better leader. Or let someone else show you how.” I straightened up, bringing myself to my full height. Staring into her coal black eyes, I spoke forcefully and clearly. “I stand here before you, charged with nothing more than talking to the leaders of a few planes of Haedes, with no one to defend me except the man who enslaved me for years. Your trial is a sham and all present know it. You can’t stop the inevitable, Lady Lillith. Do what you see fit but know that it is your time that is short, not mine.”

“Questioning my leadership will not gain you any favor, child,” she tersely commented.

“And would remaining staid, or better yet subservient in my response to this travesty earn me a lesser punishment?”

“Not at all.”

“Then you will just have to deal with my defiance of your authority.”

“I suppose so, but not for very much longer.” Lillith rose from her throne and proclaimed to the gathered masses. “Minions of Haedes, this man has been found guilty of heresy and treason against the throne of Haedes. I have decided that not only should his sentence befit his crimes, it should be of such severity as to make escaping his due punishment impossible. Therefore, I have concluded that the only fitting sentence is banishment to the Void.”

A raucous cheer went up from the gallery, signaling wide approval of the verdict. I’d only heard of the Void and all I’d learned to that point didn’t fill me with hope. An inescapable wasteland of nothingness awaited me. When the crowd finally died down, Lillith appointed Knightsabre to escort me to my prison. Nin-Gauble and his assistant asked to join us and Lillith approved his request. When Knightsabre put his hand on my shoulder to guide me out of the courtroom, I grabbed his wrist and threw his arm away. No one would be leading me to my doom. If I was to go, I would go of my own accord. Knightsabre raised his sword at my insolence and was gently pushed aside by Nin-Gauble before my guard could do anything rash. Without a word spoken, Nin-Gauble’s cleric walked up to me and rested his hand in the same spot as Knightsabre. Before I could shrug him off, the courtroom evaporated and shadows filled its previous space.

If the dense shadows surrounding me hadn't been enough of a clue as to my whereabouts, then the large canyons dotting the landscape would've been. I was back in the Shadow Plane, gateway to the Void. There were more gaping holes in this section than where'd I'd met Shaddo. As I thought this, Nin-Gauble strode up beside me and spoke.

"The land keeps falling into the Void. I'd watch your step if I were you."

"Why bother?" I remarked. "If I'm bound for the Void anyway, may as well make it quick."

Nin-Gauble shrugged and replied, "But there is a right way and a wrong way to go about things, is there not?"

"Does it matter?"

"It most certainly does," he hissed. Nin-Gauble moved with grace, weaving his way around the chasms with ease. His assistant had a different approach. This man whom I'd come to assume was his cleric floated over the chasms. Snarling beasts below him cried out in hunger as he passed overhead, hoping a meal would fall into their laps.

"Visage, control yourself," Nin-Gauble commanded, finally revealing the cleric's name. "No need to tempt the beasts."

Visage obeyed and floated over to solid ground. He lined up behind his master, following in his footprints as we marched onward to the Void. The cleric's manner made me wonder as to his usefulness. When I asked Nin-Gauble about this, he laughed. Visage appeared insulted, making Nin-Gauble laugh even harder.

"My dear Lord Fear, Visage is my cleric. Though he no longer has many of the rights and privileges he enjoyed under my reign, he is still the wisest council I've ever had."

"Don't clerics just write stuff down?" I asked.

"And that was his job. He's written all that was asked of him. Now it is his job to share his knowledge."

"But aren't clerics a race of beings?"

"They certainly are. But why have a whole race of them when you only need one? Take Visage for instance. The rest of his race perished under our rule. He was spared because I still needed one cleric on my side. His vast wealth of knowledge concerning future events has been most beneficial. For example, he foresaw this day eons ago. I knew you'd be banished because he knew."

"You knew?" I growled menacingly.

"Of course! Why wouldn't I?"

"Then why didn't you stop it?"

“Why would I do that?” he asked as if I’d just said the most foolish thing he’d ever heard. “It is what had to be done.”

My gaze diverted to the cleric who was looking up at me and grinning. His face was long and pale, his mouth lined with sharp, blackened teeth. His eyes were pitch black, yet they seemed to be smiling too. I wanted so badly to slap the smirk from his face but held back. There was no sense knocking him into a chasm. He would’ve just floated back up.

“So your cleric can tell me about a useless prophecy about some female but not about my fate at Lillith’s hands.”

“You were told what you were meant to be told. This is not my decision, I assure you. I am actually returning a favor.”

“To who?”

Nin-Gauble didn’t answer. He just kept walking, now in complete silence. The chasms were increasing in size to the point where we were now on a thin strip of land surrounded on all sides by canyon. I could finally see far enough into the darkness of the chasms to see what resided at the bottom. What I saw was astounding. Creatures that put Pit Fiends to shame roamed freely in the abyss. Large misshapen heads adorned bodies that looked canine but were covered with scales. Horned beasts with rows and rows of glistening daggers for teeth attacked one another, ripping each other apart in relentless acts of aggression. Thousands upon thousands of abominations roamed freely in the dark canyon, endlessly ravaging one another whenever the opportunity arose.

Onward we walked, Nin-Gauble and his cleric up front and Knightsabre trailing behind me with his sword drawn. The land continued to fall away until we were on a path barely wide enough for us to fit on. Before me were more shadows blanketing the horizon. I tried to look past the haze to see what lay beyond. I saw something, but felt like I’d seen nothing. As we neared, I found out that I was correct.

Falling away from the Shadow Plane was the Void. Standing on a cliff looking down at the Void, it resembled a swirling black vortex. My entourage made sure to keep their distance from the edge, as the Void pulled in anyone standing too close. Much to my surprise, a lone Pit Fiend was waiting for us at the entrance to the wasteland. It eyed up Nin-Gauble and Visage and felt they were not a threat. Knightsabre, on the other hand, caused the Fiend to snarl in hunger. I sensed it might attack and called it over to me. The Pit Fiend obediently complied.

Nin-Gauble raised his hand and called out an enchantment. His words brought a cyclone of dark matter from the Void that settled just over the end of the cliff. It turned so its funnel was facing us, drawing in

the Pit Fiend at my feet. Its body appeared to stretch as it was drawn into the vacuum formed by the churning whirlpool of darkness, and then it simply vanished into the Void.

I expected Nin-Gauble to give me my marching orders. Instead, he looked over at Knightsabre and said, "You can go now." When Knightsabre hesitated, Visage reached out and, with a simple touch of his hand, sent Knightsabre on his way.

Alone with Nin-Gauble and the cleric, I asked, "So this is what is to be?"

"It certainly is, Lord Fear," Nin-Gauble replied.

I slowly backed towards the vortex and reminded him, "I will be back."

"I'm sure you will," he hissed.

I didn't have time to ponder his words before everything exploded. I had reached the Void and was facing away from it as I neared. My sights were set on Nin-Gauble so I didn't know I'd reached my destination until I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I looked down to see the gold in my aura pulsating. As I moved into the Void, its pace grew and the light overtook me. In a blinding flash, the gold erupted and cast away the shadows with its intense light. The vile beings in the chasms below wailed in pain as the light cascaded over them. Nin-Gauble and Visage were thrown backwards from the blast and almost fell into the abyss below. The force of the explosion had thrown Nin-Gauble's hood from his head and I caught a glimpse of his true form. His head was composed of seven snakes with glowing eyes, and all of them were looking at me in wonder.

I took one more small step and was drawn into my new home with a wide grin on my face.

Distant silhouettes dotted the air before me. All was suspended in air as I noticed there was no land to plant my feet. Cries of anguish and pain filled my ears as they echoed past me. This was the nothing, the Void, and I was not alone.

The Pit Fiend that had been sucked into the whirlpool was floating nearby and I reached out for it. Though I couldn't reach it, it changed direction and settled at my side. I put my hand on its head to stay the beast so I could keep my attention on our present surroundings. The shapes in the distance were too far away for me to have any influence on their comings and goings. I couldn't begin to imagine what other beings inhabited this place. I would have to wait until later to find out.

Among the screams and tortured shrieking was a voice. At first I wasn't sure it was directed at me until I heard my name. Not my given name. As far as I was concerned, Patrick McFaen was dead to all, save one. My new title, Lord Fear, was the name I heard within the scattered cries. The voice became more distinct the more I concentrated on it. I looked around for the source and found nothing but more darkened shapes floating by. Then I saw one of these forms drawing closer.

A man appeared from the inky blackness, though calling it a man was not appropriate. This being was shrouded in shadow, the dark mist falling from him like a morning fog over the fields. He wore a cloak the same shade of black as the Void itself. The hood was drawn up but I could see his face behind the shadows. There wasn't a face at all really, just a skull. Evil and hatred radiated from this being and I knew I was in the presence of power. Without being aware of it, I was bowing slightly to this man.

"Rise, Lord Fear, for there is much we must discuss about your future," he said. His voice was a deep growl, like a rabid dog snarling in a metal chamber.

"Who are you?" I asked in awe.

"Look into yourself and you shall see the answer."

I closed my eyes and opened my mind. There I saw him, standing next to a woman bathed in radiant light. It was clear they were together yet their posture spoke of clear revulsion.

"You're Nacht," I stated.

"I am. And I am here to tell you that all that has transpired was meant to be. Everything has led you to this moment, the time of your awakening."

"I'm supposed to be here?"

"You are because I wanted it to be. Though I do not walk the other planes I still hold influence in all of them. I know what is to come, more than any other, and you will need my help if you wish to succeed."

"I am going to rule this world," I told him as I gathered my wits about me.

"But why stop there?" he suggested. "There are other worlds that you can influence, that you can overtake and preside over. Haedes is just the beginning."

"I can't do much from here."

"You will not be here forever, on that you were most definitely correct. Your spirit will not be contained in the Void as Lillith had hoped. Had she been able to banish you to the Void as a physical being her goal

would've been accomplished. Since you are only here as an essence, you will be reborn."

"What about Pak? That's who killed me."

"I am well aware of that. In fact, when Nin-Gauble came to me and told me of Lillith's plan I was quite pleased. Though it will be necessary to remove the heart of the lycan Pak has infested to replace your own, I have no doubt that your brother will eventually accomplish that feat. Until then, you would be wise to listen to my words."

"Why do you want to help me? I thought you were Lillith's father."

"I am, but my daughter doesn't fully comprehend your strength. I enlisted the help of Nin-Gauble to guide her in her decisions. In doing so, I was assured of our meeting. Shaddo even tried to hold you in the Shadow plane when you teleported to inform you of Lillith's intentions. More importantly, he would've told you to let it happen, as it was certainly for the best. You see, Lord Fear, Lillith knows the prophecy but she does not know its every word."

"And you do?" I asked excitedly.

"Alas, no I do not. Only Propheteus does. However I do know more than my eldest daughter. Would you like to hear the words that foretell of your future?"

"How do you know it's about me? Everyone seems to have a different opinion on that topic."

"Because I know," he declared with absolute certainty. "Now, listen closely, as these are the words that you have longed to hear, the prophecy of your reign over Haedes. 'And one of the children of the Aseraphim Starz shall be set upon Haedes to conquer and control its depths of evil. This one shall reign not in spirit but in body. Death of the physical incarnation in Haedes shall fail and this one shall spread hatred with every step. Systematic chaos shall reign over the realm under its leader's rule. Bloodshed and pain will motivate all to follow this new order, and the next lord of Haedes shall have the allegiance of the leaders of all the planes of darkness.'"

I listen to him tell me the prophecy I'd waited so long to hear. Oddly, I found it disappointing. "Is there more? You can't possibly know I'm the one it refers to just from that."

"No, that is not all. It is simply all you need to know for now. And I am quite sure you are the one it speaks of. Your hatred rivals my own. I can see it in you. I can smell it in the air around you. You are the one, Lord Fear, and I will make it my aim to ready you for that day."

“And in return?” I asked. Nothing ever came for free and I had the feeling there was something I’d have to give up.

Nacht was impressed with my assessment. “You are wise beyond your meager years. Yes, there is something I’d like in exchange. I want a voice on your council when you succeed. Nothing more.”

“And if I don’t succeed?”

Nacht let out a roar of laughter, causing the Pit Fiend to cower behind me. “I do not fear your failing. It is to be. Now, come. You have much to learn. From now on, you will be walking the path you were meant for, with me by your side.”

Nacht started to float away and I found myself following him through the thick, black air. When he spoke, I couldn’t help but feel confident. Apparently, Nin-Gauble was helping Nacht. More importantly, neither of them appeared allied to Lillith. I didn’t trust him, but if he wanted to impart his wisdom to me I was willing to learn. Haedes awaited my return, and with Nacht’s help it would rue the day.

Epilogue

Sunlight streamed down from above as the old man finished his tale. His son, though shaken by some of the events he'd been told about, never let his attention wane. The last half of the story had been told to him by memory, his father having put the book away day's ago. He didn't like telling the story of Lord Fear but knew it was important for his son to hear it all, good and bad.

They'd settled down for a quick lunch at the base of a mountain. There was a path leading up the massive mountain and the two of them watched as villagers living on its face streamed down to the ground below. Most of these strangers paid no heed to the two unfamiliar faces. Some bowed in respect and courtesy but nothing more. Then a man dressed in a blue and silver robe approached and pulled the old man aside. After a brief conversation, in which the mountain dweller bowed repeatedly as they spoke, the old man rejoined his son and finished his lunch.

"Who was that, father?" the boy asked.

"Just someone concerned for our safety," his father replied.

"Is it dangerous around here?"

"Nothing I can't handle, I assure you. There's nothing to fear."

The boy giggled at his father's odd choice of words. "Actually, father, it sounds as if there is much to fear. Isn't that what you just taught me?"

The old man smiled, his expression battling the sun's luster.

"There are many things to fear in life, my child. This place is not one of them."

"What about Lord Fear? Is he really as dangerous as you make him seem?"

"More so. His time spent in the Void under Nacht's tutelage transformed him. He became darker, more evil than ever before. His hatred of Lillith and her audacious behavior invigorated him. Though he was Lillith's father, Nacht knew that Lord Fear would eventually overthrow her." The old man took a second to organize his thoughts before correcting himself. "In all honesty, maybe he didn't know it then but he became more sure of his beliefs as the eons spun by in the Void. And it wasn't Lord Fear's violence or wickedness that reassured him. It was the love."

"The love? You mean between Lord Fear and his brother," the boy surmised.

“Exactly. When Lord Fear stepped into the Void, the love in his heart, the gold of his aura, exploded but did not disappear. No being with even a speck of gold had been in the Void since Tag was born. No matter how hard Nacht tried, he could not relieve Lord Fear of the golden aspect of his essence. Nacht saw this development as an advantage. In Nacht’s eyes, Lord Fear’s love for his brother would come in handy if the forces of Haedes ever decided to overrun Haven, which Nacht desperately wanted.”

“Why?” the boy asked, horrified at the very idea.

“Simple. As much as Lord Fear wanted to be with his brother, that was how much Nacht wanted to be with Tag. It wasn’t love that drove the dark spirit however. It was pure lust and greed. Just as he had dispatched Nin-Gauble to guide Lillith in achieving his ends concerning Lord Fear, Nacht also wanted to use Lord Fear the same way.”

The boy let his father’s words soak in as they cleaned up from their meal. The old man could tell his son hadn’t liked the story of Lord Fear’s origins. He didn’t particularly like to tell it. When they were packed up and ready to continue on, the old man told his son to stay put. He had decided to tell the next story here at the base of the mountain and enjoy the hospitality that had been extended to them from the local holy man.

“You aren’t going to tell me about Lord Fear’s time in the Void, are you?” the boy asked hopefully.

“No, you’ve heard enough of that tale for now,” the old man replied.

“So what’s next?”

“Next, we continue from where we left off.”

“I thought...”

“Yes, yes, I know. No more stories about Lord Fear for now. Instead, I want to tell you more about his brother.”