

ASHMER'S BACKSTORY

by Alec DuBois
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The gargoyle that crouched at the center of the table shifted, and Izuqol felt the familiar tug as another Reborn was pulled through the ancient stone into the Sanctum. ~~Hm~~, Izuqol thought silently to himself. He had seen innumerable Aspirants step into this hall for the first time, and the creature that slid out of the fold in the still air ranked among the most disgusting. Quietly, Izuqol let his drooping eyes flit over the hunched form before him. Its thin ivory skin was translucent, looking as if it had been ripped from some dead thing and stretched taught over the sinewy form beneath it. As he watched, dry sinews twisted visibly beneath, and the thing straightened. Its black bones were vaguely visible through its flesh, and its sclerotic spine emitted a series of crackling pops as it brought its violently-hunched shoulders straight. It slipped its sickly hands into either sleeve of the black numerologist's robe that

was draped loosely over its emaciated frame, and he saw it pause and regard the gargoyle. Short, thin spines crowned its head, and these stood on end as it tipped its sharp chin in a polite nod, stretching the torn membrane between them taut. The ruined wings that jutted from its back twitched, and the strips of tattered, slimy white that draped from the spiny black bones of the twisted appendages somehow remained attached. For a moment, its mismatched gaze fell on Izuqol, and he noted its oddly elvish-looking eye, soft amber in hue and slanted exotically. The other looked as if someone had torn the kidney stone from an ogre, whittled it into a perfect sphere, and stabbed it with such force into that thin-featured face as to lodge itself in the socket. The skin around it was stripped back to its brow and cheek, and the muscles that anchored the milky orb to the ebon bone beneath was bare to casual observation. As he watched, the knotted cords of dry, skinless flesh twitched briefly, and the pupil-less eye rolled, peering about independently of its sound counterpart. Briefly, glistening black teeth showed behind its thin, bleached lips, and the wizened merchant noted with idle curiosity the lack of any obvious fangs. "Wonder which Pit that one crawled out of," he muttered softly to himself, his breath a soft wheeze through his ancient lungs. Satisfied with his study of the newcomer, he turned, and, pulling his robe more closely about himself, shuffled further into the southwest recesses of the Sanctum. He returned to his customary place at the place

where the hall bent, and sat down.

Four words forced themselves through Ashmer Ras'valyra's throat in a rasping chant, and his vision went black. When it returned, he stood in the central hall of the Bloodborn sanctum in Bloodloch. He tilted his crested head in a polite acknowledgment of the gargoyle that hunched at the center of the room, then to Geryon where the one-winged vampire stood nearby. The hunched vampire briefly surveyed the shadowed sanctum, the pupil of his sound eye dilated nearly to swallowing its flecked amber iris. The guildhall was entirely silent, the only motion Geryon's occasional shift from foot to foot and the quiet passage of two vampires on their way into another dark corner. A muffled series of cracks reverberated through his back and hips as he uncoiled his sclerotic spine, the dry sinews of his back drawing taut like a bowstring. Reveling in the feeling of his shared body being whole once more, he put the blood-infused corpse through a series of stretches too minute to be seen by the casual observer. Knotted muscle twisted and tugged at his skeleton as he tightened and relaxed them, and soon, he felt the blood settle more deeply into his hardened veins. In passing, he saw Izuqol leaning against the archway of the southwest hallway, mutter briefly to himself in his ancient, withered voice. The merchant soon after turned and vanished from sight in a hunched

shuffle, his robe clutched about his deathless body.

Slowly, Ashmer turned on one bare, clawed heel and stalked southeast, his robe brushing softly against the ground with each smooth step. He felt his body give another slight, tenuous jerk, and his leg threatened to break. The alien sensation of his own blood, responding to his melded thoughts like a willing slave, slithered through him quietly. The pain of his body attempting to return to its dissolved state was swallowed in the tenebrous depth that had welled in the very darkest corners of his shared being. He heard a sibilant whisper as the Ras'valyra Ashmer cooed, its sycophantic murmur a comforting companion as he stepped down the shadowed hall alone. Widely disparate parts of him worked in tandem, forming idle thoughts and taking them back apart again with a sick kind of fascination. He toyed with the memory of his time since reforming, the primal terror at his own body breaking that welled from some untouched corner of his brutalized mind. Ras'valyra had been furious, and his own pride had stung fiercely enough to drive him to seek out the Cabal again. The Conduit had been icy, and had shed no light on the mystery of the Spheres. The deep canyons gouged into the pathways of his mind by his long practice of his triple disciplines of Numerology, Necromancy and Domination remained, but since his return, little had passed there save for a whistling memory of power. The music of the Spheres, which had been his and Ras'valyra's constant companion through their

decades together, were utterly silent. Twice, he had managed to bring enough of that echoing melody into him, and twice, it had been just as swiftly ripped away, wrenching at his body and mind with equal twisting force. He had never known such a hollow feeling of abandonment, and it had echoed sorrowfully between the high walls of his quiet, melded mind.

Distracted, he had hardly noticed his passage through the long corridor, and he blinked his Tsol'aan eye at the dark recesses of the Bloodborn library. A brief memory of nights spent in the dark, incantation after sibilant incantation wetting his lips as he had studied some grimoire or another on the subject of his art, flitted through his minds. A brief, sadistic laugh echoed through him, and he dismissively brushed aside the vague sense of nausea. He had not come here to reminisce like some old done sage, left speaking of naught but the broken promise of his lost youth. He had already chosen a suitable canvas for this work, and as he neared the table at the center of the library, he pulled the small, leather-bound black book from a deep pocket of his robes. He had carried something much like it for years, though while that had kept his insane scratchings and half-finished incantations, this would contain the story of what lay behind him. He did not know what had possessed him with the craving to document his past. Not even Sabeine, whom he valued most over all of his mortal possessions, had been privy to that tale.

Nevertheless, he found himself requisitioning a black-plumed quill from a lectern pushed against the wall. He laid his short stick of ink to one side before uncapping the matching pot. Carefully, he crumbled a bit of the grainy black substance into the vessel's bottom. The razor edge of one black tooth parted his translucent skin easily as he the pad of one too-long finger across it, and a gentle squeeze of his fist trickled a bit of his black blood into the pot with the clumped ink. After plucking the long quill from the tabletop, he stirred the viscous mess together until it was a uniform black that glistened in the dim torchlight that was barely enough to read by.

He laid the black journal before him and opened to the first blank page. The pulp of the fibrous material that had been used to weave the thick paper was visible in its grain, and it had a musty wooden smell to it that brought to his mind a memory of his own rotting form sleeping in the earth as a youth. Dismissively, he cast the experience aside and smoothed the journal flat across the desk beneath it, careful to crease the cover back enough to stay out of his way as he wrote. He touched the tip of the plumed quill into the oily ink at the bottom of the small pot, and without pause put it to the blank page. His hand, unsteady and uneven at first, soon smoothed out, and he wrote in bold, sweeping strokes as his hairless brow furrowed.

The words that follow describe the past of Ashmer Ras'valyra, and before their birth, the brief life of Ashmer Tsolariam. This tale has never been told, and there is even then much that will not bare itself on these pages. We do not have the words for every moment of our time together, and there are some memories I question as vision alone. Why we have decided to write this, we do not know. The past has never been something of great import; the roots of the tree have little to do with its death and reaping. Perhaps these moments have gathered in the dank corners of our minds, and now, left to their own have emerged seeking in the dark.

Briefly, he straightened in his seat and stared at the short paragraph that had crawled its way onto the page lying blank before him. He cast his selves adrift on the tide of his surging memories. Quietly, he slipped back into the recesses of his shared consciousness, along with the violent, unattached and discontinuous memories of the Ras'valyra Ashmer. Simultaneously, he brought himself forward, and Ashmer Ras'valyra was, for the briefest moment, Ashmer. In that flickering instant, a whorled rush of unearthed images swayed across the field of his mind's eye like a willow in a violent gust. Foggy, half-formed images of familiar, smiling faces flitted by, and he thrust them aside as unimportant. He stopped, and the taste of a single memory lay heavy on his tongue, bringing with it the faint recollection of

a chill wind. He remembered skittering spider-like across the veins of this alien plane, its too-solid laws making motion difficult. His prey drew a dizzying surge of lust from somewhere deep in his chest, and he gently set the memory aside. Again, he saw green trees, and this time, the memory played itself out with crystal clarity. Pensively, he put the ink-wet tip of his quill back against the variegated paper, and began writing again.

We are tempted to start at the beginning, with my furtive entrance to this plane, but we have never placed much weight on beginnings. They are fragile things, wrought with peril, and possessed of their own beauty, but ultimately meaningless, when one reaches the end. Neither our stealing onto this plane, nor our squalling birth played a part in what would ultimately come to pass. Instead, we will begin with the true beginning, with the moment in which Ashmer Ras'valyra could make his voices heard. So much had relied on that fleeting moment beneath the earth, hanging on the precipice between life and death, and I could not have guessed at the ultimate insignificance of my experiences up to that point. It was the briefest of moments, barely a moment for each of us that occupied less than the space of a blink of an eye for the rest of the plane. That place was one to which we would ultimately return, and will again, though I failed to recognize it in my brief fall from what would, in

two short centuries, break me. A world was created in the joining of Ras'valyra and Ashmer, when the predator could not best the prey, and the prey was helpless but to stay the predator's hand a moment longer. Undeath left that moment still in time for the next fifty years, and we were left little more than the crowded gap between two violently disparate minds in which to grow. I could not see at the time, but we followed only the narrow path that had left just enough for us to cling to. Many had called us insane, though we had denied it vehemently, sure of our path and sure of the twisted insights that lent us a window into something we saw as beyond the mundanities of this ultimately physical plane. Perhaps you may count this among confessions, but we were arrogant, and there was little we did not count as beneath us, save the Divine Themselves. Malice ruled us then, as we count it among our selves now, and in our insanity, we gave birth to the budding seed of something that both could not survive this place, yet somehow has, and flourished.

After a lingering moment, Ashmer realized he was rambling, and he felt the ebb and flow of his torqued, melded thoughts eddy towards a swirling spiral of idle reminiscence. Shaking his selves, he turned his attention back to the half-filled page. He briefly considered tearing it from the journal and beginning again, but instead simply pricked the tip of the quill again

into the blood-infused ink and rested it back on the rough page. This time, he began in slow, sure strokes, barely aware of the noticeably different cant to his scrawled words.

It truly began well after our disparate beginnings at opposite corners of whatever space encloses the planes. Up to that moment, everything had simply been a prelude, a scratched stanza to lay the scene and introduce the characters. Perhaps we had begun to merge, but it truly began in a pair of moments of such insignificance to the rest of the plane as to escape notice entirely. One moment, we were separate, and the next...

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Ras'valyra later told me that it did not expect me to fight. I was not the first being it had consumed, and the others had been helpless in its grasp. This, it seemed, was different, requiring a deeper intrusion, and unwittingly, I had ensnared the creature in my own body as I transitioned into undeath. As to that place in which we fought, well... neither of us would learn fully what it was until later, after the second time we died together.

The blackness was complete. Everywhere Ashmer looked, it was utterly dark, and the sensation of his own body was a distant, faded thing. It was warm, and for a moment, he slipped further into his semi-comatose state, seeking his dreams again.

It was as if striking a wall, and a hideous, hissing laughter could be heard somewhere close in the darkness. As he turned to look at its source, he realized he could not move. No shackles restrained him, but nor was he paralyzed. He felt as if he had been buried. At the thought, the grating laughter renewed, and he grew still. What in the Pit is that sound? He thought silently, furrowing his brow. This time, the horrific laughter redoubled, becoming a hysterical, otherworldly shrieking. There was something oddly familiar about that alien, echoing voice. He felt a breeze tease past his ear, and something cool and slick pressed against it.

"This will hurt," he heard, accompanying the motion of lips against the side of his face. Pain wracked his immobile limbs, and it felt as if thin claws raked along the inside of his skin. Fear rose sickeningly in his throat as his bones seemed to twist at his joints, and he heard a series of muted cracks. His belly expanded from within, as if he had consumed a feast too large to be comfortably stomachached, and roiled nauseously. Terrified, he struggled, but could not shift the soft mass that enclosed him from all sides. Even his fingers, between which it felt as if something rough and wet slithered, could not close into a fist against that unsettling sensation.

"More comfortable than I expected," he heard, this time as if as his own thoughts, "I've never had a body before." The experience of a voice not his own echoing his own thoughts was

the most violating he had ever had. His skin crawled, and his own alien voice murmured something unintelligible. As the sensation of a cool finger stroking the inside of his skull slithered through him, he nearly vomited in revulsion, stopped only by the indeterminate, dark mass all around him.

"Ashmer," the voice cooed softly, "Ashmer."

What in the Pit are you? The immobilized Tsol'aa thought fiercely, his disgust knotting his innards.

"Not the Pit," his hissing twin thought, "and I am you now, unfortunately."

"But I am me," he snapped back silently, and the words were met with that hideous, hysterical laugh. Again, he felt as if something writhed between his ears, and the sharp taste of his own bile filled his mouth at the sensation. Abruptly, he felt himself falling, and wind whistled past on either side. His clothes were buffeted in the rising gust, and soon, the darkness around him began to lighten softly. Though it felt as if he fell freely, Ashmer could not move, could not twist to see the ground towards which he hurtled. After a few moments, the blackness gave way to dark, charcoal-hued clouds, lit from beneath by a diffused orange light. The air became hotter, and ash raked across his face, leaving it raw. Suddenly, he was free of the thick clouds, staring up at the roiling flint sky, and now the dry, howling wind burned. Tears streaked his cheeks, and he struggled to keep his eyes open against the oppressive heat.

Abruptly, he felt hands snatch frantically at his back and arms, and something small clung to his back. Its bony fingers were horrifically strong, and as it twisted, clambering closer to his shoulders, he felt his elbow crumble in that small grasp. There was a hissing shriek from directly behind him, followed by a quiet, insane mumbling. Suddenly, he felt a hard-nailed finger at his ear, digging into his skin as if to pry open his skull.

"No!" he shouted over the wailing of the hot wind, and a chill raced up his spine at the sudden motion of his own body. Gold dust whipped past, and for a moment, the ash wearing at his skin was replaced by fine, warm sand. With a snarl, he twisted in mid-air, snapping his arm up to snatch at the smaller thing clutching at his back. His destroyed elbow screamed in white-hot protest, but he managed to get a grasp on the slick thing, and wrenched with all of his strength.

"No!" the creature screamed back, "it is too soon!"

As Ashmer turned, wrestling with the squirming thing, he saw the ground, and froze a moment. Barren, ashen plains stretched in all directions beneath the dark, broiling sky, lit here and there with orange light that issued forth from hissing cracks in the cratered basalt. It hurtled closer at a sickening speed, and for the moment the falling man spared to stare in terrified awe, he saw the vague outline of a ragged, mountainous peak jutting up from the horizon. There was a brief moment where the two struggled viciously, clawing and punching as they turned

and fell, before a long finger jabbed into Ashmer's eye, blinding him. Sharp pain stabbed back through his skull as the horrendously strong hand closed over his face, and the hard-nailed digit pressed further into his eyesocket. As his eye itself gave, popping with a sickening sound, he snarled and snapped out, driving one hand back against his unseen assailant's chest. The dull thud of some massive impact jolted him as they touched, and they flew apart.

The slender Tsol'aa's limbs flew out with the spiral, and he felt his smaller attacker lose his grip - all except for that single finger hooked into the socket of his eye. He screamed in protest to the horrific agony, and grasped that thin, bony wrist in both of his own hands. The cry was echoed by the other creature's own, an otherworldly, multi-toned wail that drowned out the noise of the wind as they rushed towards the cracked stone below.

In that moment, Ashmer knew he was about to die, though some tickling sensation left him oddly dissatisfied with that conclusion. As he simply resigned himself to it, his breathing steadied with a gasping sob, and he gulped at the hot, ash-laden air. For a moment, he thought he saw motes of gold dust the edges of his blinded vision, but it, too, passed as he hurtled to his demise. The unseen monster twisted in mid-air, and with grim satisfaction, the young Tsol'aa held on firmly. That digit buried in his ruined eye twisted and hooked, and Ashmer welcomed

the intermittent stabs of raking pain as he coiled his own slender hands more tightly around the captured limb.

"Let go!" the thing shrieked, and still he held on, willing the thing to die alongside him.

The quality of the air changed, then, and the motes of gold returned to the edges of the blinded man's vision. Somehow, he heard more than felt the impact of his splayed form on the hard, rocky ground.

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It is a strange thing, literally being born again. Ras'valyra has been infuriatingly silent on the subject throughout our two and a half centuries together, but I believe it was a kind of birth for it, as well. Before that moment, it had only manifested as a shapeless urge, a whisper in the darkness that promised power, and brought with it insanity. It hungered to die that pseudo-death, and rise again. I have come to understand that had it remained within my body while it lived, it would be doomed to follow me to the Halls of the Underking upon my demise. It had seemed equally as horrified as I was at its painful emergence in my body, a process that had begun a few short weeks before I sought the Indorani.

A pale hand thrust up through the loose dirt, scattering a trio of thick-bodied carrion beetles that had come to inspect the potential feast. It contorted, clawing at the warm air of

the huge subterranean cavern, before raking down into the loam with fingers bent. The soil swelled, as if pregnant, and the wrist squirmed up after its accompanying hand. Handfuls of the dry earth flew haphazardly as the buried man thrashed underground, and soon enough, he was free up to his elbow. A second hand burst up and joined in the frenzied scraping, and the earth bucked. For a moment, he was a pathetic, flailing thing, his limbs too far into the air to gain purchase, but still too deep to move freely, and there came a low, muffled snarl. Then the moment passed, and with a heaving sweep of one thin arm, dirt was scattered across the graveyard's misty ground. Ashmer Ras'valyra writhed, kicking viciously for a moment, and tore free to lay heavily on one side. Long pale hair draped limply over his slender Tsol'aan features, and he remained very still for a long moment. The remnants of violent sensation ached in his lungs and limbs, throbbing with the memory of the change he had undertaken during his brief time beneath the ground. A sharp pain knifed into his abdomen, just beneath his diaphragm, and he gasped softly at the intrusion - or tried to.

The experience of breathing had suddenly become an alien thing, and in a moment of primal horror, struggled with the unfamiliar act of expanding his lungs enough to let the dry air in. His first breath was a pitiful, rasping thing, and as he let it out, another sharp pain knifed into his chest, drawing a

gurgling grunt from the young man. A single drop of blood, bright for lack of air, trickled from the corner of his mouth and over his chin.

"Welcome, child of Indoron, to the ranks of the undead," came a grating voice. Something seemed to war within Ashmer then, and his mouth twitched before settling. As he looked up at the robed figure who had greeted him, the ghost of a smirk flitted over his lips.

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It was not a formal introduction, but the day I met Ras'valyra was nonetheless the beginning of a very long relationship - one that continues to this day. Why it chose this moment to get my attention, I cannot know, though perhaps will when I am joined to it again. I cannot tell how much of my memory is my own, and how much belongs to that tattered creature. The mismatched flesh that clings to its corporeal form in haphazard chirurgic abandon are the parts of me I've left embedded in it. I dare not look in those still, acidic pools at my own reflection, for fear of discovering what I look like in this place.

"What is your name?" the wind seemed to whisper as it blew past Ashmer's ear. The trees above, their limbs lush with summer, scattered the streaming sunlight across the grassy earth

in dappled shadows.

"What is your name?" Again, the wind whistled by, carrying with it that hissing question. Though warmed by the bright sun, a chill fingered its way up his spine, and he shivered despite the comfortable temperature. He stared through the trees, transfixed by a furtive motion at the far edge of the meadow that stretched off to the west. Something small and pale, moving on three limbs, but the glimpse was too swift for him to be even be sure he had actually seen it. He blinked, and shivered again as he felt a breeze too cold for the young summer day tease across his face. Fine grains of sand slipped over the skin of his cheeks, but when he opened his eyes again, it was gone. The sensation was terribly familiar, and for a moment he strained to remember.

Something touched him at his elbow, and he started, turning about. He found himself looking into the bright eyes of a young Tsol'aan girl, perhaps a slight bit older than his own twelve years. She was smiling indulgently, and he had the odd feeling he had been caught sleeping at his post. Ahead, the horses had stopped, and Ashmer's father, Atarn, looked back at him expectantly, a questioning expression on his face.

"Daydreaming again?" Atarn called, and the teenaged Ashmer felt his face heat with embarrassment. He remembered stepping off the path to look more closely at something that caught his eye, and then...

The two men on the trail shared a hearty laugh, and spurred the horses back into a slow walk. Rissa, Ashmer's older sister, rode past with a whoop, her short spear held loosely at her side.

"Father, you must stop bringing back -books- from Ashtan! They've curdled his mind!" she called, and the laughter redoubled. Through his embarrassment, Ashmer grinned, then stuck his tongue out at the wiry older girl as she drew up beside their father. She replied with a good-natured scowl, before turning back to join in on the parents' conversation. The small group began moving again, and Ashmer heard the wheels of their lone cart creak in protest. He looked back, and was met with the dark eyes of Grandmother, her deeply-wrinkled face scowling out at him from the depths of her great cloak. Carefully, he looked away from where she sat beside the cart's pilot, and back to the young girl at his side. Mirth dancing in her eyes, she looked away, as if pretending not to notice his slight.

"I did ask you a question," she mused aloud, her attention drifting up towards the trees that framed the rough dirt pathway. He frowned at her for a moment, humiliated that he had been so caught up in his brief daydream that he had missed it entirely.

"I..." he began, but as she looked back at him, he found he was unable to think of an excuse that satisfied him.

"What is your name?" she asked, and the memory of that

rasping voice at his ear brought another unbidden shiver.

"Ashmer," he replied quietly, and her lips quirked to one side in a smile.

"Sylla," she offered, as she slung her short bow over one slender shoulder. Her green robe matched Ashmer's, the homespun cloth afforded to all children in their small community. Flecked eyes that nearly matched the color of their clothing regarded him quietly, and he looked back for a moment, curious.

"You like books?" she asked, that faint smile still on her sharp-featured face. At that, he cast her a boyish grin, but it vanished briefly as he looked ahead, towards his sister. She didn't approve of his his spending every spare moment reading, and regularly arranged to interrupt him in his solitude - his other pair of robes were still stained with horse manure from the last interruption. Sylla's head canted to one side, and she pursed her lips pensively for a moment. He nodded stiffly, and her white teeth showed in a grin.

"Me too!" she blurted, drawing a look from the wiry man sitting atop the horse beside Atarn's. With a giggle, she quieted, and adjusted the short bow slung at her shoulder. He cast a boyish grin at her, and let the pack strapped to his shoulders slip forward, onto his hip. He dug through it, after a moment producing a leather-bound tome thicker than his fist. He fumbled awkwardly for a moment, then managed to close his pack with the little finger of one hand and his teeth. Throughout the

display, Sylla pressed a hand over her mouth, suppressing a laugh.

"This is what I'm reading now," Ashmer said, and handed the tome to Sylla. She hefted it in both slender elven hands, and peeled back the cover. The title was etched in fine black script on the first page, centered just above the author's name.

"The Unliving: a Study," she read aloud, and her brow furrowed as she looked questioningly back at the boy.

"It's great!" he began, still grinning, and reached across to turn a well-earmarked page. For a moment, he flipped from page to page, pausing briefly for Sylla to study the illuminations drawn in fine detail at the top of each. Ghouls, skeletons standing of their own accord, and a hideous wight flit by, drawing increasingly disturbed expressions from the girl. Secretly, Ashmer relished her disgust, and stopped at a page near the middle of the book. This entry bore no picture, and he tapped at the finely-written words with the tip of a finger.

"This man, I forget his name, kills them, and then writes about them and how to kill them," he explained indulgently, and understanding flashed across the girl's fine-boned face.

"See here? This is everything he knows about Necromancy, and the people who use it," he continued, becoming more excited with each breath, "but he says that could be anyone. Even someone living can use it, he says."

Sylla's expression was an intermingling of wide-eyed awe

and outright concern, and he found it terribly satisfying to have someone who was actually impressed by his choice in reading material.

"It says he's even killed Necromancers," he finishes, "and saved people from them, like in Herbane and the Demon!"

At that, her expression shifted, and she smiled at him once more.

"I've read that one," she replied, before looking back to the tome in her hands. Brow furrowing pensively, she flipped the page, and began reading the next entry, scrawled beneath a drawing that depicted a multitude of rotting hands clawing up through the ground. There was a long while of companionable silence, as Sylla flipped through the heavy tome and Ashmer strode beside her, watching the fields and groves go slowly past them on each side. He reveled in the open air, and the faint breeze contrasted crisply with the heavy warmth of the bright sun. The entire group cleared the trees, the path widening slightly as it swept more closely to the north. On either side, fields stretched out to the forest's edge, dotted here and there with lush groves.

"Ashmer," came a rasping call from the cart. He started, and looked back, finding the dark, squinted eyes of Grandmother on him. With a sheepish grin, he touched Sylla's elbow, getting her attention.

"I'll be back," he half-whispered, and she glanced at

Grandmother briefly, a wry grin on her face, before nodding and re-absorbing herself in his book once more. He allowed himself a moment of pride at introducing her to the valuable tome before slowing his pace and taking a single step back. After a moment, he walked beside the hunched old woman, his eyes on the dirt path ahead. The wheel of the cart creaked and clattered beside him, and there was a moment of silence as Grandmother simply looked ahead. The breeze picked up again, bringing with it a chill, and Ashmer thought he heard a slight murmur carried with it as he brushed past. He glanced over one shoulder, and brought his robe more closely about himself. Idly, he considered unpacking his cloak from his belongings in the back of the cart.

"Are you cold, child?" came a rasping question, startling Ashmer from his distracting thought. He flicked a glance up at the pilot's seat of the cart, and Grandmother still looked ahead, swaddled in her huge, dark blue cloak. Her hunched back swayed with the motion of the cart, and the wiry youth beside her tugged lightly on the traces, slowing its progress.

"A little, Grandmother," he replied quietly, nervous. One nearly black eye squinted in her creased face, and he averted his gaze, unable to hold that scrutinizing look. Ahead, Sylla still walked half-bowed, her pace varying as she flipped through the pages of the borrowed book. She paused, momentarily, and looked back over one shoulder at Ashmer. As she saw him looking at her, she cast him a bright smile, gesticulated at the open

tome propped against her hip, and returned to poring through it. A narrow grin split his lips, and he looked back up at the ancient woman riding beside him.

"It is too warm a day for a youth such as yourself to be chilled," Grandmother observed in her gentle, rasping voice, "are you ill?"

"No, Grandmother," he replied respectfully, only managing to look directly into those eyes for a scant moment, "it's just the wind."

At that, her face creased into a heavy scowl, and again the teenager averted his eyes, looking back at the rough path underfoot.

"There is no wind," she replied after a long pause, as she huddled further into her great, folded cloak.

At that, a faint tingle crept along the back of Ashmer's neck, and he glanced sharply at her, one amber eye narrowed.

"There is no wind," she repeated, her own gaze then cast along the rough path ahead, "perhaps you are ill."

"No, Grandmother, I'm fine. Perhaps it was my imagination," he said, with a slight incline of his head, "do you need anything?" It was custom to render some assistance to the elderly before leaving, and Ashmer managed to hold that squinted stare respectfully.

"No, Ashmer, go on," she said, before looking away over the heads of the men and women walking and riding ahead of the

creaking cart. He offered Grandmother a distracted nod before breaking into a swift trot, and soon he pulled up beside Sylla once more. She still had her attention buried in the borrowed book, and Ashmer grinned at her startled look as he stepped close at her shoulder. Her smile was bright, and she reached up, tucking a strand of her dark brown hair behind one sharply-pointed ear.

"This is amazing," she says, gesturing to the page held open. A ghoulish humanoid figure was sketched onto it, its flesh depicted in long, scratching strokes of the quill used. The effect achieved was a desiccated husk, with gaping holes in its dry, grey skin. He cast her a boyish grin, and reached across, flipping to the next page.

"Sylla," he muses aloud, drawing her curious green gaze, "did you feel a wind earlier?"

Bemused, she shook her head, and her brow knotted.

"There is no wind," she said, a brief, concerned look crossing her features.

Ashmer's mouth twisted into a frown, and he looked ahead, his brow furrowing over his flecked amber eyes. Something tugged at his attention, as if he had forgotten something terribly important. Sylla's mouth quirked at the pensive expression on his fine-featured face, but she remained silent and averted her gaze. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a furtive motion, and glanced distractedly off to the west. There, at the very far

edge of the meadow, a fawn poked out into the sunlight, nose twitching at the small group of Tsol'aa strung out along the narrow path. Ashmer shook his head, and looked back at Sylla, her own wide green eyes turned away across the sparse groves to the east of the trail.

"So you've read Herbane and the Demon?" he asks her, drawing her gaze. She grinned girlishly at him, and nodded, before opening her mouth to speak. Her first few words became oddly muffled, however, as a quiet breeze slipped across the Tsol'aan boy's ear.

"There is no wind," came a soft, hissing voice, barely at the edge of hearing.

#

Ras'valyra was silent while we spent the next handful of weeks in Ashtan, until the cart and our pack animals, at first laden with goods, were bent under the weight of a greater amount of coin and raw materials. While our parents haggled, Sylla and I played in the streets. We spoke with reserved monks, wondered at the primal transformation of a Bahkatu, and once, saw a visiting Luminary from Enorian on a diplomatic mission. Sylla was enchanted, and I was fascinated with the myriad crafts undertaken by Ashtan's people. We spoke at length of family, and found a common thread in our annoyance with the constant question of what we wanted to be when we "grew up." It wasn't

until we returned to the village that Ras'valyra made itself
felt again.

The sun had just begun to slip from the sky entirely as the group hiked through the last strand of trees before the village. The cart behind them rolled and creaked on the pathless, uneven ground, much lighter than it was when it had left. It was a warm night, and the damp air was alive with the sound of insects. The recent rain left the ground soft underfoot, and still dripped from the heavy boughs overhead. Ashmer's hood was soft against his face, still wet from having stared too long up at the dramatic sky. The setting sun cast fiery orange shadows across the bellies of the serpentine clouds that slid across the firmament, which itself glowed in rose-hued glory. A soft breath escaped the teenaged Tsol'aa as he peered through the interwoven leaves, snatching glimpses of the pastel borders where the varying colors merged. He was the first of the spread-out group to reach the crest of the final rise, and he stopped atop it, white teeth showing with exhilaration at the swift trot through the foliage behind. The adults and older youth had relinquished their horses, walking them through the forest that stretched away to the west.

With a sweep of his slender hands, Ashmer dropped his hood over his shoulders, and looked behind him to gauge the progress of the other children. Through the intermingled oak and poplar,

he saw traces of movement, and once, a flutter of a green robe as a younger boy dashed across a stretch of open ground. A faint smile tugged at his lips, and he turned back forward, sweeping his attention across the small bowl pressed into the topography to the east.

A thin finger of smoke rose into the sky from the communal gathering hall, where a fire always burned, day and night. The rest of the air above the village was clear, finally late enough in the spring that each family would no longer have to endure the bitter smoke clouding the air of their shared spaces. As he watched, a pair of sinewy youths hefted cords of wood into a central fire pit, and began the process of stoking the nightly cooking fire. His stomach growled, and he reached into a deep pocket of his robe for the half-eaten piece of hard bread. As he waited for the rest to enter the dell, he gnawed pensively on the tough snack, his amber eyes settling on the village ahead.

A moment later, a branch broke as something rustled through the brush at the foot of the rise, and Ashmer started, turning on his heel. He squinted in the direction of the sound, but there was nothing. His brow knotted; there was no motion, and no further sound, save for that of the approaching caravan.

"Welcome home, Ashmer," a melodic female voice intoned behind him, and he hissed a breath as he spins, startled. His chest heaved as he drew in three long, panting breaths, and his jaw clenched. There was nothing there. What in the Pit? He

thought silently, as he bared his white teeth at the empty crest of the hill. No answer was forthcoming, and shaken, he tore another bite from the tough bread in his hand. The voice had been somehow oddly familiar, but he couldn't place who it could have been. This was the second time that day his mind had played such a trick on him, and he shook himself bodily, as if to cast off the uneasy sensation settling into his bones. In the central clearing of the village below, he saw figures gathering, and the sound of laughter drifted up to his perch. Again, his stomach growled. The night the trading group returned was always one of subdued celebration, as they enjoyed the delicious fruits of their labor, and prepared to sort and turn the raw materials purchased into something useful, or valuable. The next few weeks, he knew, would be a time of daily, monotonous labor - he was still at the age where he would be placed at one task, and left to fulfill that task to the exclusion of all else. He grimaced silently at the memory of fingers sore from hours of braiding cordage into rope, and the season before that had been pushing nails into bridles for horses with gloved thumbs. His hands ached in the ghost of the remembered time, and he clenched them briefly into fists.

Another rustle startled him from his brief daydream, and he turned about, expecting another trick of his mind. At the base of the hill, however, Sylla ducked into view, followed by the spry figures of two other youths. One, a diminutive girl, stayed

close behind Sylla, while the other, a taller boy, strode smoothly up the steep incline. As she neared, she beamed a white smile in Ashmer's direction, and he tipped his chin in a small nod.

"This is Ashmer," she says to the older boy, who bows his head politely. Ashmer's smile vanishes, and he mimics the stoic gesture. The boy himself was at least half a foot taller than Ashmer, his dark brown hair cut close to his scalp. The wisps of the very beginnings of facial hair dusted his lip and cheeks, and his shoulders were broad, just filling out in the promise of manhood.

"This is my brother, Meshel, and my baby sister, Soira," she explains, indicating the taller boy, and the younger girl at her other side. Soira cast Ashmer a shy smile, then stepped further behind Sylla, her small hands clutching at the sleeve of her older sister's robe. There was a moment of companionable silence, before Meshel spoke.

"You're Kyra's baby brother," he states more than asks, his expression neutral.

"Either that, or she's my older sister," Ashmer replies quietly, as he slips his slender hands into either pocket of his robe, "I take care of her, more than the other way around."

At that, Meshel's nostrils flare in a soft snort, and he assents with a quiet nod. Ashmer's white teeth show in a narrow grin, but it fades as he notices the single wide, green eye

peering at him from beneath Sylla's arm. His lips quirk for a moment, and he settles down into his crouch, bringing his flecked, honey-hued eyes in line with the shorter child's. She hid briefly, stepping further behind Sylla, before peeking back out once more. Sylla herself grinned down at him, her forest-green eyes dancing with mirth.

There was a long moment of silence, as they simply looked at each other, before Ashmer lifted both slender hands. Puffing out his cheeks, he grabbed both ears and pulled them to either side of his face and pursed his lips, turning his face into a simian caricature. Eyes wide, he turned, peering about, before looking back at Soira. She giggled softly, tugging at Sylla's robe, and Ashmer let the air from his cheeks in a huff, before sticking his tongue out at the child. He screwed up his face and crossed his eyes, both hands rising to the side of his face. Her laugh is a tiny, melodic thing, and Ashmer grins widely in response. Sylla's laugh is a more pronounced version of the same, and as Ashmer looks up, a wry smile has even found its way onto Meshel's face. Planting his hands on his knees, he slips back to his feet.

Behind the siblings, a few other Tsol'aa filter through the underbrush, and the cart breaks from the forest to the north, swaying with the pitch and roll of the muddy ground, before straightening out on the well-tended meadow ahead. His father walked at the head of the small group of Tsol'aa, leading his

horse, with his sister just beside him in similar fashion. Even at this distance, Grandmother's attention unsettled him, and he lifted his hand in a tentative wave. Though tiny with distance, he thought he could see a withered hand slip from Grandmother's heavy cloak in reply, and he dropped his back to his side, his brow knotting. Again, a slight, chill wind brushed at the young Tsol'aa's fine-boned cheek, and a vague feeling of unease knotted in his gut. Disturbed, he found his thoughts drawn back along the path of the series of odd sensations that had followed him more frequently of late. An odd, restless sensation gathered in his shoulders and chest as he strained distractedly, trying to remember when it had begun. Again, there was that feeling that he had forgotten something terribly important, and he was vaguely aware of his brow knotting. The muscle between his eyes tightened, and for a moment, it felt as if the cool tip of a finger pressed firmly against his warm skin.

"Come on!" Sylla called from the bottom of the hill to the east. Ashmer started, woken from his disturbed reverie, and glanced east, to where Sylla waited with her two siblings. With a final glance at the dark-cloaked form of Grandmother, he turned on his heel and kicked into a swift trot towards the trio. Sylla's expression was concerned when he drew up at her side, and he offered only a shrug in excuse.

"What do you keep thinking about?" she asks him, her soft green eyes hardened with concern. Meshel pointedly looks away,

and Soira simply skips along between them. The small girl pauses briefly, bending down to pluck something from the rain-damp grass.

Ashmer simply looks back at Sylla for a moment, frozen, as she folds her slender arms over her chest.

"I think I'm sick," he begins after a moment, and before he can continue, her expression melts, her brows turning up.

"Oh, really?" she asks him, interrupting the first of his next words, "well, I'm glad we're home, then."

Ashmer had been about to explain about the sounds, the whispers, and the wind that wasn't there, but he shut his mouth and nodded, offering a weary smile in reply. Again, the four were quiet, Meshel's heavier boots being the only sound as he stepped through small puddles and over soft patches of twined roots. Again, Ashmer's mind drifts, this time to the feast ahead. This evening would boast the best food enjoyed by the community aside from that served by the groom's family at celebrations of the Rite of Unity. He fantasized about tender meat, crisp vegetables, and the exotically-seasoned specialties that would cover every table, and this would be one of the few nights in the year that enough wine would be served for the children to partake. His stomach rumbled restlessly, and he lifted the remainder of his hard bread to his lips. After a brief frown at it, he stuffed it into his mouth, chewing stiffly. His cheeks bulged, and he glanced down, casting a

lopsided, screwed-up expression at Soira, his eyes crossed once more. She giggled again and stepped forward, putting Sylla between her and Ashmer. He finished chewing, swallowed, and looked ahead at the approaching village. A few figures were gathering to greet them, framed by the wildfire glow cast by the setting sun, and he saw his mother, her basket propped at her hip, waving at his father, who lead the remainder of the group towards the communal gathering area at a steady trot. Ashmer's pack suddenly felt very heavy, and he was exhaustingly aware of how sore his legs were from the past week spent hiking to Ashtan, and the return trip through the Ithmia. He looked at Sylla, then Meshel, and found them both appearing as weary as he felt. Steps slowed and lengthened, and each visibly relaxed as they stepped past the unmarked boundary at the village's edge.

"Are you going to the celebration with your family?" Sylla asked him curiously, and he saw her head tilt out of the corner of his eye. He shook his head, and she smiled brightly. It was customary for members of the community still continued children to attend the celebration "with their family" - since families tended to remain in the same abode until well after a child reaches adulthood, it was a mostly semantic idea.

"You can come with us, then," she continues, beaming, as her pace picks up, "we're going to raid the cider kegs, and get the first cuts of lamb from the roast." As she speaks, Ashmer's mouth waters, his mind racing towards the meal ahead with a

ravenous hunger.

"I'm looking forward to it," he replies with a wide smile, and eases into a light trot as they near the very edge of the village. With a whoop, he breaks into a run, and he hears Sylla and Meshel kick up behind him as they race towards the first low buildings. The ground was soft underfoot with the recent rain, and they flew across the last hundred feet of the meadow with all the joyful abandon of youth. Ashmer's long legs pumped, and he straightened, reveling in the rush of the evening air. He spared a glance behind him, and saw little Soira, her hair flying behind her, gaining on him in a wild rush. Cooling air raked across his teeth as he grinned back at her, and he turned back forward, leaning harder into his swift lope. After a few long strides, he noticed the air become noticeably colder, and it swiped at his face with its icy palm as he ran headlong for the village.

"Faster," he thought he heard in the hissing tones of that chill gust, and with a frown he glanced back over one shoulder at Soira. What he saw turned his stomach - the twisted form of the Tsol'aan child loped towards him on three gangly limbs, her flesh now a faded ashen hue. Her eyes, no longer the bright aquamarine that shared so many hues with her older siblings, were twin globes of cloudy fluid, devoid entirely of a pupil. Her mouth opened, too wide for that small jaw, and a long, black tongue slipped from between her grimy yellow teeth, to lap at

the air. Swiftly, the thing-that-was-Soira was gaining on him.

With a cry, Ashmer turned and ran as fast as he could. Adrenaline washed through him, and his chest heaved in great, panting breaths as he gulped desperately at that cold wind. He heard those small feet rake at the grass behind him, becoming louder with each shuffling lope, and tears streaked down his cheeks. Suddenly, his foot caught on something, and he slammed forward, tumbling to the wet grass. He tucked one shoulder and rolled over - behind him, the demon-Soira gained, and he looked down to see another thin, bony hand wrapped around his ankle, its wrist disappearing beneath the moist earth. In a moment, he resigned himself to his fate, and prepared to scream and kick as violently as he was able as the loping thing neared at a terrifying speed.

Just as he felt his mind touch ground and center, his head spun in a dizzying rush, and the vision shifted - once again, it was Soira sprinting towards him as fast as her little legs could carry her, considerably farther back than her twisted counterpart had been. He looked down, and saw a concealed root hooked over the top of his foot, having been torn partially from the dirt by his weight. His vision swam, and he felt as if he had been bodily picked up and shaken. Soira's smiling expression became one of concern as she neared, and she drew to a halt a few feet away, still panting from the run.

"Are you alright?" she asked him, her brows knotting.

"I am," Ashmer said, as calmly as he could muster. Soira must have heard something in his voices, because her brow furrowed further, but then Sylla and Meshel came up, still running.

"Shouldn't run so fast you can't feel the ground," Meshel intoned calmly, his breath steadily evening out even as he spoke. He bent down, one hand canted against his knee, as he offered Ashmer the other.

"You're right," Ashmer replied as he took the proffered hand and let Meshel lever him back to his feet. He brushed at his robe with both hands and shook himself. As he did so, he felt as if he had just re-settled in his own skin, and the experience both relieved and unnerved him at the same time. He had always remembered having nightmares similar to these visions and whispers, but never had they manifested themselves so starkly in his waking mind. For the third time that same day, he had the unshakable feeling that he had forgotten something important, but no matter how he strained, he could not remember what it was. The vague memory of a childish, guilty feeling wafted through his mind, but dissolved as soon as he turned his attention to it. The tail end of his nauseous terror faded, and he cast a reassuring smile at Sylla. Hers was an expression of mild concern, but Meshel looked matter-of-fact about his observation as he folded his arms over his chest. Impatiently, he looked between Sylla and Ashmer, his brow rising over one

deep blue eye.

"Well, are we going, or not?" he asked simply.

"I'm hungry," Soira said, adding her weight to the question.

"I'm fine, really. Let's go," he said, "I'm starving."

#

Smoke and music wafted up into the air, the former carrying with it the rich, tantalizing smells of the feast still being heartily consumed at the long trestle tables lain beneath the open sky. Above, the clouds had separated in long fingers, leaving wide swathes of the star-strewn sky visible. Mugs of warm cider in hand, the four Tsol'aan youth lay on the slope of a low rise, sipping the delicious nectar and pointing out constellations as they crept out from behind the concealing clouds. The bright ivory disc of the moon hung low in the sky, and everything was silvered in its light. The wet grass glittered, leaving the open field that served as the communal gathering area a mirror of the tiny pinpoints of light overhead. A few others had joined them, and they scattered in twos and threes, stretched out on flattened blankets and cloaks. The air was crisp, a refreshing last taste of the brief, cold spring before summer bloomed in full. Ashmer leaned on his elbow, his feet pointed down the gentle slope, with his head tilted back to stare at the purple pinpricked firmament. Beside him, Sylla sat in similar posture, talking quietly with another boy a little

older than them both. Soira raced with the other young children among the rest of the gathering, nearer the central bonfire, a small wave of annoyed and amused murmurs following them. Young adults, mostly couples, stood at the edge of the firelight in each other's arms, their heads similarly tilted back to appreciate the sky. A chorus of the night's insects rung softly in the background, only audible in those moments of silence as the sound of voices and music ebbed and flowed. Ashmer, his gaze falling from the stars briefly, watched his father take his mother's hand and lead her, grinning, to the track of packed-down dirt that served as an area for dancing. The musicians took up a lilting, playful melody, and laughter drifted up from the tables to Ashmer's keen ears.

For the moment, he basked in that odd, comforting sensation of being alone among friends and family. Sylla was engrossed in her conversation with her new friend, and Meshel similarly lay a short distance away beside a girl that somehow matched his quiet confidence. Rissa, his sister, spun and twirled at the center of the dancing ground, casting wild shadows across the other dancers. A smirk quirked at the corner of Ashmer's lips as he saw three men her age join her in the stomping, acrobatic maneuvers, and she lead them on with the ease of a true master. He had recently learned the origins of the dance - it was a ritualistic form of practice from some forgotten age, something the warriors of that time had used to ready their bodies for

combat. Now, he thought, it was readying their bodies for something else entirely.

"Ashmer..." he heard then, in a soft, rattling hiss that slipped past his ear. An involuntary shudder fingered its way down his spine, and he shook himself as he sat up. Not again, he thought, even as he strained as the sound reached the very edge of hearing. Something else accompanied it, just too quiet for him to make out, but something about that barely-recognizable sound sparked a memory.

"Ashmer..." this time, the whisper could be heard more clearly against its background undertones, and it trailed off in a faint, shrieking wail. He abruptly remembered, then, finding the corpse of a bird when he was much younger, hardly more than a baby. With the forgotten image came the sense that he had never forgotten in the first place.

"Ashmer..." he could hardly hear the whisper this time, for the red-streaked memory that washed across the blank page of his mind. The pigeon had been ripped open, its ribs cracked, and innards strung out across the ground around it. Its lungs fluttered in its chest, and Ashmer remembered being oddly fascinated with the fact that it still lived. Its crushed wings lay twisted at either side, and its throat bobbed with each gulping breath. As soon as the vision came, it was gone, leaving Ashmer back on the wet slope with his mug in hand.

"Ashmer!" came Sylla's voice, and he spun, startled. Some

of his drink sloshed out of its container to the ground. Sylla looked at him with a concerned expression, and the older boy's look was one of idle curiosity. He felt his ears burn, and he lifted his mug to swallow his embarrassment along with a mouthful of the sweet, spiced cider. It was heavy on the tongue, the heavy cinnamon in it warming him as he drank deeply. He felt it slip past the knot in his throat before pulling the mug from his lip and wiping his mouth with one sleeve.

"Were you drifting off again? Are you still sick? Should you be inside?" she asked him, rapid-fire, and he felt a deep sense of unease at her line of questioning. Something about the look on his face unsettled Sylla, and she rose, padding down the hill to him.

"Get up," she said, as she offered her hand to him.

Ashmer looked at it briefly, then took it, and she nearly dragged him to his feet. Almost immediately, she was off, striding between the other youths scattered across the low rise. He found himself dragged along behind her, as her hand clamped tightly down on his, and for a few steps he nearly had to run to catch up. She cut straight towards the tables, and the bonfire, where the heated cider was being poured freely and food was still being brought from the great buried ovens on steaming platters. A few firelit faces turned and watched as the two passed, and Ashmer dragged on his hand lightly, slowing Sylla.

"Where are we going?" he asked her.

"Dancing," she informed him matter-of-factly, before turning and striding into her brisk trot, once again with Ashmer in tow. An uneasy feeling settled in his stomach, and something tingled down the length of his spine. At the edge of the clearing, awash with the warm glow of the massive central fire, she drew to a halt, and reached out, taking his other hand. At his slight resistance, she paused, her head canting aside as she grinned at him with teeth hued orange by the bonfire.

"What's wrong?" she asks him, as a faint, chill breeze teased through the the clearing. The trampled grass underfoot waved lightly at its caress, and Sylla shivered visibly as she pulled her robe closer about her against the cold. As he realized that she had felt it as well, Ashmer felt an absurd wash of relief; perhaps the odd experiences of that day leaving the village had been his mind playing tricks on him. He had been having nightmares recently, and he thought with relief that it may have just been their violent memory that toyed with his mind while awake. Like all nightmares, he assured himself, they would pass.

"Nothing," he informed her, and reached out, taking her warm hands in his own. The song playing then trailed off, and the musicians broke into a joyful melody, its beat a lively thing that stirred Ashmer's blood. The pair stepped and leapt, improvising where they met the end of their dance lessons, and soon, they were both laughing as they jumped and spun. He took

both of her hands, then, and quick-stepped towards the bonfire. With graceful aplomb she followed, their feet stamping rapidly at the soft ground. The heat, as they neared, was intense, and Ashmer halted before they got too close. With the final musical chorus, he stepped away, turning in a lithe, if unpracticed, leaping maneuver, before stepping back forward and taking her hands once more. With a twist of his arm, he twirled her, and she giggled, spinning away before he gave a too-sharp tug to bring her back upright. She stumbled against him, and he enclosed her in his arms. The song trailed away, and breathless, the pair leaned against each other, the last of their shared laughter playing itself out.

"I don't believe you, you know," she told him, as the musicians began to shuffle about, changing places and tuning their new instruments. One fiddle began a low, almost mournful note, and a single drum beat a steady rhythm beneath it. She straightened, leaning more fully against him, and one of her hands found his at his side. Lifting it, she pressed her palm into his, and grasped his elbow with her free hand. It was a warm, comforting kind of embrace, and he let himself sway in time with her and the music. He paused, silent for a moment, as she looked up at him with those huge green eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked her, his brow furrowing. Her smile was sad, almost, and he averted his eyes, watching as other couples found their way together on the cleared dancing

ground.

"You don't fool me," she replied softly, the words followed by a quiet, pensive laugh, "I've seen those haunted stares since the day I met you, and the look on your face when you spoke with Grandmother."

Unease spread through him, and he lifted one hand. His arm encircled her slender shoulders, and the rhythm of the sound slowed slightly, drawing the two into its embrace. They swayed together, moving from one foot to the other as they moved the length of the cleared ground before the bonfire.

"Goddess knows what it is, but something's bothering you, I can tell," she continued after a lingering pause, and he looked back, finding her flecked emerald gaze still affixed on his. The corner of his mouth turned down, and he suppressed the urge to again look away. A brief, barely-there nod was his only answer, and her own slender mouth twisted into a slight, concerned frown. Relief flooded through him as, instead of asking what was bothering him, she lay her head on his chest. Again, a chill wind swept through the clearing, and she shivered, huddling closer against him.

For the next three slow, winding songs, the pair danced, their swaying steps drawing them closer to the huge bonfire at the center of the village clearing. The comfortable night turned chill slowly, and soon, the air was a crisp temperature, refreshing after the humidity of the merchants' trek through the

northwestern lands and the swamps around Ashtan. Ashmer held Sylla close, reveling in the prolonged, comforting contact.

"You can tell me what's bothering you, you know," Sylla began again, and again, that feeling of unease wound itself around the base of Ashmer's spine, "but you don't have to."

"Thank you," Ashmer replied quietly, forcing the words past the knot in his throat. Should he tell her? About the nightmares, the visions, the twisted specter of Soira and the dead hand wrapped about his ankle? About the whispers that followed him everywhere, and hearing words that hadn't actually been said yet? He shook his head, again deeply unsettled about the happenings of the past few weeks. He felt helpless, and with that unpleasant experience came that brief, bloody memory that flitted past his mind's eye. A bird, its ribs torn open, and a tiny bloodied stone lying nearby that had captured his attention.

"Sylla!" came a call from the edge of the clearing. His flecked amber eyes followed hers to the source of the sound, and he saw Meshel, Soira, and a few other youths standing and waving at them. Sylla pushed herself gently away, offering him a warm smile, and he stepped away, suddenly cold without the warmth of her so close. He drew his cloak more closely about himself.

"Natan!" she called back, and Ashmer saw the waving youth jump up and down once more. He was a wiry boy, a little older than any of the others, and possessed of a slender strength

evinced clearly with every motion. He grinned broadly, and Sylla beamed back, her white teeth showing between slender lips.

"Are you coming?" the boy called back, his clear voice carrying across the wide space between them.

Sylla looked at Ashmer inquiringly, and he grinned back at her, as if to conceal the raw unsettled feeling that roiled in his gut. She cast another beaming smile at him, and he allowed himself a touch of guilty relief at the success of his artifice. Side-by-side, they walked to the edge of the clearing, and the gaggle of young Tsol'aa ran off into the night, shouting taunts at each other as they raced between the darkened trees. Just as Ashmer cleared the first line of brush in a swift spring, another cold breeze teased at the edge of his cloak.

"Ashmer..." he thought he heard, a hissing whisper on the wind, and he stopped for a moment, his brow furrowed.

#

Ras'valyra's whispers, and the way its mind tugged at mine, drawing me close to the precipice of insanity, altered me. At times, I was the perfect youth, helpful, energetic, and willing to give of myself for the greater community. More and more often, and no longer while I slept, visions plagued me, however. Motion out of the corner of my eye would distract me from a crucial task. A loved one would surprise me, their features momentarily twisted in the guise of some terrifying specter. Yellow teeth gnashed as my mother spoke, one evening, as her

eyes bulged, lidless and milky, in their sockets. When the vision had passed, it was as if it had never happened, and she either didn't notice, or chose to ignore my haunted expression. After a year of this slowly intensifying unraveling of my hold on reality, it ceased to phase me. As I learned minor incantations, hunting, and fishing, I found my mind sharper and more alive in those brief moments of frightening insanity. My hallucinations at times were of things that had yet to happen, or could happen, and in return for the damage to my being I took thorough advantage of those momentary insights.

The face that stared back at him from the depths of the pool was his, but something seemed odd about it. The soft amber hue of his eyes was brought into sharp focus by the sun that streamed through the trees overhead, each tiny fleck picked out in the reflected light. The ripples in the water played bright patterns across his fine-featured face, and his fair skin was warmed to a slight bronze hue by the attention of the midsummer sun. His ears, now sharply-peaked in adulthood, rose through his knife-straight silver hair, which he let fall where it will over his neck and shoulders. It was disheveled from his trek through the eastern forest. It had been a long, enjoyable trip, several days through the beautiful woods at the peak of the season. His shoulders ached pleasantly from the weight of his pack, and his feet were sore with the imprint of the ridges he had scaled and

fields he had crossed. Somewhere to the north, he knew, there was an oft-traveled road, and he was glad for the day's distance on foot between this grove and there. In the years since he had first met Sylla, he had distanced himself from others, choosing solitary tasks and his books over the company of the trading caravans. When he had come of age in his sixteenth year, he had chosen to stay with the village, tending their lore with Grandmother and aiding in the maintenance of the area just surrounding their land. He had learned each craft with ability and a quiet kind of tenacity, refraining almost entirely from the drinking and wild games most of those his age partook in. Sylla had insisted he come on this particular trip, citing the past several months he had spent solely in the confines of the village boundaries, and after three days of cajoling, he had finally conceded. He had packed swiftly, and at dawn on the fourth day, set out with her and two other youths, including Soira.

He reached down, cupping at the pool he bent over with both hands and lifting the cool spring water to his face. It was deliciously refreshing, and he closed his eyes, briefly reveling in it. As he opened them, the reflection that stared back at him was hideous. Thin malachite skin clung to that fine-boned face, its expression a faint, contemptuous smirk. One eye remained, an eerie reflection of his own amber orb, but the other was a scene of ruin. A hard, lidless orb stared back at him, its entirety

stained a faint yellow, and the dry muscle surrounding it was clearly visible in the wavering reflection. He whispered a curse under his breath, and that other thin-lipped mouth moved as well, revealing glistening ebon teeth behind them. With a breath, he slammed his fist down into the shallow pool, destroying the image in a splash, and uncoiled, snatching up his pack as he did. He swept it up onto his shoulder, tightened the strap, and turned, leaning into a swift trot away from the disturbing memory of that hallucinated reflection. His visions were becoming more and more frequent, nearly to the point where they no longer bothered him, but to see his own face twisted so left his stomach unsettled. The way that... thing had smirked at him wrenched a knot into the muscle at the base of his spine. With a mental effort, he thrust the memory away, and as always, it was an odd sensation as the reality of the here-and-now was brought into sharp relief by that ephemeral image. The memory of it chilled him to the bone.

For the moment, he was alone, as he had split at the last ridge, leaving Sylla, Soira, and Ylin in the valley beneath. They had stared at him, incredulous, as he had suggested taking the ridgeline above. Exhausted, they had elected to take the gentler ground beneath it, and he had tirelessly gone up alone. The view offered from here was breathtaking, and as the trees thinned, more and more of the world was laid at his feet. It was still early in the day, and that morning's heavy fog still clung

jealously to the trees, its last vestiges pooling in the crevices and valleys offered by the uneven terrain. In the distance, the horizon hazed to blue, and the outline of the Vashnars was barely visible far to the southwest. As he crested the ridge, he paused, straddling a deep crag at the very highest point of the ridge, and let his eyes slide shut. He drew a deep, cold breath into his lungs, letting the high breeze offer some relief from the day's already hot sun. Euphoric, he had already forgotten all about his own hideous reflection staring back at him from the pool he had left behind.

A terrified scream knifed through that giddy calm, and his eyes snapped open. It had come from somewhere ahead and further back down the ridge, but with the way sound echoed off of the craggy stone, it was difficult to tell. It was followed by an bellowing roar, and what sounded like claws scrabbling against rock. Without thought, Ashmer took off at a run, tightening the straps of his pack to secure it against his shoulders and cease its bouncing. He tore the short spear from its leather sleeve, grasping it in a fist at his hip. In a few long bounds, he had cleared the ridge top, and he rushed into the trees with wild abandon, heedless of the risk presented by the gnarled roots now underfoot. Again, that scream echoed through the brush, and he angled towards it. The ground ahead sloped sharply down, nearly dropping off in a cliff, and he took it at a run, pausing only to catch himself at its very edge. With his next stride, he

swung down onto the uneven slope, and swept towards the bottom. His boots slid on gravel, and he leapt from perch to perch as he raced into the small valley below. This time, the scream was frighteningly close, and again that roar sounded, and Ashmer tore his knife from its sheathe at his hip as he crashed through the final thick wall of brush.

He was met by three incredulous pairs of eyes, two green and one blue, that stared back at him from the center of the clearing. Sylla, Soira, and Ylin stood there, apparently waiting for him to rejoin their trail towards the lake. His chest heaved with each panting breath, and his brow furrowed in confusion as he looked back.

"What in the Pit are you doing?" Ylin asked simply, his expression mildly concerned. Ashmer's head canted to one side, and he straightened, letting his short spear fall to one side.

"You didn't hear that?" he asked them, too sharply. Sylla's brow furrowed.

"Hear what?" Ylin shot back, "we haven't heard anything."

Startled, Ashmer slid his knife back into its place at his side, and fit his spear back into its sleeve in his pack before tugging the leather thongs into a loose knot.

"I heard a scream," he replied tentatively, just as the sickening realization dawned on him.

"Well, there wasn't one," Ylin informed him, before looking to the two girls standing beside him, "did either of you hear

anything?"

Soira shook her head vigorously.

"No," Sylla said slowly, her flecked green eyes sharp with concern as she looked back at Ashmer, "we didn't hear anything. Are you sure? Maybe it was just the wind."

Ashmer frowned thickly at that. "The wind," he suspected, had become a private word between them. Sylla knew about his visions, he thought, though he had never directly told her. He supposed his behavior was enough to point clearly at the truth, especially now.

"Must have been," he replied quietly, before squinting through the trees to the east, "we're not far."

With the mention of their destination, Ylin nodded stiffly, and turned, moving off towards the trees. Sylla lingered for a moment, along with Soira, and their shared blood was plainly evident in the identical expressions of concern stamped on their fine-featured faces. Quietly, Ashmer enjoyed a moment's glance at Sylla, and shook the thought away. They had come very close to kissing once, before one of Ashmer's hallucinations had overtaken him, and he suspected Sylla thought he was simply too frightened to follow through. Ylin was much better for her, he thought, and she seemed content with their budding romance.

A short while later, the four youths broke from the tree line and hiked onto a grassy field laid at the edge of a lake. It stretched away to the east in glassy smoothness, visible all

the way to the trees at the far shore. A cool breeze played across it, rippling the surface briefly, and Soira ran with a joyful whoop to the edge, her young face bright with excitement. Ylin slid the pack from his shoulders and pulled the thick blanket from it, as Sylla opened Ashmer's pack and similarly unfurled the blanket there. The huge things were wrestled flat on the warm grass, and food was immediately opened. As Sylla and Ylin snacked on fruit they had picked that morning, Soira kicked off her boots and ran along the very edge of the water, her bare feet splashing noisily in time with her panting breaths.

Ashmer let his pack slip over his arm, and laid out on his own blanket, eyes sliding shut as he reveled in the warmth of the sun overhead. For a long while, he simply dozed, enjoying the cool air and the sounds of Soira playing on the narrow shoreline. Ylin and Sylla talked quietly, and Ashmer deliberately let the words become indistinct, though the warm intimacy of them was unmistakable. A brief stab of jealousy nestled beneath his breastbone, but he cast it away. Until he was truly sane, or could trust himself, she was better off with Ylin than him, and this way, she would be happy.

That lost thought offered him a form of relief from the his unsettled state. He realized that, even with everything that had happened and all that he had seen, he still held hope that he would be free of it. A small smile spread across his slender mouth, and he looked out across the brightly-lit lake to the

trees on the opposing shore. For a moment, he envisioned that he was that glassy body of water, undisturbed except by the playful wind. That same wind combed through his long hair, and he tilted his head back, closing his eyes as he soaked in the hot sunlight. With a dismissive gesture, he lay aside his cloak and opened his shirt. He took another bite of the stale biscuit from his pack before popping a cube of his mother's home-made cheese into his mouth. After savoring the sharp flavor, he washed both down with a swig from his skin and lay back, folding his hands behind his head. Just before he settled onto his back, he caught Sylla looking at him from where she shared a blanket with Ylin, her emerald eyes bright with mirth.

Those eyes followed him into the blackness as he dozed off in the sun.

#

Hope is an insidious poison, deadlier than voyria and far more covert than loki. That first taste of it was euphoric, and I was immediately addicted, drunk on the cloying draught of hope. Perhaps Ras'valyra allowed it, to teach me something, or perhaps it was simply a lesson it was time for me to learn. Nevertheless, that first searing instruction in the fatality of hope was my first step on the path that has lead me through the last two centuries. It was not the denial of hope, but the utter destruction of it that I would later find lent me the tenacity necessary to survive that other place. Its sultry, silent twin,

despair, was close on its heels, a far more comforting companion, but after a time, that, too, would be destroyed. These first years separate, yet leashed to the formless Ras'valyra prepared me for the discipline necessary to welcome such a creature into my own being and fuse with it so utterly. Neither of us could have known the outcome.

Ashmer woke slowly a short while later, letting the sounds of Soira at play in long before he was roused enough to open his eyes. As always when he woke, he was vaguely uneasy, though try as he might, he could remember the disturbing dream he had just had. Along with that grasping lack of memory came the recollection of his determination that he would see himself cured of his insanity. Grinning to himself, he blinked his eyes open and sat up, reveling in the warm groan of his sun-soaked muscles. His clothing was hot against his skin, and the blanket similarly so. It was all he could do not to simply lie back down and sleep through the rest of the day and night. A short distance away, Sylla was cradling a similarly sleeping Ylin's head on her lap, and as his gaze found hers, she grinned back at him.

Quietly, she mimed pouring the water from her skin onto the unconscious boy's face beneath, and the two shared a silent, snickering laugh at the thought. Ashmer flicked at the wooden buttons of his shirt, slid out of it, and lay it aside with his

cloak. Ylin stirred briefly as Sylla took his head from her thigh and laid it gently on the thick blanket beneath them. She uncoiled, and in a few swift steps was crouched beside Ashmer on his own blanket. Soira looked back from the edge of the water and waved, and the two waved back, white teeth showing in bright grins.

"I don't think I've seen you smile for three months," Sylla remarked quietly

Ashmer's smile twisted into a soft, indulgent frown, and he looked at her over one slender shoulder. After a lingering moment, he conceded the point with a quiet shrug, and turned his flecked eyes back to the lake spread out before them.

"Yeah, I... realized something," he began softly, and the Tsol'aan girl shifted a bit closer, her head canting aside curiously. There was another moment of companionable silence as she simply looked, and Ashmer pored through this new insight, feeling paths open before him like a newly-discovered deer trail through a thicket of impassable bramble. Ideas spun dizzily through his mind, and he felt the immediate urge to begin.

"Fine," Sylla replied laughingly, startling him from his brief daze, "you cryptic bastard."

Ashmer felt his face heat with embarrassment, but even with his new found hope, he felt his attention drawn to that uneasy knot at the very base of his spine whenever he thought of finally sharing his insane state with Sylla. He shook the

dangerous temptation away, and resolved to tell her everything, when he was cured. He smiled warmly at her, his honey-hued eyes squinting, and simply shook his head.

Sylla released a playful, exasperated sigh, and reached out with one hand, punching him lightly in the gut. A breath rocked from his lungs in a quiet grunt, and he scowled indulgently at her, one hand crossed over his assaulted middle.

"C'mon," she began again, "let's go for a swim."

With that, she rose, unfolding, and padded across the field to where Ylin lay. With a gentle nudge at his shoulder, and a hand on his face, she woke him, and Ashmer again tuned out the quiet words as he checked his own supplies. With the next few minutes, he re-packed his lunch into his pack and left it in the shade of a lone, spread-boughed oak that had dared rise closer to the water than any of its brethren. Ylin rose gracefully, offering Ashmer a polite nod and wave, and stripped off his shirt and trousers before leaving them with his own cloak to warm in the sun. After kicking off his boots, he shouldered Sylla playfully aside and ran for the water in a dead sprint, stark naked.

The two left standing in the field by the shore paused for a moment, then followed in close pursuit, their own clothing flying away across the grass as they ran. Whooping, they cleared the edge of the water and splashed into it until they were waist deep. The mud was cold, and squelched softly between Ashmer's

toes as he fought his way into the deeper water. Sylla ran in great, leaping bounds, slowing only as she leapt face-first into the water. A moment later, she rose soaking, and tossed the wet whip of her hair over one shoulder. Briefly, the teenaged Ashmer appreciated the view that offered, before similarly diving into the cold water. He felt his hair tug at his head as he kicked beneath the surface, and briefly ran a hand across the uneven lake bed. The mud gathered between his fingers, and he shook it off. Ahead, he saw the ground drop away smoothly, fading into a clouded haze dotted with submerged vegetation.

He moved with sinuous grace, gaining speed as he arced a bit deeper, and saw a smaller shape dart past him. As he looked, he saw Soira, grinning beneath the water, slip down to the bottom, touch it lightly, and swim away, angling back up to the shimmering surface of the sun-drenched lake. Ashmer felt his lungs burn slightly with his held breath, and kicked off the bottom, scooping at the cool water with both hands as he slid straight upwards. After a brief moment, his head broke into the air, and it kissed coolly as his soaked skin. After a moment, the warm sun made its way through the water clinging to his hair, and he swung onto his back, floating towards the opposite shore as he basked in the midsummer heat. He kicked his feet slowly beneath the surface, and arched, letting the sun touch his chest and middle as it cleared the water. Sylla swam to his side, and Ylin followed, his curly hair plastered to his head

and his blue eyes bright with mirth.

"I didn't see you at the last hunt," Ylin commented quietly, intruding on the lingering, companionable silence. Ashmer turned his head to one side, kicking to keep afloat, and drew a quiet breath through his lungs.

"I was ill," he explained simply, hoping that his smile was genuine, and not the thin, pained thing he expected it to be. He remembered the morning the youths had gathered, the air tingling with anticipation at the prospect of such a hunt. He had awoke dizzied, and could not shake the unsettling feeling of - something- coiled in his stomach, shifting in ways that left him helplessly nauseous. Every hour he had emptied his stomach that day, no matter what medicine his mother gave him, until his very body ached to the bone, and each time he vomited, the violence of his hallucinations drove him to cold terror. The image of his own hands, wet and sticky with blood as it cradled a beating heart, had never left his mind, and the memory still brought the sharp, coppery smell to his nostrils. He sniffed sharply and wiped his arm across his mouth before continuing.

"I had stashed a piece of my mother's cheese for too long, I think," he explained with a narrow grin, and Ylin laughed. Sylla, however, simply looked at him with those concerned green eyes, and that same vague sense of unease descended on him like a familiar friend.

No, he declared silently, thrusting the thought away, I

will be whole again, no matter what it takes.

With his new found hope, he was able to simply grin back at her, his mouth widening until she finally broke into a smile and quiet laugh of her own.

"Well, you missed a damn good hunt," Ylin began again, and as Ashmer had noticed he was prone to do, simply began talking without waiting for a reply. For the next hour, the curly-haired youth spoke as the trio swam, and Ashmer and Sylla listened quietly, interjecting whenever a particular point of interest came up. Finally, as they neared the shore again, Sylla interrupted him.

"-Enough- about the hunt!" she said laughingly, as she splashed a handful of water directly into Ylin's face. He sputtered for a moment and glared back, eyes squinted, and Sylla simply grinned back at him whitely, her wide eyes lit with a playful gleam. Ylin simply couldn't maintain his hard expression, and soon the throaty sound of a suppressed laugh pressed past his lips. Sylla splashed him again, and he kicked off the muddy lake shore in a swift rush. She screamed with laughter as he tackled her, and twisted away as he attempted to wrestle her beneath the surface. Again, he got a face full of water, and soon, Soira came up and joined in the barrage. Just then, something slithered over Ashmer's foot, and he jerked, peering down into the half-clear depths of the lake beneath him. The outline of his foot glimmered with the play of sunlight

through the rippling water, but he saw nothing else, and he was still not close enough to shore to be standing on the bottom. Then, after a moment of squinting past his foot, he thought he saw something else move in the murkiest depths, where the lake bed vanished in a brown haze. His brow furrowed. There were no fish in this lake, or snakes, or anything else that should be moving. A cold realization tingled down the length of his spine, and he thrust it away, determined to take no note of his unsettling hallucinations.

As he looked back at the trio still splashing and wrestling near the water's edge, a spray of water caught him full in the face, and he tasted the silt as it slipped past his lips. Grinning, he blindly returned fire with a swift whip of his long arm, and it had that satisfying weight of a wide, arcing spray of water. He blinked his eyes open, and saw Sylla and Soira wiping the water from their eyes as it sloughed out of their hair in waves.

Then, Ylin sprung from the surface of the lake beside him, having kicked beneath the water to avoid his own splash, and grinning, tackled him. Ashmer's elbow caught him in the middle, and the two grappled, kicking madly to stay afloat. The game to see who could get higher in the water and weigh the the other down began, and Ashmer twisted his wiry frame, letting Ylin's greater weight slip off of him. Finally, Ashmer simply kicked out, and the breath left his opponent's lungs in a swift rush as

his foot connected with his middle. With a throaty laugh, Ylin swung out, encircling Ashmer's head and neck, and, grappling, the two dropped beneath the surface. Ashmer found purchase on Ylin's elbow and twisted, managing to slip from the vice-like grip, and kicked off of him, swimming away with a sinuous swaying motion. He gathered speed, and a look behind him showed Ylin following close behind. After a moment, his head broke the surface, and he gave a shout.

"Race you to the bottom!" he called, casting a wry grin back at his curly-haired counterpart. Ylin just grinned back, and, without another word, ducked beneath the rippling water once more. Chagrined at his clever response to the challenge, Ashmer twisted in a serpentine motion and darted straight down, swiftly passing his opponent as the speed of his first kicks played out. Then, they were both paddling madly towards the bottom, grinning teeth barely visible in the clouded sentiment this close to the lake bed. Just as Ashmer was sure he had won, a feminine figure slid past them both, and emerald eyes danced with the light of the sun filtering through the rippled water overhead as Sylla glanced over her shoulder at him. With a taunting grin, she reached out and laid her hand on the muddy floor of the lake, and Ashmer let out a bubbling shout in protest. Then, her green eyes went wide, and Ashmer thought he saw her hand jerk beneath the soft surface of the mud beneath with a muffled squelch. Frowning, she turned, laying her feet

against the bottom to kick away, and then twisted madly as her feet were similarly sucked down. Bubbles rose as she let out a panicked breath, and the look on her face as she turned back to Ashmer sent an icy knife of fear through his heart. His muscles clenched in his stomach with the sinking sensation, and driven by the sudden rush of adrenaline that trickled in a tingling rush through his body, darted forward. He and Ylin both reached her simultaneously, taking her shoulders in both hands. Ashmer's lungs burned with the lack of air as he dragged at his friend's body, but she simply twisted further, her hand and feet still stuck to the bottom. Letting loose an exasperated bubble of frustration, he clambered down her, heedless of where he put his hands, and grasped her ankle. Frantic, he dug his fingers into the sticky mud, and felt a bubble pop just beneath the surface. A rush of grainy sediment swept into his eyes as the pressure there changed, and blind, he clawed to the other foot. Soon, both her feet were free, but in her struggles, her hand had now been sucked to the wrist into the soft mud.

A dizzying whorl of nausea swept through him, and his lungs screamed madly for air. Snarling beneath the water, he thrust aside the searing pain and dropped to his knees on the surface beside Sylla as he wrapped her arm with his own. He immediately felt the bubble in the mud beneath slip open, and as the water rushed into it, he was drawn a few inches down. His legs below the knees, bent in his kneeling position, stuck fast, and some

corner of his mind noted with analytical certainty that he was about to die.

Just as he managed to wrench Sylla free of the mud's hold, his chest and middle convulsed. The last wisp of air burned out in his lungs, and reflexively, his ribs drew out, sucking a lungful of water into him. The pain was more intense than any he had ever felt, and as he tried to scream, the suddenly soaked muscle of his lungs twisted uselessly against a fluid too thick to breathe. Just before that searing pain drove the sense from his mind, he saw the fast-fading image of Ylin dragging a struggling Sylla back towards the lake's edge. They broke the surface, and Ashmer's vision went black.

#

It should have been my end, but instead proved the test necessary to prepare me for what was to come. It was in that moment a world was created, in the friction wrought of Ras'valyra's utter denial of its own destruction. It stabbed life into something in me I didn't know existed, and from then on it lay molten beneath the timid surface of my thoughts. Though it would be fifty years before I even remembered that place existed in the vast chasm between my disparate halves. I have yet to discover the true nature of that other place, and to this day question its very existence. Whether an illusion or not, however, that is where I had a taste of power for the first time in my short life, and it was a moment that would lurk in

the shadowed crevices of my mind until the day I truly met my tormentor.

A searing wind rose from beneath, and Ashmer felt himself buoyed on it. It carried with it fine grains of ash and dust, and his entire body burned. His hearing returned first, at first a distant wail, and before long he heard the whickering moan of the hot gusts as they drove up beneath his outstretched arms. His legs, bent in their kneeling posture, were anchored together and faintly numb. Try as he might, he could not move, and his struggles only resulted in an aimless flailing in the buoying wind.

Then, he opened his eyes.

The sight that greeted him was at once terrifying and awe-inspiring, as a primordial wasteland of molten rock and gashed-open earth lay contemptuously before him. Hissing bursts of oily smoke tore themselves from the broken ground, and occasionally, there was a muted, exultant roar as a geyser of lava knifed up towards the sky.

And that sky! Flames roiled and twisted, as if some huge being had been set on fire and hung above to writhe in its interminable agony. Tongues of flame dripped from that conflagration, falling quietly to the shifting earth below in thick droplets. Great black storm clouds scudded just beneath

it, twisting and shifting as they were torn apart and reformed by the oozing, fiery sky. He looked down, and found his legs fused to a great spur of dark basalt that rose from the twisted floor beneath, towering at a dizzying height over the plain that marched off into a hazy grey horizon. He was entirely naked, and thin scratches and heated sores covered his body from the abuse of the constant, ash-laden wind. For what seemed to him an eternity, he stared, dumbstruck, at the sheer violence of his environment, and the alien unfamiliarity of it struck him like a blow. Then, a trio of molten droplets splattered against the narrow spar that he had been affixed to, and the splash of that glowing material flicked about his legs and belly. He screamed in horrified protest at the pain and helplessness of it, and twisted, nearly losing his balance as he attempted to wrench his legs from the stone that had seemingly fused to them. As if in response to his scream, there was a deafening crack, and red lightning arced into the distant horizon. Over the next few minutes as he writhed, trying to find some way to ease his burning agony, a thick layer of black clouds gathered overhead, obscuring a portion of the vast molten sky. Fine ash rained down on him as the wind ceased, and he covered his face with both arms, attempting to keep the invasive grains from his eyes.

"Ashmer," he heard a faint, rattling hiss from somewhere behind him. Wrenching at his trapped legs, he twisted, but could not catch a glimpse of whatever had settled in the air behind

him.

"Ashmer," came that sibilant whisper once more, and the storm gathering above convulsed violently. Ashmer tilted his head back, flecked eyes squinted sharply as he thought he saw a huge face, its expression serene, form in that oily substance. Oddly, gold motes drifted at the edge of his vision, and the searing temperature suddenly felt like a warm, comforting embrace. A watery image spread before his mind's eye, and the memory of his death while rescuing Sylla returned in a rush like inhaled silt. He felt a stab of regret and fear at his own death, and then pride, as the final recollection of her and Ylin breaking the surface filtered through his pain-wracked mind.

"No," came that layered, subtle rasp once more, as if carried on the renewed wind, "No."

A sharp pain wrenched him as the muscles over his ribs convulsed, and for a moment, he couldn't breathe as his lungs filled with the recollection of inhaled water. Then, he was free, and a grating, gurgling cough wracked his slender frame. With a sobbing breath, he hunched forward and leaned on both hands, though the stone beneath was painfully hot to the touch. Another lightning strike rumbled across the molten sky, this time much closer and deafeningly loud, and the splitting, reshaped earth far below seemed to slow, as gashes closed and the glowing innards of the planet beneath were concealed behind rich, dark stone.

As a particularly wide crevice slammed shut, that glowing vitae speared into the air, and a single droplet sizzled threateningly into the stone between Ashmer's knees. He tilted his head back as a shadow fell over him, and saw the huge ashen cloud above approach, gathering speed as it fell heavily from the plane's fiery ceiling. Incredulous, he simply stared at it for a moment, then, as he squinted, and it rushed closer, he saw a massive stone, larger than the entirety of his village, slip from the confines of that billowing cloud, its jagged edge becoming visible a moment later.

"No," Ashmer heard that rattling hiss whisper, rising sharply in intensity. He felt an odd kinship with that sibilant voice, and the next time it whispered to him, his chest convulsed with a pained breath.

"No," came another call, this time a grating rasp easily heard against the moaning wind. His own cry echoed it in a primal sound, and he snarled at the inevitable stone falling at fatal speeds. The cloud now billowed out behind it like a cape, and as it neared, he could see tiny details, carvings and indeterminate shapes etched into its ragged face.

"No!" he roared at the thing, layered with the otherworldly shriek of the voice that had given him the word. The air convulsed, as if bucking some unseen intruder, and again he screamed, his arms flung out to either side as he simultaneously welcomed, and summarily denied his impending doom.

"No!" this time, the word seared through his lungs and throat, leaving a wet tingle in its wake, and blood ran from his lips and nose as his lungs pressed closed, forcing every ounce of the hot, dry air from his lungs in his roar of utter refusal. Just before it struck, his own terror finally overcame him, and he blacked out, every sense snuffed entirely in a minute fraction of an instant.

When his eyes snapped open again, he was underwater, and the searing air of his previous surroundings occupied his lungs in wet contempt. With a muffled snarl, he forced his lungs closed, and felt some of the invading liquid pour from his nose and mouth. He wrenched madly at his entrapped knees, and though his muscles responded sluggishly, coiling slowly into action, the soft mud gave with a slurping suck. For a brief moment, he struggled with the rushing water as it sought to fill the space beneath him, before he won out with appalling strength and shot to the surface like an arrow.

The warm sun was a barely-noticed detail as his head crested the glassy surface of the lake, and the breath he sucked into his lungs felt like two knives sliding fatally into his chest. He forced the breath from them with a grating scream, and his voice broke halfway through, becoming a quiet, rattling whisper. Again, as he flailed at the hated water beneath him to keep afloat, his chest expanded, and the next breath was a cool

wash of relief as life tingled achingly back into his body. His heart pumped sluggishly, and his vision swam dizzily. The water felt like thick, clinging slime as he paddled through it, careful to keep his head above water, and the warm sun hardly reached him in the clotted depths of his half-deadened senses. The trees seemed oddly still, as if an invisible fog had crept in between them, and the sharp rocks of the uneven shore brought giddy relief, in contrast to the agony he had just endured.

Had endured! He straightened tentatively, feeling his muscles groan in protest to their lengthening and stalked, naked, from the water. Three figures sat huddled together beneath the tree line, one sobbing openly as another rubbed her back. Her back! It was an odd experience, recognizing someone he knew so well only after a long moment, but he picked Sylla's red-rimmed eyes out against the drab backdrop of the blanket encircling her bare shoulders. Her sister, Soira, knelt beside her, with Ylin crouched on the other side, his curly hair a frizzy crown on his scalp. He felt as if he moved through molasses as he stalked towards them, water running from his bare feet to pool in the grass underfoot. Sylla stopped sobbing, and he saw her jaw fall open in a dazed expression. Ylin's brow furrowed, and he shook her briefly before turning to see what she was staring at. The look on his face was one of absolute shock, and Soira's eyes went wide to match. Contemptuously, he met the triple stare of the three who had abandoned him, and...

wait.

His sense returned in a fractured rush, and he suddenly felt incredibly weary. Slumping, he finished closing the gap to the three, and without a word, collapsed into a huddled crouch on the blanket still laid out on the grass near them.

"What in the hellish Pit?" Ylin asked incredulously, breaking the silence, and the two girls rushed forward, Soira offering the blanket as Sylla nearly tackled him, her arms circling his shoulders. Tears ran freely down her face, adding to the water already soaking his thin frame, and he returned her embrace with sluggish fervor, clutching her to his chest. Ylin took the blanket from Soira and draped it over Ashmer's shoulders, though there was something besides relief in his sharp blue eyes.

"You were dead," he said flatly, his eyes squinting for a moment as he reached out to touch two fingers beneath the line of Ashmer's jaw, "I came down to pull you out, and you were already gone. The gap beneath the mud had just grown, and I almost got caught myself. Even I couldn't get you out. How in the Pit?"

Ashmer met his stare with his own, and he shrugged, a sobbing breath shuddered through his chest, and he clutched Sylla tighter against him. After what seemed like too short of an eternity, she pulled away, her green eyes misty, and beamed brightly at him.

"Thank the Goddess you're alive," she said simply, her voice cracking with a renewed sob, "Lleis must have heard our prayers."

As she spoke the name of the Matron Goddess of their village, the roaring image of that distant, agonized wasteland knifed across his mind's eye, drawing a startled hiss from the young Tsol'aa. In reply to Sylla's concerned glance, he simply shook his head and pulled the blanket more closely about his nakedness.

"Well done," he heard a faint hiss whisper along with the rustle of the wind through the trees, and ignored it. After a moment, he thought he heard something give a quiet, hideous laugh in the distance, but then it was gone, and he turned on his heel. Without another word to his companions, he gathered his belongings, unsteadily dressed himself, and, after tugging his cloak over his hunched shoulders, fitted his pack over it. He pulled the straps tight and began trudging towards the tree line. The other three followed close behind him as he picked their path out among the trees spread across the meadow to the east. Sylla stepped to his side, drawing a look from Ylin, and Soira skipped ahead, briefly dueling a low-hanging branch with a foraged stick before bending to collect a few berries from a nearby bush.

"Are you alright to walk? You wer- I mean... you..." Sylla began unsteadily, her hands folded over her slender middle. Her

brow furrowed, and the rest of her question remained unspoken as she peered at him through those wide, tear-red eyes. He met her gaze steadily, his lips pressed into a faint frown, and nodded quietly before reaching up to tuck a lock of his still-wet hair behind his ear.

"I want to get as far away from there as possible," he explained, and something in his tone drew an odd expression from the girl as she sped her pace to match his. There were no further questions forthcoming, however, and he turned his attention to his aching body, reveling in the play of muscle against muscle as every step stretching another numb place back into tingling sensation. His nose and throat burned as if he had been breathing acid fumes, and his eyes stung with the fleeting memory of an ash-laden wind.

"Thank you," Sylla finally said, her tone soft, and as she reached up and touched him, that sickeningly familiar memory of his own hands flashed before his briefly-closed eyes. The fibrous muscle of the heart clenched and unclenched, spitting more of the sticky blood onto his palms, and it was Sylla's face that stared up at him from the ground at his feet, utterly dead. It was that memory that haunted him through the rest of their trek that day, and on into the night as he drifted off, alone beyond the firelight's edge.

That next morning, Ashmer awoke first, and his eyes flicked open as he tore from the hellish nightmare. The gory vision faded away after a moment, leaving the faint taste of acidic bile in the back of his throat, and he stared through the cool morning mist that had enshrouded the trees while they slept. The sky was flint, and the foliage, wet with condensation, was intensely green against that drab canvas. He heard soft breathing to his right, and turned his head to see the sleeping face of Sylla resting on his shoulder. Beyond her, and halfway across their little clearing, lay Ylin, his chest rising and falling in the deep, even breaths of the utterly unconscious. Soira was curled up next to the blackened ashes that remained of the night's fire, a trail of crushed grass evidence of where she had rolled closer in her sleep. The air was crisp and cool, though a few hazy rays of sunlight promised another hot day, when the damp mist had succumbed and burnt away. His brow furrowing, Ashmer tried to remember how Sylla had come to be so close, or how his arm had become wrapped about her shoulders. It was vaguely numb, and tingled unpleasantly, and he attempted to gently work his hand in and out of a fist, to get his blood flowing into the deprived limb once more. As he shifted slightly, she rolled a bit closer, and her hand fell over his chest. For a moment, he was worried his pounding heart would wake her as it thudded steadily in his ears, and his pulse could be felt in his joints, and where his neck nudged lightly against

her forehead.

Softly, she stirred, giving a brief, quiet breath, and the rest of her slid a bit closer over the blanket Ashmer had flattened beneath him. He was suddenly very aware of his own sweat, and his blanket stuck to the skin of his belly and arms with the moisture. He leaned closer against her, reveling in the warmth of her body, and curled his arm tighter around her shoulders. Her robe was open beneath the blanket, and the contact of her skin on his heated him. Briefly, he felt a stab of shame and fear. Ylin and she has obviously been together, and he, of course, had his own breaking mind to worry about. He was oddly unconcerned about that, and the stillness that had settled in him sometime since dragging himself from the lake settled more deeply into his bones. Indignance flared briefly, and his face suddenly felt hot. Why shouldn't he have anything with Sylla? They had been close friends since the very day they had met, and she was beautiful. Ylin had made no claim to her, and neither had she made any claim to Ylin in asking for his heart in the Rite of Unity.

Another soft breath escaped Sylla's slender mouth, this time cool against the warmed flesh of his neck and shoulder. In her sleep, she nuzzled against the nape of his neck, and he felt a pleasant tingle finger its way over his scalp before trickling down the length of his spine. She stirred again, and this time, her emerald eyes flickered open. Her brow furrowed briefly, and

she looked back at his arm around her shoulders, before looking back up at him. Her eyes were still glassy with sleep, and a small smile spread across her lips as she simply reached her other hand up, crossing over his shoulder. Her eyes closed again, and she leaned close, the very tip of her nose touching against his cheek. His head tilted to the side, and suddenly, his mouth a scant inch from hers. For a long moment, he simply stared at her, his brow furrowing as his lips pursed pensively.

"You're on my blanket," he whispered quietly, and she gave a soft giggle, her white teeth showing in a narrow grin. Exaggeratedly, she looked to the crumpled form of her own blanket where it lay vacant on the grass nearby.

"So I am," she replied, and the tone in her voice sent another thin shiver slithering down his spine. He cast a mirroring grin back at her, and leaned his head to one side, laying it against her own arm where it lay wrapped atop his shoulder. There was a long moment of silence, and even the mist-shrouded forest was silent as the sun slowly began to rise, its light filtering softly through the thick, wet fog.

Then, without another word, Sylla simply leaned in and kissed him. It was a gentle thing, little more than a brush of her lips across his, but it sent a shivering arc of heat through him. His belly clenched briefly, and he felt a cool breeze rustle through the clearing, kissing at the sweat on his chest and neck with gentle familiarity. His brow furrowed more deeply,

and he cast a look over her shoulder at the sleeping form of Ylin, where he lay on his back. That same shoulder lifted in a faint shrug, and the hand at his shoulder came up, pressing his face back close to hers once more.

"He is a good friend, and will make someone an excellent husband one day," she explained quietly, her emerald eyes wide and her expression serious, "but when I thought you were dead, all I could think about was what I hadn't told you." He started to speak in reply, but she silenced him with another kiss, this one deeper than the last. Her lips pressed to his, and he felt his eyes flutter shut as the pervading warmth of that contact spread through him. He gave a soft huff against her mouth and turned a bit closer against the ground, his other hand rising to her shoulder.

"I love you..." came a soft, sibilant hiss, and Ashmer thrust it aside, ignoring in favor of the feel of Sylla's body against his.

"I love you," she whispered again as they reluctantly broke the contact, her brow furrowed with concern, "that's not strange, is it?"

Her question nearly made him laugh out loud, and he was barely able to contain it in a wide, boyish grin. In reply, he leaned in and pressed his mouth to hers in another deep kiss, and his hand closed on her shoulder with the slightly increased urgency of it. She pressed closer against him, and her robe came

open a bit farther. The brief touch of her skin on his was electric, and he felt the chill tingle rush down his front in a pleasant wash of visceral sensation. Heat surged through him, and he felt a deep, wrenching desire bloom somewhere deep inside him. The way she returned his kiss lit a fire there, and he clutched more tightly at her as he pushed closer.

After a moment, she pulled away, breathless, and her soft green eyes had a sharp glint to them. Her breath came as quiet pants through her parted lips, and, in a slow motion, she curled closer against his side, her belly pressing between the parted folds of her robe to touch his ribs. She writhed in a sinuous sway of her hips, and one leg slipped up beneath the blanket to hook over his. This time, he pushed her onto her back, letting the blanket fall partway from his bare back, and leaned over her once more. Her lips twisted into a wry smirk as she looked up at him, though briefly, he thought he saw a flicker of concern cross her features as she studied his face. His replying kiss was met with equal lust, however, and she gave a small, soft sound against his lips as they claimed hers. Briefly, his tongue flickered across her teeth, and she teased back, sending another sharp trickle of pleasing warmth down the length of his spine as her tongue touched his. His hands went to her shoulders then, and he felt as if he had just been tossed from a high cliff as his stomach climbed into his chest, and his heart into his throat.

Without a word, he tugged at the folds there, drawing them down off of her bare shoulders. She arched her back briefly, and one of her own hands came up to hook at the waist-cord of his loose woolen sleeping trousers. With a soft grunt, he brought his hands down and grasped her arms just above the elbows. He slid one leg over her and straddled her, his weight pinning her arms to the ground. Again, that brief moment of concern crossed her face, but as he lowered his lips to her bared throat, she simply gave another suppressed, quiet moan.

The next few minutes were a blur. Deep, pleasurable waves of warmth swept through Ashmer, and Sylla writhed pleasingly up against him as his mouth worked at the soft, vulnerable skin of her throat. His teeth raked there in a light, tickling nip, and she gave a soft, throaty chuckle before arching her back enough for her chest to touch his. Then, she gave a sharp cry, and wrenched violently, peeling one of her arms from his grasp. A sharp, coppery taste lay heavy on Ashmer's tongue, and as he opened his eyes, a welling dot of blood floated on the pale skin of her neck. Later, the memory of his violently forcing Sylla to the ground as an alien rush of cold lust knifed through him would dart across his mind, but for the moment, he was consumed entirely, and nearly senseless. Her scream barely reached his ears, and the only thing he remembers of Ylin's blow was the sharp pain that flowered across the side of his head. The vicious fight that followed would haunt his dreams until the

very day that he no longer dreamt, and the bitter taste of defeat that lay like poison in his mouth echoed that of the creature that would soon invade his body. The very end of the memory, of Ylin's boot swiftly descending towards his face, was the last thing Ashmer saw before waking up in shackles, on a boat bound for Slaver's Isle.

CHAPTER ONE

Yi

After my escape, I indulged in the solitary life of an occultist, offering my worship to the Lady of Corruption. My prayers were never returned, but I suppose that didn't matter to either of us. All that mattered was the transformation that slowly descended on my Tsol'aan body. Intense pain wracked me as my bones lengthened, pressed close against Ras'valyra's own physicality. After a short time, I renounced my position in the Indorani, and met the one named Ezrax. In a brief conversation, he agreed to take me on as an apprentice, though I cannot remember why I asked. The Cabal, he said, offered the answers I sought, and I began my training in the disciplines that would define me for the next fifty years. Shortly after that first conversation, I retreated into a solitary kind of study. Without the useless activities of my youth to distract me, I buried myself in every tome in the library, and soon, the basic

principles of Numerology were at my command. With every tweak and twist I wove with my newfound power, I began to change, and it seemed that ef'tig had a strange principle when it did not contradict with yuef.

With that revelation, I began to experiment. People were mostly the subject of my experimentation, and my insatiable curiosity was stoked by Ras'valyra's rapacious lust for destruction into true, sadistic malice. I reveled in the insights afforded by others' pain and disassembling, along with my own. A change overtook me, this one far deeper than the Necromantic destruction wrought on my form by Ras'valyra as it, too, learned what I did.

"What was your name again?" the xorani asked him idly.

"Ashmer Ras'valyra," he rasped back, his voice pure agony as it raked through his thin throat. His newly-twisted form ached with the residual power he had unleashed on it in his private study, and it had been nearly a year since he had spoken with his supposed mentor.

"Right," he said dismissively, and the expression on the taller man's face might have been found on that of someone who had just discovered an unwanted household pest. "Ezrax," he offered politely, with a tilt of his lizard snout.

Briefly, Ashmer Ras'valyra appraised the Cabalist standing

before him, both what his sound eye could take in with the dim light of the Spinesreach hallway, and the ephemeral suggestions offered by his lidless orb. Something coiled hard around the bulky form, and as he stepped forward, it shifted briefly before becoming rock-still once more.

"Did you need something?" he asked, startling the ruined young Necromancer from his brief study.

"You are skilled in the arts of jherza," he whispered back, his dual minds struggling to pick words from the seething mass of their melded consciousness. Curiosity intermingled with alien lust, and a questing kind of tenacity was twisted into a sharp, violent will by that wrenching psychic force.

"Hm?" Ezrax asked in reply, his scaled brows rising. There was a long pause, and an indulgent kind of understanding spread across his features. "Oh, yes, you mean the whole thing about combat. Yes," he continued conversationally.

There was a long pause, and Ashmer felt a tingling pain rasp up his spine, even as his contorted minds veered off in wildly differing lines of thought. The image of his hands buried in the Cabalist's chest, and slick with his blood, briefly flickered in alternation with a memory of his kneeling before the same man and swearing his allegiance in a grating rasp.

"Well then," Ezrax offered after a long moment of that pained silence, "I suppose I could teach... you."

With that, he offered one clawed hand, and Ashmer

Ras'valyra simply looked at it with both mismatched eyes. Something in him knew that to touch was to cause pain, and he suppressed the urge to take the hand and wrench it from the bone of that reptilian wrist. After a moment, the xorani retracted it, his expression now one of mild, indulgent curiosity.

"Come on, then," he said, beckoning. Ashmer stepped forward, and the two moved south, quietly making their way beyond the inner walls of the city.

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I don't know why we sought that man out, in particular, but we found him, nonetheless. Over the next several years, he divulged his entire knowledge of using these combined disciplines to kill. Ras'valyra indulged violently, and I was fascinated, though the two of us could by now hardly be determined separate. His sadism and my tenacious curiosity had me using every power I could research, dig up, or learn of in my attempt to destroy him. At first, it was all I could do simply to remain whole in our frequent matches.

Ezrax's eye squinted briefly, and Ashmer felt an almost-palpable wave of emotion strike him. His dual minds reeled, and the world around him twisted, sprouting tentacles. He briefly worshipped their effulgent righteousness, reveling in the feeling of black sunlight streaming between those waving

fingers. He lifted both thin hands in supplication, sound eye sliding shut, and felt some insistent, unintelligible thought knife at the very edge of his enlightened consciousness. With a mild effort, he swept the thought aside, returning to his dance across ashen fields pocked with pools of acid and blood in his trek home to his village, until it returned once more. An alien will overtook his own, briefly overpowering his mental struggle, and he snapped back into reality. With sharp focus, he drove the dementia from his dual minds, and blinked sharply. The powerful Xorani had closed the gap between them in two reptilian strides, and raised his long, thin rapier in a quick jab. Ashmer felt the tip enter his shoulder, and his next thought was thick and slow through the pain in that narrow wound. He forgot what he was about to do, and then remembered as he noticed that his dirk was still in his fist. With a soft hiss, he brought it up, wrenching it into Ezrax's side, and felt a brief moment of triumph as his opponent stumbled back, clutching at the envenomed wound. As he moved in for a second strike, it felt as if something broke inside him, and his next stride felt as if he was moving through molasses.

With single-minded intensity, he continued towards Ezrax, who now seemed to be moving at serpent-like speed as he straightened, sword at his side. There was a wry smirk on his face, and he felt an odd twist of his dual attentions. He shrugged it off with a mental effort, both attentions affixed on

his target. Once more, Ezrax's eyes squinted briefly with effort, and he felt his perceptions skew violently. Hallucinations wracked him, and the last thing he felt in the depths of his demented mind was a sharp tug somewhere deep against the base of his spine. The experience of his very essence unraveling with that pull startled him momentarily from his unsettled mental state, but it was too late, and he watched with intermingled horror and fascination and he and Ras'valyra simply dissipated, crackling away into nothingness as he was unraveled. Blackness overtook him as every sense was snuffed, snapped like so many tiny threads as that final binding substrate was torn from his being.

A moment later, the entryway to the Ironmaw Prisons faded into view, along with Ezrax's smug smirk. "Again," Ashmer rasped at him, and he nodded.

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The dirk darted at him once, then again, and Ashmer felt the venom quickly slither into his dry veins. With a mental shrug, he cast away the effects, his sinews tightening. The black substance spurted from the small wound in his side, and he stepped to one side, narrowly avoiding the swiping whip that followed. He reached out, tugging at the emotions of the man opposite him in the gravel courtyard, and gave another hard yank as the air shimmered behind him. Flames spewed from the firelord's mouth, but he ignored it, and they quickly sputtered

out before his skin could even catch flame. Again, that short knife flickered in, and the green outline of his opponent's illusory form slipped to the opposite side. Black teeth showed in a mirthless grin, and he directed a hammering fist of his own will at the one he knew to be the true assassin. Before the envenomed tip of his weapon could reach the Cabalist, the man stumbled, groaning, and clutched at his head. Again, Ashmer toyed with his emotions, and the servant of Hecate he had recently bargained for stepped out of a fold in the air. She reached out, and beneath her fingers, the man's arm broke with a loud *crack,* falling limp to his side. He gave a demented snarl, and shook himself bodily before lashing out with the whip in his other hand.

It coiled around Ashmer's throat, and he went tumbling forward as his assailant yanked on the handle. He slammed face-first into the gravel underfoot, and writhed briefly, his thin fingers clawing at those ensnaring strands of leather. The iron tips bit into his thin flesh, and he felt his blood flow freely from the open wounds to stain his robes beneath. Still, the man could only stumble forward, and Ashmer met him with an onslaught of Numerological artifice, clawing at the man's sanity with a vicious will. As he eased into a crouch, his now-healed arm ready to bury the dirk deep into the prone Necromancer's throat, he gave a sharp tug on the manifestation of the man's physicality. He tumbled to one side, crumpling, and Ashmer raked

the edge of his own knife through the strands of the whip, severing them. With a hiss, he rose, and again lashed out, haphazardly clawing at the same physical threads. Slowly, the man began to rise, but it was if he moved through molasses, and the sickly Cabalist hammered at his mind again, the vision of a toppling tower clear in his mind's eye. The crouched man tumbled again into the dirt with a deranged, gibbering cry, and began to swim through the gravel, his hands soon bloodied by the rough gravel beneath.

Instinctive training, hammered into the Necromancer by so many times this had been done to him, took over, and he reached out mentally, feeling for the tiny, frayed edge of the assassin's being. After what seemed like an eternity, he found it, and, feeling his own being wrenched with the effort, gave it a sharp tug. Abruptly, the assassin's mind and being unfurled, coming apart in a haze of light as every part of him broke itself down into its original, constituent pieces. Soon, all that remained was a fine, shimmering dust, which blew away in the wind. Just then, a soft clapping reached Ashmer from the side of the courtyard, and he turned to see Ezrax standing there, his long coat swaying about his ankles with the chill wind.

"Finally," the bulky xorani said, a smug look on his reptilian features.

Ashmer felt a surge of youthful pride, and a dismissive,

sadistic twist of his melded thoughts left him unsettled and deeply ill.

"Our thanks," he simply said, both sides clamoring for a chance to speak. Just then, the same man he had just slain stepped onto the courtyard, a narrow grin on his weathered face.

"My turn," Ezrax announced crisply, before directing an even look at Ashmer. He felt as if something had struck him in the back of the head, and his vision swam dizzily as his surroundings twisted. A rattling hiss forced itself painfully through his throat as he slashed his way through the dementia, and lashed out, forcing his own will against the other Cabalist's. It was an outwardly silent exchange, as each leaned against the other, and Ashmer heard the faint notes of the song that had begun to filter through his fused minds intensify. It was a discordant sound, twanging sharply against his deadened nerves with each note. With a quiet effort, he simply went with it, feeling his own being twist under and against the opposing force that also sought to bring it under its own control.

For a long time, this went on, appearing to any observer as the two Cabalists simply locked in a kind of staring match, their bodies completely still. Then, Ashmer felt something in his own mind break, just as a single troublesome note found rhythm with the rest of the melody he had brought together from the disparate notes playing through his mind. He slammed into that weakened point, just as the Cabalist opposite him did the

same, and he indulged in a brief moment of triumph as Ezrax's mind crumpled in his grasp. Then his own snapped, twisting beneath that heavy-handed force, and he felt a sharp tug on his emotions that left him nauseous. His stomach rose into his throat, and as he bent to vomit, his attention snapped to similarly-bent Ezrax at the courtyard's edge.

The contents of his stomach expelled themselves onto the gravel ground, but he stifled it with a choked hiss as he straightened. He picked the shape of Ezrax from the dizzying whorl of insane images that danced before his mind's eye, and reached out, tweaking sharply at his emotions. Just then, a green blob sloughed out of a fold in the air and landed on the xorani's head, enveloping it. It throbbed as it slithered over his scales, and as Ashmer gathered himself for another strike, flames engulfed him. Searing pain ripped through him, and the smell of his own flesh rose to the slits where his nose had once been. As the hungry flames crept over his sound eye, his sight went black, and he lashed out, feeling for the faintly-glowing suggestion offered by his ruined left eye.

His numerological fist struck the tower of his opponent's sanity, and he felt it crumble beneath the vicious force of the blow. Something enveloped his own head, and he reached up, clawing at the slimy thing with both thin hands. With a grating snarl, he ripped it away, and the flames that had engulfed his form went out as he forced a cord of Necromantic power through

his dry, brittle sinews. Ezrax similarly straightened as his vision returned in a flicker. Again, the two railed against each other, and the courtyard fell still as the entities slipped back into their masked pocket dimensions once more. Ashmer folded either hand into the opposites sleeves of his robe, and Ezrax placed his into the pockets of his jacket as the two twisted at the song playing silently between them.

The runic forms of each number snapped through Ashmer Ras'valyra's dual minds as he raked at each cord, and he felt the song grow more intense with each passing moment, though no sound could be heard over the soft breeze that played through the prison courtyard. Then, something crackled between the pair, shattering the silence, and the song became a jangled, twisted thing, hopelessly knotted as he pressed against his opponent's will. Ezrax's snout turned into a contemptuous frown, and he stepped forward, his slender sword rising.

A grating rasp tore at Ashmer's thin lips as he stepped forward to meet him, his own dirk rising. Briefly, the two circled each other, weapons low, before the xorani stepped forward, leading with a flickering jab of his long blade. Ashmer's dirk intercepted it halfway down, turning it aside, and he reached out, tweaking at his opponent's emotions with a twisting tug. Ezrax's pupils dilated briefly with focus, and he chuckled indulgently before stabbing out once more. This time, the tip of the blade found Ashmer's chest, and a tingling pain

spread down his ribs and into his hip. Hissing, the malachite grook slid forward, and the hilt of his weapon punched against the thick material of Ezrax's long jacket as he buried the blade in his gut.

A look of momentary horror crossed his face as his body stiffened in paralysis. As Ashmer forced the venom from his veins with a wrenching of the brittle muscle of his chest, Ezrax's own muscles relaxed, and the two circled each other once more. A few more quick, snakelike licks of the rapier were traded with deceptively fast jabs of the shorter weapon, and still, the two stepped sidelong across the gravel courtyard. Ashmer's mismatched gaze met Ezrax's reptilian eyes, and another brief exchange of power crackled between the two, with neither able to find purchase.

With a soft grunt, Ezrax extended, one leg stamping out with the lunge as he aimed the tip of his rapier at Ashmer's middle. As he straightened, the twisted grook lashed out, laying a blanket of interwoven Numerological artifice over the bulkier Cabalist. He reached through, carefully snipping a few of Ezrax's vital threads, and watched with satisfaction as his motion slowed to a smooth crawl. Simultaneously, he felt something break, and his own motion similarly slowed. His hand was weak on his dirk as it lifted, and he was barely able to turn the tip of the rapier aside before it skewered him. Briefly, there was a sinuous, graceful dance as the two shifted

in slow motion, short dirk turning aside the slender rapier and its own sharp tip being caught on the sword's handguard with each sluggish retaliating thrust. Every motion came with titanic effort, and soon, Ashmer's weakened muscles burned with raw exhaustion. Still, he kept the space clear and the notes straight, and the pair continued to duck, weave, and stab out as if underwater.

Then, he slipped, and the rapier slipped a few inches into his shoulder. After a moment of agonizing effort, and as the blade left his flesh once more, his own dirk parted the scales beneath Ezrax's floating rib, and blood oozed in slow motion from the garish wound as he ripped it away with a pained snarl. Again, the two lashed out simultaneously, and again, struck each other, and after a few moments, Ashmer found his attention turned to forcing enough power through his wounds to keep the bleeding from killing him outright. The gravel beneath them was spattered with intermingled black and red vitae, and soon enough, the xorani slipped, tumbling in sluggish motion to the ground. With a violent gleam in his eye, he forced himself back to his feet, his muscular arm extending in a hard stab directed at the younger Cabalist's gut.

A sharp pain knifed up into Ashmer's chest as he accepted the blow. His spine crackled audibly as the sharp blade carved into it, and his own dirk fell from his numb fingers. As it was emptied, his hand rose, and he planted it almost lovingly on the

side of Ezrax's snout, which twisted into a brief, confused frown.

The cord of Necromantic power that Ashmer released through that point of contact slithered coldly against the insides of his nerves, leaving a wet trail of sensation. Before his eyes, and beneath his hand, Ezrax's flesh melted, and Ashmer forced more of his own essence into him, dizzyed at the brief and intense effort of directing his mind and body in that sluggish state. Scales cracked and curled away, and the raw flesh beneath rotted in an instant, blackening and withering until the bare bone underneath showed, grinning white. Ashmer's other hand came up, and the older xorani's other side was similarly decayed. A raw, gurgling cry tore itself from Ezrax's lungs, grating in its intensity, but was cut off as the rotting force reached beneath his jaw. Soon, all that remained of the head was a grinning reptilian skull, and Ashmer wrenched it to one side, feeling the now-brittle spinal cord break with a sickening crack. The head popped off entirely, and the body slumped, dragging him to the ground with it by the blade of the weapon embedded in his gut. The sluggish lack of connection to his own physicality ceased with a painful snap, and he reached down. Slowly, he drew the weapon from his flesh, and laid it next to the twisted corpse of his mentor.

He rose, and, dizzyed, stalked from the Ironmaw prison courtyard without a second glance at the assassin standing off

to one side.

A few hours later, Ezrax found him sitting in the Cabalist guildhall, a quill set against an open page of a small black book, bound in leather.

"Well done," he simply said, his sharp teeth showing, "next time, I won't go easy on you."

CHAPTER TWO

Sabeine

Sabeine. The first time I spoke her name, it felt as if my own blood had spilled into our mouth, and if I had kept it inside, I would have choked on it. I was fatally curious of this quiet eye of a dark storm that had laid herself at my feet, and she became the subject of most of my following experiments. It was not love, mind you. Such a thing simply could not survive the ashen maelstrom of my tortured minds, and I harbored no fantasies of romancing this young Cabalist, beautiful though she was. In the torqued gap between my stitched-together halves, sadistic lust festered in a heady brew, mulled with sickening curiosity and a thirst for knowledge of this creature. It was this brew of which we drank.

A chill gust blew through the Inner Gate of Spinesreach,

disdainful of the high summer sun. It fingered lightly at the lowest folds of the emaciated Cabalist's robes, though his flesh had already cooled beyond the bounds of life, and he was hardly aware of it. Another startling insight had taken him by the throat, and now, he followed its tumbling progress through the twisted canyons of his stitched-together mind. Childlike curiosity embraced the unbridled lust for whatever was forbidden him, and the variables of his latest experiments filtered together, drawing a straight, starlit line to a pinpoint conclusion. The small corner of his mind that remained Ashmer marched on with analytical fervor, and he carefully traced his steps back through the various intuitive leaps that had led him to this precarious perch. From this vantage, it was utterly clear in its twisted perfection, and the implications of what he had barely touched on shook the Numerologist in him. He would have to experiment, and take apart the spectral steps that lead down into the inky depths of this new paradigm. That nameless urge swelled in his emaciated middle, and he felt a thin cord of Necromantic power coil tightly around his hand at the direction of his barely-conscious will. Jherza, of course, would be the first, as he had always begun there, and ef'tig would be the simplest place to find his way to from there. Yuef continued to escape him except in the basest sense, but yi beckoned with sibilant promise.

His sinuous grey tongue was rough on his thin lips, and he

was startlingly aware of that distant sensation as his distracted attention was drawn back to his immediate surroundings. Returning to his body was like pressing his face against the frosted glass of a winter window, and his vision blurred with mundane forms of little interest, mixed indiscriminately with the essential suggestions through which Ras'valyra processed the world. Something tickled at the edge of his melded consciousness, and he irritatedly turned his attentions on it. The hole in the side of his head where once a peaked Tsol'aan ear had been turned towards the source of the sound, and he felt his pupil-less eye twitch in its socket as it sought the source of whatever intruded on his meditations.

After a long moment, he was able to filter through the image before him, and made out a young Tsol'aan woman staring intently at him, her dark eyes squinted lightly. Her black hair hung straight about her shoulders, and her form was slender beneath the draping folds of her Cabalist robe. A mundane strain of thought forced its way through the billowing cloud of his twisted consciousnesses, and he filtered through a mental roster of the newest novices to the school of the Cabal. Selaena? No, that name had not yet been written, though would be, Ras'valyra knew, so it could not be that one.

"Sabeine," the name slipped from his lips like a spilled drop of blood, unladen by his usual, quiet hiss.

"Yes," she replied slowly, her thin brow rising, "Are you

going to answer me?"

Her last word echoed dizzyingly, throwing the tenuous link he held with his sense into disarray, and he slammed the fist of his tenacious will into it, forcing it back against the thin film of his physical form. With quiet intent, he sorted through the memories his sense had relayed to his desiccated brain, and found what he was looking for. The echoing sound of her voice morphed, melding into a faintly-heard specter of her actual words, "I want you to teach me." With the wavering voice, heard as if underwater, came the memory of a few words distractedly exchanged before Ashmer had stumbled upon his most recent discovery. He felt a wrenching sensation, and suddenly, he was immediately aware of the still, cold air as the slender woman stopped nearby and folded her hands into either sleeve of her robe.

"Greetings," she said simply, and his flecked amber eye squinted lightly at her. Her expression was one of mild curiosity, and he noted a lack of the disdain, unease or disgust that surfaced on the faces of most who regarded him for the first time. His crested head canted to one side in an insectile twitch, and his lidless eye ached sharply as he focused it on her. Her aura was a quiet thing, as poised as her straight-backed posture, and mirrored the look in her eyes flawlessly. Deadly curiosity settled in his dual minds, and an image of his sickly malachite hands, sticky with blood as they cradled an un-

beating heart filtered across his mind's eye. For some reason, it brought his attention back to the excruciating agony that twisted at the very root of his melded being, and a cold breath hissed through his dead lungs. Oily black smoke poured from between his glistening teeth as he felt his body shiver apart under the influence of the levering force that slowly wedged itself between his fused halves.

"Greetings," he replied in a quiet hiss.

"You are Ashmer Ras'valyra," she informed him crisply, "I want to learn from you."

"Sabeine," he said, the name wet against his sinuous grey tongue where it lay coiled behind his ebon fangs.

"Yes," she replied slowly, her thin brow rising, "Are you going to answer me?"

Thin lips peeled back, and he cast a narrow, mirthless grin at the Cabalist.

"Why do you seek us out?" he asked her, noting the slight squint of her dark eye at the word he had chosen to refer to himself with. An unctious, bloated satisfaction settled contemptuously in his chest at her unspoken curiosity. She reached up, tucking a lock of her black hair behind her ear, and pursed her lips pensively.

"You ask that like I shouldn't," she said finally, "so perhaps I have just sought you out to learn."

The ghost of a smirk flitted across the edges of his mouth,

and he tipped his crested head in a deep, respectful nod. She straightened a bit further, both brows rising before they furrowed as she regarded him pensively. Each motion to him was a slow prod at her regal poise, and he reveled in the way the traces of her life-force twisted briefly, as if in a cool breeze. Slowly, he stalked forward, and began to circle her, the folds of his robes a scant few inches from hers. Her eyes followed him for a moment, then, as he crossed behind her, she looked forward once more, her expression impassive. She remained still as he completed his circuit, and halted back within her view. Her dark eyes flicked back to him, still curious, and he settled, becoming still. His body never quite came straight, always leaning at an angle to the ground underfoot, and it brought his thin-featured face a bit closer to hers as he regarded her quietly.

"Are you done?" she asked him quietly, with a slight twist of her lips, "you still haven't answered me."

Again, Ashmer felt the dry sinews in his face tighten as his own mouth opened in a wet, mirthless grin. He briefly traced through the few different answers to her question, navigating his way through the perilous gap between the gentle and the horrifically violent. The possible responses split, procreating in effulgent lust, and after a few moments, roared back at him from the high ridges of his dual, opposed minds. Dizzying curiosity split and wove together with sadistic lust, and he

again felt the nameless urge to simply reach into this curious Cabalist's chest and pluck the heart from beneath her ribs.

"We will teach you," he answered instead, as his quiet steps carried him a few feet away. Sabeine moved to catch up, and he noted with twisted scholarly interest her motions as she moved directly to his side, keeping pace with his smooth, stalking strides. With a gesture of one sickly hand, he reached out and closed his fist on an unseen current that slipped in an oily current overhead. He caught Sabeine's eye in a glance of his flecked amber orb, and let his fist fall, drawing a slithering cloak of that bared current over himself. As they walked, he reached out a hand, gesturing quietly with his too-long fingers, and she peered at it for a moment before lifting her own hand. Misunderstanding his intention, she paused for a moment, then placed it beneath his own, as if to let him guide it. The pain that arced between that point of contact and the ripped point where his melded minds were fused blew through his mind and body in a crackling rush. Mutant thoughts were blasted into their constituent strands, and he felt the viscera of the wetly-joined halves of his being convulse against one another dizzyingly. Unable to pull his hand away, he could only ride with that draconic storm, and after a moment, and he felt as if he was soon to be left little more than a hollow, burnt-out shell. Something quieted in him, nestled against that brutal tear he could feel, but not touch, somewhere deep in the oozing

mass that contained his twin minds.

Then, he was sharply aware of his own body, as if his minds had been crushed back into it, and the maelstrom of white pain rampaged about him like an enraged beast, tearing at the edges of his thoughts. When he turned to look sharply at Sabeine, he sucked in a cold breath, and simultaneously felt himself drawn down, as if the Spirean hall and the earth beneath were tumbling from the firmament to some unseen ground beneath. Oddly, he heard Sabeine's first words echo through that crackling heat in a wavering trickle of distant sound, and her voice echoed through the low roar that had begun somewhere in the background. The only thing that remained of him, besides that quiet little knot at the very lowest point of his melded being, was a sinuous wisp of that curious lust. Drawing it into his mental fist like a lifeline, he opened his battered mind, and the pain rushed in, raking across the raw viscera of his stitched-together consciousness. His sinewy muscles torqued against his brittle bones, though his corpse held as the draught of raw, heady agony slipped down his throat into his belly. Slowly, he pressed further into it, and abruptly, he felt as if he pushed through the surface of some acid lake, his vision returning in a wavering blur. Sabeine simply looked at him curiously, her hand beneath his, as if nothing had changed in that tiny, agonizing eternity.

With a fearsome effort of his will, he tore himself to the

surface of that rushing pain, though it settled with a wet tingling into every nook and cranny of his body. The crevices of his mind screamed in protest at the uninterrupted torture, and he found his thoughts buffeted, torn into new shapes by the buffeting winds raised by the heat in his bones. When his mismatched gaze met Sabeine's, the memory of his last kiss raked across his mind's eye, and he slipped his hand away from hers in a quick, smooth tug. Still, his entire being remained soaked in that wedging agony, and his thin lips peeled back as he loosed a vehement hiss at the young Cabalist.

CHAPTER THREE

Jherza

"What?" the hissed word carried with it a cord of unrestrained power, and the air bucked violently between them. Ashmer's pale lips pulled away from his black teeth, and a spurt of dark ichor ran over his chin. His single amber eye squinted sharply at Sabeine, even as its lidless, milky counterpart twitched in its socket. The muscle surrounding it corded, twisting as it worked against the revealed bone. After a moment, his snarling visage calmed, though as his expression returned to thin-lipped neutrality, the air bucked again, and a nearby candle was snuffed. Sabeine's expression twisted for a moment, before returning to her usual, impassive countenance. Her black eyes looked back at him steadily, even as her brow furrowed over them.

"What?" Ashmer asked again, this time in a calmer tone.

"It's true, Nihilus. They adopted me - against my will,"

Sabeine's voice was level, and she folded her hands in front of her as she straightened.

They stood alone in the eight-sided ritual chamber of the Cabalist hall, and a myriad faint reflections observed the interaction in the smooth, faceted obsidian walls. Ashmer stood at one edge of the design carved in the floor, and Sabeine at its center. It was devoid entirely of furniture, and the lone door was closed.

Ashmer's ruined eye twitched again in a violent jerk, moving independently of its counterpart.

"You let them," he hissed at her, his voice a grating rasp that sawed its way past his throat. As he spoke, each word was edged by a faint, otherworldly wail that echoed through the chamber. Thin malachite hands clasped, then unclasped at his sides, and the cloaked, normally invisible mass of his accompanying demons roiled momentarily.

"No," Sabeine replied, her brow knotting further.

"Yes," Ashmer snapped back, with a violent gesture of one long-fingered hand. He shook his crested head, the spines straightening to fully fan the glistening membrane strung between them with a quiet rustle.

Sabeine opened her mouth as if to speak, but as Ashmer lifted a hand, the air before her writhed, as if in pain, before convulsing violently. She was thrown to the ground, and for a moment, lay sprawled.

"We will deal with you later," he rasped, before turning on his heel. The roiling air behind him parted, and followed him like a heat wave as he strode towards the door. His thin frame trembled visibly beneath his tattered robes, and the chains cloaking his form rattled, their glistening links grinding against one another. Something crackled through the chamber, and a cord of something black, barely-seen, ripped across the floor before ricocheting up against the ceiling. The sound was somewhere between a lightning strike and bone breaking, and left in its wake a faint, crackling whisper. The sound quieted as Ashmer stepped through the chamber's portal, which swung open to admit his passage.

His gut felt as if it were simply going to erupt, and short knives of white-hot agony ripped up and down his spine. Anger, returning as if a long-forgotten friend, surged through him, driven insane by the unwinding influence of Ras'valyra's parasitic psyche. In that tiny corner of his consciousness where Ashmer alone looked out at the world, almost a figment of his blended, alien imagination, he noted that even the demon that co-habited his very being was violently angry. With a titanic act of will, he suppressed the urge to throw his will against his immediate surroundings, satisfying himself with the thought that he would have a moment to do so against the actual objects of his rage. Mutant thoughts washed through his mind, a mingling of Ashmer's pride and Ras'valyra's penchant for unrestrained

violence. As he always had, he rode the tide, and his steps carried him to the ground that stretched before the Inner Gate of Spinesreach.

"Ah, Ashmer," a smooth voice remarked nearby. His lidless eye flicked across, and he saw the currents of essence and an imprint damming jherza's progress that made up the form of the Syssin scientist, Anfini.

"I was hoping to speak with you," he added, his brows rising as he noted the expression on the Cabalist's face.

"It will have to wait, scientist," came Ashmer's hiss in reply, barely restrained from a rasping snarl, "jherza's call is shrill."

With that, he raked his teeth into his lower lip, drawing black blood, and whistled in a sharp, multi-toned sound. Hooves snapped at the ground, and Avarice stepped up at a swift gallop, her long wings flapping. Red eyes widened, and she snorted as she neared Ashmer. He reached up, placing a hand on its muzzle, and the black horse screamed a brief whinny, shaking its head as she raked at the ground with one warhammer-sized hoof. A faint smirk flitted across Ashmer's lips, and he slipped up onto its back. With a light twist of his emaciated body, he directed his winged mount south, and she surged into motion, hooves pounding against the cobblestone beneath.

As he rode, he let his sound eye slide shut, and stabbed out with his mind, reaching for the presence of the Druid he

sought.

"Hazyq," he hissed silently, following the seeking thrust with a single, sharp word.

"We know what we've done, Ashmer," came the Druid's mental reply, "and you can't undo it."

"You will answer for it, then?" the Cabalist hissed back in dual psychic tones.

"Come on," Hazyq finished coolly, before withdrawing from the link entirely.

Soon, the northern stretches of the Aureliana forest whipped past, and Ashmer scraped his bare, clawed feet across his mount's muscled sides. Great wings raked at the air, and the pair rose above the line of the trees, slowing only slightly as they gained altitude. Over his right shoulder to the north, Duiran rose above the blanket of trees, and ahead, something moved among them. With a hiss, he swept his mind's eye through the area, and found what he sought. The boughs of the canopy had knotted in a latticework of wood and leaves, and Ashmer reached out as he plunged through it. The air roiled, and bark sloughed off of rapidly-decaying pulp as the branches decayed. He came down into the small clearing hard, and dropped from Avarice's back. Black teeth bared, he straightened and slipped either sickly hand into the loose sleeves of his tattered robe. A man and a woman stood at the far end, and around them, the foliage was alive. A massive swarm of wasps hummed malignantly over

their heads. There was a moment of quiet, the only sound being the faint rustle of the animated fauna overlain by the swarm's buzzing. Avarice's nostrils flare in an equine snort, and she pawed at the dirt, ripping up the grass underfoot.

Behind Ashmer, the air seemed to open, and a figure wreathed in flame stepped into visibility, its hands raised. With a sharp hiss as the puddles from the recent rain evaporated beneath it, it lifted its hands, and a stream of fire spewed towards the pair. It struck something solid just before their actual bodies and swept aside, deflected by the shimmering spherical globe that surrounded them. The flames raked at the ground to either side, and the grass curled and blackened in the fierce heat. Almost as soon as the conflagration played itself out, the scorched ground began to mend, and tiny yellow flowers popped out of the still-glowing embers.

"Zenobia," Ashmer rasped, in a mockingly polite greeting.

The Druidess' only reply was a quiet nod, her eyes squinted.

With that, the grove erupted into violence, as the pair each lifted their staves. Just as vines lashed down from the trees ahead, snapping towards the Cabalist's thin form, he dove headlong into the cacophonous music of the Spheres. Without moving, he turned his attention to the Druidess. The familiar experience of surveying a tower filtered through his mind's eye, and with a mental shove, he toppled it. She bent, clutching at

her head. A vine coiled itself around Ashmer's throat and lifted him bodily from the ground. He let his desiccated muscles go limp, relinquishing the tenuous hold his dual minds had on his unliving body. Distantly, he felt the vine's thorns tear his thin flesh, and he clamped down on a particular note in the song of the Spheres with a mental fist. His gaze still affixed on the Druidess, he reached out, feeling through the entangled emotional pathways that knotted the two together in relationship. The runic form of Ef'tig burnt itself into his mind's eye as he wrenched at one, and felt a surge of sadistic satisfaction as she straightened stiffly. The glazed grin on her face told of his success, and with a hiss, he reached up, grasping at the vine around his throat.

Simultaneously, Hazyq had cleared the gap between them in three great strides, and slowed a few strides before Ashmer. Something violent and primal glinted in his eyes as he prepared to strike. Just then, the hunched form of a greasy-haired, ancient woman stepped out of the air between them, intercepting him. As his fist whipped at her, instead, she grasped it almost lovingly. It looked as if he had punched a brick wall, and his arm crumpled with the audible sound of breaking bone. With a bestial snarl, he swept the bony form out of the way, and bared down on Ashmer once more. The Druidess darted past him, drawing an incredulous look from her counterpart, and rushed at

Beneath the Necromancer's affectionate caress, the vine

withered and fell away in thin strips of rotting vegetation. His nearly-numb body fell heavily to the ground, and he heard a leg break beneath him as if through a wall. Carefully, he forced his corpse to remain standing, precariously balanced on his one whole leg. As she approached, the bone knitted, crackling back together, and he leaned forward, both thin hands rising in a sharp sweep. His hands contacted the sides of her head the same moment she struck, and the cord of Necromantic power he let snap through his arms wracked his skeleton. Her staff tore into his side, and again, that far-away sensation of bone crumbling scratched at his dual consciousness. Before his palms were torn away and he was flung across the clearing by the force of the blow, rot spread virulently through her skin, which sloughed off in wet chunks to reveal blackened muscle beneath. That, too, fell away, and for a moment the sides of her face were raw bone. The rest of her skin went white, and she shivered visibly.

Hazzyq curled one leg beneath him and leapt, his staff rising in both hands. As he came down on Ashmer, he swung, bringing the end directly down at his crested head. It stopped in its tracks a few feet from the target as it impacted something shimmering in the air, and he stumbled a step to the side. The Chaos Orb became momentarily visible, a crack showing where it had been struck, before fading from sight once more. The fallen Necromancer's attention remained on the druidess as she halted, her eyes closed as she fought the sudden rot eating

away at her flesh and muscle. It was slowly retreating before her mending skin, muscle twining together visibly before skin slipped over it. Black teeth bared, Ashmer reached out, the force of the conjuring driving him back to his feet as his unliving muscles twisted and contracted. A freezing wind raked at his skin for a brief instant before the spell struck his target, and Zenobia twisted, her arms curling around her sides as her ice crawled across her visible skin. Just then, the same hideous old woman stepped out of a fold in the air and reached out as if to comfort her. As those bony fingers brushed at her shoulder, the muscle beneath shriveled, and her arm broke with a sound Ashmer could hear from where he lay.

With a hiss, he tore the massive, blackened warhammer from his shoulder. Hazzzyq whipped his staff across in a blinding strike, and Ashmer was barely able to deflect the next strike with the haft of his weapon. As the two staves touched, a flash of sunlight erupted from that point, and Ashmer shrunk back with a rattling hiss. The Druid took a smooth step in, the point of his staff slipping out in a snake-quick lunge. The thin undead twisted, narrowly avoiding it, and brought his fist up - suddenly occupied with a short, rusted dirk. The point drove up beneath Hazzzyq's ribs. As the Druid's muscles contracted, paralyzing him, glistening black teeth showed in a hideous, triumphant smile. After ripping the knife from the taller man's waist, Ashmer stepped towards Zenobia, still struggling against

that roiling wave of cold. The crone attended her closely, each touch withering away a limb, and the Necromancer stepped in with another blast of freezing air. The huge warhammer rose in both sickly hands, and he paused for a moment, as if gauging something.

Then, he brought it down in a sweeping arc, and Zenobia's knee broke apart beneath the weight of that huge metal fist. She toppled to the ground, and the Cabalist brought his weapon overhead once more. After another brief pause, in which he took a gurgling breath through his dead lungs, he slammed the weapon down again, this time smashing the Druidess' other leg into a bloody mess. Her scream was a muffled distraction to the barely-present dual view of Ashmer Ras'valyra, enclosed in its soulcage and carried along in the rushing torrent of the Spheres. A new strain of the music drowned it out, and he thrust aside in favor of the discordant, wailing notes of his own Necromantic essence. The crone's bare, wrinkled foot settled lightly on the Druidess' hand, and her other arm withered as she stilled. Ashmer canted his head to one side, curious, as he noted one leg begin to mend.

A shout brought his attention back across, and he turned to see Hazzzyq sprinting towards him once more in long, bounding strides, a snarl on his face. Ashmer seized one jarring note of the song he heard, and thrust his will down into the earth beneath his feet. Decayed hands and clawed bone burst out of the

earth, and a single such appendage snatched the Druid's ankle, slowing him. The bone broke, and rotted flesh spewed, before two more hands managed to claw into the quick-moving legs.

The Necromancer turned, determined to see his work done before the other reached him. In a far-away corner of his mind, something questioned his violent rage, but it was squashed beneath a triumphant shriek from the otherworldly strains of his thoughts as he bent over the prone Druidess. Glistening teeth bared, he straightened one hand, and black, crackling energy wreathed it. He drove it deep into her gut, and flesh parted to make way for the translucent blade. Her scream pierced the veil of his removed awareness for a moment, before he settled into the rhythms of the Necromantic vivisection. After a few moments, her organs were splayed across the grass, and she writhed, just now having managed to fully regenerate her leg.

He heard Hazyq step behind him, free of the dead hands, ignored it. He pried his black-nailed fingertips beneath the edges of Zenobia's sternum, parting the torn flesh beneath. His spare, dead muscles twisted against his skeleton as he heaved, but his own strength won out, and he ripped the bone from her opened torso with a triumphant hiss. Briefly meeting her gaze with his own sound eye, he cracked it in half and drove the sharpened point of the splintered bone through her spine, impaling her to the ground. The writhing form went quiet, then, and Hazyq's staff cracked into the side of his head, and his

vision spun wildly as he was tossed through the air.

He descended hard, skidding across the grove, and as he landed, a swarm of wasps dropped onto him, their stingers ripping into his malachite skin. White-hot pain trickled through his entire body as the venom took effect, still muffled at his distance from his own physicality. The Music drowned out the sensation, however he was suddenly unable to move. As Hazyq approached in long, stalking strides, his staff held in both fists, he turned inward, falling more fully into a quieter, serene strain of the multi-hued song. He saw where the beat skipped, stoppered by a single, restrained piece of the melody. A series of hard blows fell on his crumpled form as he pined at the halted note, and he heard distantly the sound of his own bones breaking. The thin threads that were his link to his undead body hummed tremulously, and he felt briefly the link between his body and mind break open. A rush of vitality poured through his broken frame, healing him, and he was given enough space to free that single, repeating note.

Just as he slipped back into his body like a hand into a glove, he looked up to see Hazyq standing over him. Vines entwined his emaciated form, and he let his essence leach from his pores like an oily spill. The leaves and vines began to decay, but Hazyq seemed unconcerned as he straightened. His chest expanded as he drew in a huge breath, and something violent lit his eyes.

Then, he bent forward, and his jaw opened far too wide for the bones of his jaw to actually allow. A hideously bright pillar of fire issued forth, slamming into Ashmer's prone form. The sheer heat was breathtaking, and he heard a grating, gurgling scream wrench itself from his throat as that fire melted his flesh. It sloughed off of his bones in blackened chunks, revealing the bone beneath, and distantly, through the ephemeral, complex suggestions offered by his lidless eye, saw his corpse literally begin to come apart. Searing pain reached through the thin hold he had on his body, and he viscerally felt his sparse frame melt as a few threads snapped in rapid succession. His dual minds twisted in agony as his charred husk collapsed entirely, and the inferno tore ravenously into the unclothed flesh of his consciousness. A hideous, mental shriek filled his hearing, and a new kind of pain wracked him as he felt barbed claws scrabble against the inside of his ribs.

"No!" the hissing scream of furious denial bolted through him, and he felt the word torn from his lips by the force of what little remained of his desiccated lungs suddenly contracting.

He felt the heat edge closer as it licked directly at the lowest of the tightly-woven threads of essence that anchored his soul to his body, but it held, and a moment later the conflagration whisked out. The ground around him was blackened, and the vines had dissolved entirely before that punishing

blast. Blackened bone smoked in the open air, glistening in the bright sunshine, and metaphysical vapors hinted to the inhuman view of his lidless eye of his own body rising with it. His organs had been melted entirely into slag, and dry muscle was stripped from flesh, now in ashes around him.

His rasping cry still echoed in his ears, as if something had just shouted directly into the hollow of his skull, and he felt something knotted in his chest break. Crackling white energy snapped out like lightning, riding the length of his skeleton, and Hazyq, with a snarl on his primal visage, stepped forward, his staff rising as roots tore themselves from the ground. They dropped heavily on the broken, smoking ruin that was Ashmer's living corpse, and even through the raw agony of his dual minds being scorched bare, he felt his ribs snap. Still, those sparking arcs of Necromantic force wound themselves into his destroyed body, and all at once he felt whole again, if weakened. With an agonized hiss, he uncoiled, thin shoulders straining against the roots that wrapped his naked, malachite form to do so. Satisfied simply to stand, he peered at Hazyq as he neared, reaching out to touch lightly at the threads that linked his own mind to his corporeal form. Black teeth bared as he found what he sought, and viciously tore into them, leaving each in ruined tatters. His staff lifting, the Druid visibly slowed, suddenly moving as if through a thick, invisible morass. In the space it took him to reach the bound Cabalist, Ashmer had

left the roots in blackened strips of rotted vegetation at his feet, and as he felt Hazzzyq's mind start to come back into the normal flow of time, he thrust a sickly hand into the dirt at his feet.

Out of the corner of his sound eye, he saw the staff rise, and he uttered a short incantation before ripping his hand up - a two-handed bastard sword of rusted metal, its hilt wound in faded leather, came with it, and he swept it up, parrying the first strike. Flame again poured from Hazzzyq's mouth, roiling over Ashmer's hands for a brief moment, and he spun, following the motion of the Necromancer's block and lashing out in a swift underhanded thrust of his staff. The suddenly sharpened point snapped into Ashmer's middle, and he felt his spine crumble beneath the force of the blow as it impaled him. The sword dropped from his grasp even as his scorched hands re-formed over the thin bone, and he bent forward nearly in half. He stopped himself with one hand on the staff piercing his emaciated belly, and with a hiss, he straightened, his other hand snapping out - a dirk held in the bony fist. The blade again bit into the Druid's side, and Ashmer followed it with another vicious stab, this time taking his opponent high on the chest. The short weapon buried itself to the hilt, and as the Druid stepped away with a gurgling gasp, he let the hilt go. Blood burbled from beneath the wound, staining Hazzzyq's clothing down his front, and Ashmer bent, scooping the heavy bastard sword from the

ground.

The Druid attempted to block, but the Necromancer's sweep knocked the staff aside, and as Hazyq leaned sluggishly away from the following thrust, he fell to the ground. A thin, malachite hand snapped out to follow the rusted blade, and sticky webbing erupted from it to fall over the prone Druid in a clinging blanket of thin strands. With a snarl, he ripped at it with difficulty, another snarl torn from his lips as the embedded dirk twisted in his chest with each writhing lash of his arms.

A euphoric rush trickled through the still-close connection Ashmer had with his body, and he felt Ras'valyra shudder in exultation as he saw their opening. His other sickly hand rose to the long, leather-wrapped hilt of the rusted sword, and he snapped it straight up, letting the countering weight carry him forward a single, loose stride. The very tip of the long blade scribed a long circle overhead, the hilt rising above it as it fell behind his shoulder, and every dry muscle in his body snapped simultaneously as he ripped it across in a killing arc. For a langorous moment, the Necromancer's mismatched eyes met Hazyq's gaze, and the triumphant euphoria he felt solely through the otherworldly half of his melded consciousness peaked, oozing past the carefully-maintained barriers that kept the two from collapsing into nothingness.

The rough, rusted edge kissed at the join of the bound

Druid's head and throat, just beneath the line of his jaw, and the flesh parted unwillingly. The impact of his spine reverberated up the Cabalist's thin arms in a brief moment, before the blade was through, and the headless corpse of his opponent crumpled, now completely still. Ras'valyra's victorious shriek was deafening, echoing through his shared skull, and he felt the wash of euphoria subside, replaced by his slightly reduced, still-simmering rage.

Just then, he heard a shout from the brush to the north, and a glance in that direction told of motion, quick and graceful. After thrusting the blade of his bloodied weapon deep into the earth at his feet, he stalked, unclothed, to the edge of the clearing. He felt the passage of his bound entities follow behind in their masked entourage. An exact double, still clothed in his previously scorched-away robe, briefly appeared, stepping through a fold in the air before vanishing with another step. Through the odd, backwards sensation of the doppelganger, he felt a surge of Necromantic power tingle through his hand, and felt flesh decay beneath it. A slow, vicious smile spread across his lips, and something surged deep in his chest, as if encouraging him. Quietly, he stepped forward, and with mental effort, cleared the way, causing the foliage to wither before him and leave a small area around him clear. The drain on his essence, already depleted, dizzied him, but he clamped down, keeping his dual minds pressed against the hollow shell of his

living corpse.

Something flashed at him in a glittering blur, and he weaved to one side, narrowly dodging the spear's head. Black teeth bared, he turned his full attention on the sentinel that leapt fully from the rotted foliage.

"Good," he hissed at this newest attacker, and privately exulted in the opportunity to destroy someone else. Again, the spear whickered out, and the leaf-shaped blade bit into his thin arm, just above the elbow. The pain was white-hot, but could not even begin to compare to the agony of being incinerated, and only served to stoke his boiling fury. A sickly hand whipped up, and he felt the steel edge grate against bone as he bent his arm. With a hard jerk, he wrenched the spear from his opponent's grip, simultaneously feeling through the discordant notes that played through his dual minds. A few of the gossamer threads connecting the sentinel's body and mind snapped, and he faltered, stumbling a step. A mental heave toppled the weakened man's sanity entirely, and Ashmer Ras'valyra quietly indulged in the raw, demented expression on his face.

"Jherza," he began in a low rasp, feeling the according note find its way into the Spheres' melody, "Jhako, Lgakt." Almost effortlessly, he tugged a single frayed thread at the very edge of his victim's being, and it unraveled entirely, his corporeal form soon following in rapidly-dissolving wisps of displaced matter. The remaining bits of bone and vanishing skin

curled away into nothingness, and the Cabalist tore the spear from his arm before tossing it into a nearby bush. Dark blood sizzled in the open air, and the wound smoked as it closed. Just then, two more hunters slid catlike from the cover of the nearby trees, followed by a small horde of animals. A raven swooped at his head, and its claws tore deep gashes beside the crest there. As he stumbled, the first came on, leading with a quick thrust of the butt of his spear. His thin form tumbled to the ground, skidding across the blackened grass, and the cold breath hissed from his desiccated lungs. He keenly felt the dirt squeeze beneath his black nails as he clawed at it, his pale lips peeling back as he clambered back to his feet. A chill swept through his living corpse as he reached out with a spike of essence. Indiscriminately, he raked it across the ground, and decayed, ashen hands burst up through the topsoil to claw at the air. The air shimmered briefly behind him, before seeming to fold open, and his entities stepped into visibility.

As the sentinel approached again, two small dark forms darted towards it. The chaos worm's small sharp teeth bored into her belly, and the long, needle-like proboscis of the enlarged tick parted the flesh of her throat with ease. With a snarl, she came on, stopping only when the hunched form of the crone intercepted her with a loving caress of one arm. It shriveled, darkening beneath that ancient hand, and Ashmer stepped forward, taking the opportunity to grasp at her other arm. A cord of

Necromantic power slithered through his arms and through his palms, and he distinctly felt the bone break. Just as the second sentinel's spear slammed into his middle, impaling him, flames engulfed the first, drawing a shriek from her. As the man behind the spear embedded in Ashmer's gut snarled, slamming him back in a few hard strides, he reached out, tweaking at the woman's emotions. A quick twist was all he was able to complete before he was thrown away. The spear's head slipped free, and he felt a short length of his own organs slap wetly against his chest as again, he fell to the dirt.

Before the spear could reach him again, he rose, his attention turning to this newest attacker, and shoved hard at his sanity, the mental silhouette of the turret crumbling beneath the weight of his own mind. He held his course, though, and the dull look in his eyes fled as he lifted the spear for an underhanded thrust. Again, Ashmer forced his dual minds against the sentinel's own, and this time, he halted, spinning on his heel. Briefly, the image of Sabeine flitted through his mind's eye, and his wrath erupted in response, wrenching a snarl from his pale lips. Mentally, he clawed out, flaying the threads the joined the sentinel's body and mind, and, gathering the tattered ends up beneath his own will, tugged sharply. A look of horror briefly cast itself across his face, before he, too, unraveled, dissipating into nothing in a few short seconds.

The clearing itself was a scene of utter chaos, as snarling

beasts tangled with misshapen, otherworldly entities. Blood of all colors was splashed across the ground, creating a slippery morass studded by rotting, clawing hands. The woman, still aflame, grasped her spear in both hands, once more whole. Abruptly, the fire went out, and her scorched, warped flesh mended swiftly, her features reforming into a tense snarl. She kicked into a swift run, the tip of her spear leveled, and Ashmer slipped his dirk into his fist, still wet with its previous victim's blood. She lashed out, and he wove to one side, narrowly avoiding the spear's point. A clawed foot slipped forward across the soft earth, and he leaned forward, dirk leading in a quick jab. He thrust it deeply into her belly, and her eyes widened as her body locked into place, each muscle snapping to its limit against her sinewy frame. Leaving the short knife in her, he reached up, claiming her head between both thin hands. His fingertips dug into the skin behind her ears, and he tensed as he felt the essential energy keeping his corpse in motion leach through his flesh into hers. The living body decayed before his eyes, showing as virulent green steaks in the ephemeral vision of his lidless orb, and her shriek soon became a burbling cough as the rot reached her throat. After a lingering moment, as Ashmer forced more and more of himself into his victim, she collapsed entirely, brittle bones snapping apart as muscle sloughed from them in black, glistening pools.

Trembling, he stepped away, and with each passing second it

was more and more difficult to stay close enough to his own body to feel the nearly-dry well of his deathly essence. Wearily, he relinquished his iron grip, and felt his dual minds balloon apart in the ether, finding more natural shapes and positions relative to each other. The feeling of the soft soil was a distant, numbed thing as he gathered his weapon from the disassembled corpse of the sentinel woman, and he lifted one hand to his thin lips. A sharp whistle sounded in the clearing, and Avarice tore through the brush, boughs turning to ash at her passing. Huge hooves left a clear trail of glowing embers behind her as she trotted towards the hunched, shaking Cabalist, and with a whinnying snort, she halted a few feet away.

Not far away, he could hear the the skirling scrape of steel on steel, and a sharp cry, followed by a deep, otherworldly bellow. A faint smirk played across his thin limbs, and he reached out mentally, choosing select thoughts from the roiling place where Ras'valyra and Ashmer met until it formed a coherent statement.

"Do join us," sounded the telepathic communication.

"Thought you could use the help," came the Bloodborn's curt reply, before another agonized scream tore through the restless air of the forest. After a few minutes, it was silent, and he briefly saw a lithe, vampiric figure flit through the underbrush between two trees. Sated and exhausted, he reached up, clambering onto Avarice's back. Another gurgling cry echoed

through the trees, cut short by a wet thwack, and then the grove was silent. Though the effort left him weak, he grasped at currents invisible to the naked eye and drew a cloak about him, concealing him and his winged mount.

A single thing remained undone, something he had decided upon some time between riding from Spinesreach and that moment. The tide of his dual, melded thoughts ebbed and flowed against the shore of his mortal mind, and at a great distance, he felt himself urge Avarice into motion. The music of the Spheres by far drowned out the sound of the wind as it rushed past his ears, and soon, he was again soaring over the forest, east into the rising sun. As he crossed over a wide river, he angled his path north, hardly conscious of having done so.

The ground swept past beneath, rising steadily as he approached the city. The spires pierced the bright, pink-streaked dawn sky in a stark silhouette ahead, and a tiny, quiet voice in a forgotten corner of his roiling, fused self remarked on the beauty of it. Then it was gone, and he let the pitch and roll of his demonic half play against the solid stillness that was the quieted emotions of his mortal mind. After a few minutes, he felt it quiet, along with his former rage, and fell wholly into the music of the Spheres that constantly played behind each twisted, backwards thought. This time, the notes played forward, progressing from one to the next with harmonic ease. The gaping wounds marring his skeletal frame healed

swiftly, his malachite flesh smoking with the swiftness of the power that reached through him. He was vaguely aware of a burning pain, but dismissed it, remaining close enough to his physical form only to let the reflexive workings of his desiccated brain direct its motion.

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Huge hooves hammered down, and a tiny, irritating jolt was felt through the bones of Ashmer Ras'valyra's sickly living corpse. It jarred his memory, as well, and with great mental effort he remembered what he had returned to the city for. Avarice's steps were light as it carried him down the wide hallways at a trot, and he briefly noticed that the sway of his weight atop her matched the rhythm of the song he kept his ear pressed to. They neared the quiet corner where the Cabalist guildhall was hidden, and he dismounted, briefly aware of the cold stone beneath his bare, clawed feet. As he entered the hall, he pulled a robe from a shelf nearby and draped it over his emaciated nakedness before tossing the belt into a knot. With each long-fingered hand tucked into either deep sleeve, he stepped to the far side and willed the door to the ritual chamber open. Residual energy from his departure crackled eagerly at his return, slithering up his leg as he stepped past before coiling somewhere deep inside, where his body met the rest of his being. Behind him, the door slid quietly shut, and he took a moment to regard the regal form of Sabeine, where she

stood near the center of the five-sided chamber. Her eyes had been shut, and they slid open as he entered. For a lingering moment, he simply held her sharp gaze, reveling in the intelligence and razor-edged will reflected there.

"Scion," she greeted him curtly, and he felt a brief surge of mortal pride at the complete absence of fear in her voice. She was the only person, his sharp Tsol'aan mind reflected, that was not disgusted by him, was not afraid, and lacked the usual facade of arrogant dismissal that most treated his dual, melded individuality with. In fact, she seemed more offended by his reaction that morning, and he felt the distinct urge to laugh with mortally-fulfilled joy that she was honestly upset with him. Under the twisting influence of his grafted consciousness, the urge and emotion twisted into sadistic pleasure, then became violent euphoria, and he swiftly killed that line of thought. Instead, he let a faint smirk play across his thin lips, and stalked forward, hands still held in either sleeve of his robe. The music of the Spheres was a quiet thing, and he circled her, his attention affixed on her hard expression. Her eyes followed him as far as they could, but she did not move, and soon he had circled back to her front.

"Are you going to answer me, or just circle me like a potential meal?" she asked him sharply, her brow furrowing as one dark, flecked eye squinted at him. His black-toothed grin was made mirthless by the stiff peeling of his thin lips, and

the brief pleasure he experienced at her snapping question twisted, again following the knotted passageways offered by his dual minds. He let it go, and reached up, lightly brushing the back of one malachite hand along the side of Sabeine's face. She stiffened, then, for a moment, leaned her head against his hand. It curled behind her head, and he took a short step forward before pressing his too-thin lips to her eleven mouth. Frustrated with the brief, fleeting memory of a similar kiss, before his transformation, he instead parted his ebon fangs and let his long, sinuous grey tongue slither into her mouth. It coiled around hers in a violating kiss, and he held her for a lingering moment. The still breath escaped her lungs with a small sound, though she needn't draw another, and her hands came up, clutching at the front of his borrowed robe. Another small sound forced itself past her lips, and he broke the contact, releasing her to straighten a scant foot apart. Her visage had softened an almost indiscernible amount, and he briefly remembered that any touch caused her excruciating pain. A brief moment of mortal concern and horror at his own actions was immediately torn apart in the play between the conjoined halves of his mind.

"Well?" she asked him stiffly, and he noted the slight crack in her voice. Again, glistening black teeth bared themselves between his pale lips, and he reached into his robe to uncoil the many-tongued whip from his emaciated waist. Her

eyes narrowed at it, then him, and her mouth twisted into an indignant frown.

"I've done nothing wrong," she began, though the last word was nearly cut off as he sent a cord of power racing through the weapon in his hand. It snaked up, collected one of the woman's slender wrists, and tightened around the other. With a brief tweak, he forced it up into the air, dragging her hands with it, and soon, she hung a few feet above the smooth obsidian floor, her own legs kicking. Feeling for a particular note in the ongoing music underlying the ebb and flow of his mutant thoughts, he reached out and fixed her in place, adding layer upon layer to the song until she went still. The look on her face was one of indignant anger, and he reveled in it as he reached up, stripping the robe from her slender form. The cloth smoked in his grasp, and a few glowing sparks following in its wake as he tossed it to one side.

Again, Sabeine opened her mouth to speak, but the words were twisted into a quiet grunt as Ashmer lightly touched two thin fingertips to her belly. This time, the touch sent arcs of agony crackling up through the Cabalist's own limb, and he let it wash through him. At the place where his two once-separated halves met to form the mockery of a consciousness that was his active mind, he felt himself leaning into the sharp sensation as it torqued at the melded thoughts formed there. It was matched by a sharp, discordant note as he interjected a single thought

into the music of the Spheres that played beneath that, and felt Ef'tig draw a series of mixed emotions through that point of contact. Indignation, fear, and anger invaded his half-dazed mind, and he welcomed them like a guest, still carefully holding the excruciating pain in his living corpse close.

A brief shock shook through him as he realized he had, in fact, leaned forward, and his robed front pressed against Sabeine's own where she hung. Her mouth was twisted into a pained grimace, and a small series of suppressed whimpers twisted in her throat. His palm was fully pressed against her navel, and the pain coursing up through that touch would have taken his breath away, had he been breathing. Abruptly, he broke the contact, and the woman drew in a dry, sobbing breath through her own mostly-unused lungs. His bare, clawed feet were a whisper on the hard floor of the ritual chamber as he circled the immobile Sabeine in long, slow strides. She quickly composed herself, and the sheer anger cast across her face when he returned to her front sent a new, sharper line of thought racing through the canyon between the stitched-together halves of his mind. Again, he reached up, lightly drawing the tip of his finger down the length of her front, and she visibly tightened, though otherwise remained impassive. The pain of that touch seared through the silent nerves of Ashmer's too-long digit, radiating up through his arm and into his chest, and he stamped out the urge to pull away.

As it pressed further against her skin, he felt Sabeine begin to twist against the force affixing her in place, and heard discordant, arrhythmic notes begin to pull apart the melody of his own Numerological artifice. A faint smirk ghosted across his thin lips, and he met her fierce gaze for a moment as he felt through the underpinnings of the song that ran counter to his own. At every turn, he managed to thwart her efforts, and an odd sensation rose in his chest as the youthful joy of the game was morphed into proud righteousness at his own power, then sickly, sadistic pleasure by the ebb and flow of his dual thoughts. His other hand rose just as he pushed the whole of his palm against Sabeine's middle, and the reciprocated force of both hands on her threatened to break the bones in his arms and shoulders. A thin, hooked claw ran across the inside of his skull, and he heard a brief, hissing whisper somewhere in the shadows of the ritual chamber.

Then, in a moment, he remembered what he had begun, and let his long fingers slip further into the soft skin beneath them. Sabeine's body jerked against the invisible bonds as he opened her middle, each layer brought back with the care of a surgeon at work. Small sounds escaped her as he rearranged what lay beneath, and the sharp, coppery smell of her blood filled the air, driven into Ashmer's awareness along with the agony brought on by the almost-intimate touch. Finally, the cold breath began to force itself from Sabeine's lungs in a series of sharp

screams, each echoing through the chamber well after she herself had paused to drag in more air. After a few moments, he completed his task and carefully removed her heart, grasping it in both hands as a temple-goer might a sacrament. As the organ came loose, Sabeine's cry became horrifically shrill, peaking into a sonic scream that briefly threw the notes of the Numerological manipulation holding her off-beat. For a long moment, she swung freely, writhing against the whip holding her wrists, before Ashmer mentally gathered the tattered threads once more and slammed her back into place.

When he looked back to her face, it had been stripped entirely of her former anger. Slowly, the Cabalist let his pale lips peel back in a mirthless mockery of a grin, and with both hands, he held the glistening heart out to her. Dumbstruck and in agony, she stared back at him, her dark eyes dull, and he let a few twisted thoughts slip across the tenuous link between the two. Dizzied at the effort of drawing upon that rudimentary form of Ef'tig, it took him a moment to notice the understanding that drew across her fine-boned features. Her jaw went slack for a moment, tightening as he leaned a touch closer. Almost tentatively, he closed the gap between them, pausing with his thin lips a scant inch from hers. She twitched at the contact of his robes and her opened front, and seemed to fight something for a moment, before giving a slight upward cant of her chin.

Again, he pressed his mouth against hers, and his tongue

slithered around her own in what would have been a kiss, had he been human. The too-long thing coiled tightly around hers, and he felt her struggle against the invisible restraints once more. He felt a wash of pride at her acceptance of his unspoken offer, and his youthful elation torqued, becoming narcissistic triumph, then fell into a deep-seated, seething pleasure that nestled beneath his unused heart. It went on for a long time, with her heart held in one hand at Ashmer's side, before, sated, he slid away, and she relaxed visibly with a shuddering breath. Briefly, Ashmer reflected that had someone who believed in the sanctity of the Rites of Unity had been present, they would have tried to kill him for this twisted mockery of a proposal. That, for some reason, brought a satisfaction her acquiescence alone did not, and his thin lips peeled back even farther.

Sabeine's blood dried slowly on the front of his robe as he lifted her heart in both hands and again set to work. This time, she did not attempt to suppress her cries as he buried his sickly hands in her innards, and with almost loving care, replaced her heart in her chest. He briefly mused that he could re-attach it however he wished, considering she didn't need it to function. Concentrating briefly, he let the wounds beneath his malachite skin open, and the oily smoke that issued forth twisted, forming wispy curls. With another sharp thought, they slithered into Sabeine's opened belly, outlining thin, otherwise invisible cords between the various vital organs nestled beneath

her ribs. Leaning down so as to see better, and shutting out her continued screams, he quietly snipped a pair where her heart had been, re-twining them with nearby cords of black smoke. Gently, he pushed her heart back into place before threading the newly-made connections through it, and again, felt the woman weakly writhe against her bonds.

"This is the last," he hissed at her quietly, the first words he had spoken since he arrived. Her brows furrowed briefly, her eyes bleary with pain, and he answered the confused expression with a faint smirk. With a sharp twist, he sent a cord of power snapping through his burning fingers, fusing the soft tissue back together and rejoining the organ with the rest of her body.

Sabeine's scream again peaked, rising swiftly to a pitch beyond what could be normally heard, and he felt something burst deep in his skull on either side. The candles' flames waved in the disturbed air, flickering, and as Ashmer slid his hands from her chest, he felt the wetness of his own blood trickle from the cavities where his ears had once been. When he met her gaze once more, the irises and whites of her eyes had evaporated, drawn into the blackness that now encapsulated each orb entirely. Holding that half-drunk look, he gently settled each of her vital, if unused, organs, back into their previous places, and the cords of black, oily smoke that had settled there shifted, finding a less convoluted pattern before dissipating entirely.

As he did, she twisted helplessly, sharp cries forced from her throat at each renewed touch of the Cabalist's malachite hands.

Having completed this, he drew the parted folds of her soft skin back together, pinching the edges together between the knuckle of his forefinger and pad of his thumb. The searing burn that tore up his arm at the touch became a bone-chilling cold, and he drew a hissed breath through his dry, sinewy throat. His other hand released her momentarily, drawn from her opened belly, before he reached into a pocket of his robe. Her now-black eyes squinted dizzily at him as he produced a thin bone needle, and, holding the sharp point between his black teeth, pinched at the thin, dull end. It began to glow in a tiny point of white light, and he gripped it lightly between two fingers. Again, she kicked uselessly against her bonds as he threaded it through the gap he had cut across her navel, stitching the flesh back together. In the wake of the needle's invasive path, a thin thread of that white light followed, bright even against Sabeine's pale skin.

Slowly, he worked his way across her middle, quietly watching her twist in the scant inch the Numerological manipulation allowed her to move in. With a seamstress' care and a surgeon's precision, he closed the long gash, leaving it stitched with the pale strand of his own essence. Another sharp, if weary cry escaped the bound woman as he tugged on the spiderweb-like strand at one end, drawing it tight from hip to

hip. Quietly, he knotted it, and settled his palm fully on the closed wound at the very center of her navel. The bone-chilling cold that pervaded his body at the touch was scorched away as again the pain of the touch turned searing-hot, and he felt his strength ebb as he stayed with it, careful to keep close enough to his own body to maintain control.

The thin strand of essence that stitched Sabeine's horrific wound closed drew rapaciously on the Necromancer's own, and her flesh mended before his eyes, sifting together until her middle was restored to the smooth, unmarred curve it had been a short hour before. The final mending of flesh tugged sharply at Ashmer's being, drawing with it a rattling breath, and he drew his hand away. Trembling, he turned from Sabeine and paced across the ritual chamber, feeling the raw edges of each brutally re-awakened nerve as the pain itself subsided with the break of contact. She similarly shook, and he gently unwound the hard notes of the song encompassing her, letting her gently settle to the ground. With the dissipation of that conjuration, she slumped, hanging limply from the whip coiled around her wrists. Something primal slipped from the Tsol'aan half of his mind, and he felt a surge of something unfamiliar to his melded consciousness at the sight of her hanging there, unclothed. Briefly, he simply looked at her, before turning on his heel.

As he neared the door, he reached out, closing his fist on something unseen, and the candles were snuffed as he plunged the

chamber into darkness. A brief knife of torchlight flickered into the room as he pushed the portal open, and he closed it behind him, leaving his fiance alone in the blackness of the ritual chamber.

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When Ashmer returned, he found Sabeine much as he had left her. Her hands were curled into loose fists over the cord of the whip encircling them, and she hung half-limp from her restraint in the darkness. A brief wash of pity oozed from the mortal half of his mind, and was twisted into sadistic appreciation of her naked form by the otherworldly influence of its counterbalancing half. He strode forward quietly on bare, clawed feet, his newly-replaced robes a whisper on the cold floor, and halted a scant few inches from her. She was unconscious, her chest silent with her lack of breath, and he reached out mentally, feeling in the blackness of her sleeping mind for the line of her suppressed thoughts. What he found pleased him, and a small sound escaped his thin throat. Quietly, he reached up, curling one finger beneath her chin, and felt a slight tingle as the force that constantly drove as a wedge between his fused parts leaked through that point of contact. A cold breath swept into her unused lungs, and she awoke with a start, her black eyes narrowing sharply as she peered up at him.

She looked as if about to say something caustic, but the expression on his thin-featured face must have stolen the

thought from her. Glistening black teeth showed, and he leaned down, pressing his mouth to hers. Her whimper was muffled against his thin lips, and he let his thin arms encircle her waist as he pushed fully against her. The whimper became a suppressed scream, intensified as his tongue parted her lips and swept into her mouth, coiling around her own once more.

For many long minutes he held her, and after her initial struggles she hung limply against him, only a swaying kick of her bare legs evidence of her pain. Abruptly, he broke the contact, straightening, and with a dismissive gesture released the physical expression of jherza that he had knotted around the whip. It fell to the floor like a cut cord, and she came with it, crumpling to her knees at his feet. Gently, he offered her a thin hand, but she pushed hers onto the floor instead and rose without his help. As she gathered her discarded robe, he bent to collect his whip, and with an idle motion of both hands settled it back beneath his draping robe once more. Sabeine pulled her robe close about her naked frame with a swift tug, and tossed the rope belt into a knot at her waist. Her black eyes affixed him steadily, and his mismatched gaze met her stare. There was a lingering moment of silence between them, and Ashmer felt something both warm and sharp bleed through the link ef'tig afforded him with this woman he had so thoroughly claimed that same afternoon. The huge crest on his head laid flat, and he felt the thin membrane between the spines lay softly against the

malachite skin of his neck.

"You are ours," he was compelled to say, both sides of his agonized mind contributing to this twisted line of thought.

"Yours," Sabeine agreed quietly, though her impassive expression hardly changed with her speaking.

"Elene has contested the Conduit," he said, his voice a dual, multi-layered hiss, "she wishes the Cabal."

In reply, Sabeine's chin lifted, and the expression on her face brought a twinge of sadistic pleasure to the melded creature that was Ashmer Ras'valyra.

"We will fight her on this, and claim it ourselves," he replied to her unspoken question in a slow rasp. Her nod was stiff, and she folded her slender hands into either sleeve of her robe as she regarded him coolly. Her slender lips twisted into a slight, pensive frown, and her black eyes narrowed. Ashmer suppressed the urge to share his thoughts with her through that linking number, knowing that to do so would be to share the excruciating pain that wracked his dueling selves. He had given her enough pain that day, he thought. With a curl of his too-long fingers, he beckoned to her, and she moved forward. The shimmering wave that was the entourage of chaos entities that followed him parted, allowing her passage, and without a word he turned on his bare heel. Side-by-side, they strode from the guildhall and into the wide hallways of Spinesreach, their passage marked by few as they moved into a quiet wing of the

huge city. From time to time, they passed other Cabalists, Syssin, and the occasional mage as they went about their separate duties, and each remained silent. With each step, Ashmer felt another knot of a new insight unravel, and a slow understanding settled on him with the finality of a death sentence. Bits and pieces of memories fit together, and something virulent bloomed deep in the analytical corner of his mind. The Cabalists were stagnant, he thought in dual agreement, the mortal Ashmer and otherworldly Ras'valyra coming to the same conclusion through divergent paths. With each passing moment, more of that insight-turned-judgment came unraveled, revealing itself in all its righteousness to the Necromancer.

"It must be done," a thin rasp sounded, and Sabeine turned, casting a pensive frown at the creature that walked beside her.

There was another lingering moment of silence as the two reached a nearly-deserted wing, north of the markets. Here, there were only the occasional passersby, who moved quietly on at their own business without even a glance. The hallways were narrower, and the two scaled a steep staircase carved into the stone behind one such corridor. It stretched many flights up into the spire overhead, and without complaint, Sabeine followed Ashmer up each, her steps quiet on the stairs beside his clawed feet.

"We will restore the Cabal to what it has never been," he hissed quietly as they crested the fifth such flight of stairs.

"I will see it done," Sabeine announced quietly, and as he looked at her, a small half-smirk had lain itself across her lips. That hint of a smile jabbed through the seething surface of his agonized consciousness, drawing forth a faint memory from the depths of his mortal mind. A night of food, warmth, and a dance... with a dismissive act of will, he murdered the green-eyed memory and leveled his mismatched gaze on the woman standing beside him. He noticed he had stopped moving, and eased into motion once more, taking each step in a smooth, stalking stride.

"Good," he replied finally, his voice issuing as a barely-audible rasp that raked painfully at his dry throat. Idly, he uncapped a vial and tipped it up, draining the distilled serum within before flicking the empty back into a pocket of his robe. Deep light filtered down the next flight of stairs as they turned a corner, its hue nearly blood red, and Ashmer felt his eye, the single thing remaining of the form he was born with, adjust as he neared the top. Chill air greeted the pair as they stepped out of the cramped hallway onto a wide, sweeping balcony etched into the side of the spire. It tugged lightly at their clothing with icy fingers, drawn down off of the tundra at the head of the storm clouds that gathered in the distance there. To the west, the sun lay bleeding on the horizon, its red and orange rays cast against the underbelly of the sparse clouds that floated against that pastel sky. At the very edge of the

vista offered them, Ashmer could see the first hints of night overtake day as the sky to the east turned a dark, bruised purple.

Sabeine's eyes were squinted against the light of the dramatic sunset, and again, they fell silent, simply staring at the sight as the last glow of the sun crept beneath the horizon. The bonfire glow remained for half an hour, and the air grew steadily colder without the intervening warmth of the fiery disc that now slept beneath the earth. Ashmer reveled in it, and a brief, violent memory shattered his repose, that of a hot plain viewed from too far above as he hurtled towards it. The sky was scattered in dark, ashen clouds, and the firmament itself aflame - not with the warm colors of sunset, but appearing as if a pool of boiling magma had been inverted over the ground below. A vestigial memory of pain stabbed into his left eye, and he shook himself free of it, his sound eye blinking briefly.

Night overtook the dusk like a lover, and the sky darkened to a deep twilight blue.

CHAPTER FOUR

That Other Place

A few years later, Ashmer stirred. He rose, padding softly to the half-crumbled opening that adjoined the larger chamber to the north. He let one thin hand glide lightly over the nitre-covered stone as he ducked through, his sound eye blinking against the sudden light there. Ahead, the hall of the ruined castle spread into darkness, interrupted now by a bright, glimmering light. It moved jerkily, twitching to and fro in the distance, and Ashmer Ras'valyra moved towards it, his lidless eye twitching in his socket. Dust slipped from his malachite skin, and as he stretched his thin limbs, he felt dry tendons untie themselves and unused muscle protest stiffly. It was extremely difficult to bring his dual, floating melded minds close enough to his living corpse to move, and his steps were quiet, unsteady things. The light ahead grew brighter as it grew closer, and as he neared, he held up an arm to shield his sound

eye from it. Black teeth, bared, and he hissed a short series of words before reaching out. The light was snuffed entirely as he slammed this portion of the hall into blackness with a spell, and the sight revealed to his sharpened gaze brought with it a rush of old sensations.

A priest, mace held firmly in one fist, clashed with a goblin between two ancient pillars. Two goblinoid corpses lay crumpled at the combatants' feet, their limbs twisted and skulls caved in. At the sight, a brief, furious anger played between the two halves of his mind at being roused from his meditations. Even Sabeine had ceased to visit him, and the memory of the look on her face before she walked away was scorched into his dual minds' eye. He stalked forward, thin hands fisted at either hip, as the goblin shrieked at the sudden darkness and slammed his sword down, driving the priest to his knees. The blade of the crude scimitar shrieked against the metal of the mace's handle. Intent on its seemingly disadvantaged target, the goblin didn't notice the approaching Necromancer.

Dismissively, Ashmer raked one fist across in a backhand across the thing's jaw, and as it contacted, the flesh curled away in blackened strips. The suddenly-bare bone crumbled, and the goblin spun away into the darkness with a gurgling shriek. Still seething, Ashmer forced a wave of his essence onto the thing, enclosing it in a fierce cold until the breath was crushed from its lungs. A mace smacked into the back of his

knee, and it broke beneath him, toppling him to the floor. Again, light flooded the dark, ruined hall as the priest lifted it back over his head. With a fervent prayer, he began to spin it over his head, the light sparking from its head in great, fiery bursts that swiftly drove away the conjured darkness.

Dual minds reaching, Ashmer clawed at the ephemeral cords of the priest's physicality, and he stumbled to one side before lifting the mace once more. Slowly, he bore down on the Cabalist, his face locked in a grimace of hate and rage. A snarl twisted at Ashmer's thin lips as he forced his melded consciousness against the priest's, and a demented light shone in his opponent's eyes as the tower of his sanity was toppled. Still, that mace shone and grew closer, blinding the prone Cabalist.

Something struck him then - it was if the myriad threads of various, unrelated insights suddenly revealed themselves as co-conspirators. He felt himself come apart, as if to join the flowing current of the blackwind, but it was odd, changed somehow by that nearly-undefinable realization. As if through morass, the priest crept closer, but Ashmer paid him, and his fiery mace, no mind as he unwound this sudden lightning strike of understanding. Briefly, he felt the force that constantly levered itself between his complementing halves relax, and the excruciating pain, made almost unnoticeable by forty years of its presence, suddenly ceased. Relieved exultation hissed

through him in a cool rush, and he nearly shouted in sheer, otherworldly joy as both Ashmer and Ras'valyra were freed from that torturous hold. His living corpse continued to come apart, wisping away in oily black smoke, revealing the ebony bone beneath his thin flesh.

A vision of a distant, familiar plain descended on him, dark against the backdrop of the blinding light from the priest's mace. Dark basalt, shattered against the ground, jutted up towards a dark, roiling sky in jagged teeth. Lightning lit the innards of the heavy clouds at intervals, casting deep shadows in the craters and crevices below. To the east, there was a flat stretch of barren tundra, its ground studded with spiny, alien plants that belonged nowhere he had seen on Sapience. It lay flat nearly to the horizon, where a range of mountains rose against the dusky, variegated sky. There was no sun to be seen, but the place was lit with a deep indigo light, occasionally shifting to orange as the clouds opened, letting the flickering light through. This brief glimpse revealed a fiery surface close against the upper edge of that stormy ceiling. In his mind's eye, it seemed the surface of some invading star, paused on the verge of crashing against the rocky ground below. Then the clouds closed again, filtering the light into an indigo so deep it strained his eyes. Something was strange about it, but before he could probe further into the odd vision, a sharp crackling brought his dual attentions back to

reality.

His body had nearly entirely vanished, leaving little more than a few black bones in the humanoid shape of his frame, and the mace swept down in a smooth arc, aimed neatly for the center of his chest. As his ribs wisped away, dissipating into thin wisps of oily black smoke, it slammed into what remained of him. A sharp pain wracked his melded consciousness, and he felt the threads at the very edges of his soulcage fray. Then, it felt as if a fierce wind overtook him, and he was plunged into an icy blackness.

The experience was one of being dragged across rough, rocky ground, and his chest burned fiercely. He felt his black blood pump from the wound now there in sickening amounts until it stained his entire front. Still, he tumbled through that utter blackness, his body dissipating as he crashed against things unseen and reforming in staccato succession. With each catastrophic impact, he felt something break, and each time he reformed a new pain was added to the agony already wracking his tumbled form. At the final impact, he found he simply could not reform, and was swept through the chilled darkness as the oily black smoke of the Necromantic blackwind. Still, the torture of his physical body being broken was nothing compared to the suddenly-lifted, constant pain offered by the force that had been attempting to separate his joined halves for the past forty years. If he had been able, he would have shrieked in

otherworldly exultation, but was unable while forced to remain dissipated into the blackwind. The howling gale that carried him intensified, and for a moment, the raw volume drowned out even the dual, mutant thoughts that bubbled to the surface of his joined mind.

Then, he was compressed, closed in on all sides by rough stone, felt keenly through the disassociated sensation of his oily, wraith-like form. The narrow opening squeezed tighter, and he felt stretched as somehow, that same force pressed him through it. As the already-cramped crevice pushed in around him, he felt a similar pressure on his melded counterpart identities. What passed for the emotions of his dual undead and demonic consciousnesses bucked, contorting insanely as the two were forced together, straining the barriers that kept them from collapsing into nothingness. Bits of his identity dissolved, thoughts cut off half-formed and feelings strangled before they could take root. His whole being shook with the tectonic force of the undead mortal Ashmer and the chaotic, inhuman Ras'valyra grinding together. Thoughts were crushed, and others twisted, careening insanely through his melded consciousness as that foreign, pervading pressure intensified. It was the terrible opposite of the energy that had attempted to pull him apart for so long, and for the first time in his lensed memory, mortal fear bled through the rapidly-dissipating barriers separating his two halves.

Ahead, deep indigo light slanted through what appeared to be a narrow crack, and his terror intensified at the pressure smashing him from all sides. Delirious, he was sure he would be unable to fit even the compacted, broken form of his dual minds through that tiny slot in the darkness. Without a corporeal form, and unable to keep his consciousness on any one thought to see it through before it was crushed or warped beneath that psychic influence, he ground towards it. Still the rough walls closed around him on all sides, and he felt bits of his smoky form wisp away, separating with intense, stabbing pain from the rest of him. It reached a peak just as he neared the crack, and his distended vision blurred with the raw agony of it just as he was slipping through.

Briefly, he tumbled through the deep light, again smashing and dissipating against juts of hard stone as the same, chill wind pushed him across the surface of the plane. Vision faded, and though he knew that to fall unconscious while in his current state was to die, the blackness closed swiftly on him with the finality of a pouncing predator.

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Briefly, the cold wind heated, and the air seared fiercely across Ashmer's sharp-featured face. Ash and sand came with it, and he felt its rough caress lift his long, silvered hair. Something odd about the experience struck him as he began to wake, and his brow furrowed. Slowly, his eyes opened, just as

the wind returned to its previous chill. A barren plain stretched before him, turned on its side by the angle of his head where he lay with his cheek to the rough grit. Great broken spurs of basalt clawed at the dark, roiling sky, some taller than anything he had ever seen and others no more than a slender, cracked spear aimed above. Rocky dirt wound in narrow paths between them, its dark grey stained a deep indigo by the light that filtered through the clouds above. The hue was intense enough to hurt his eyes, and a tear slid away from the corner of one squinted orb as he placed a hand on the hard ground. It was odd - the last thing he remembered was...

Sudden motion caught his eye, and as he pushed himself upright, he noticed another figure similarly sprawled not far away. It, too, stirred, though with its lidless eyes he could not tell whether it slept, or simply lie there staring at the sky. As he looked more closely at it, bile rose in his throat at the sight. Nearly-transparent white skin left every working of muscle visible, and what might have been a distended, many-chambered heart twitched in the thing's emaciated chest. Dark veins wound thick from that knotted muscle, winding through organs Ashmer had never seen nor heard of before in places where he himself had muscle. Long slits opened its belly horizontally, that hinted-at mess glistening contemptuously at the disgusted Tsol'aa between their neatly-sliced edges. Similar slits were drawn along the inside of either arm and either leg, and there,

the organs clinging parasitically to the thing's black bone hissed and sputtered with the rise and fall of its black ribs. A ragged hole had been smashed into its thin face where its nose should have been, and beneath, a lip-less mouth seemed hemmed in between it and the sharp chin. It had no ears to speak of, nor hair - the rest of the head, besides its eyes, was completely smooth, its dark veins showing through the gossamer skin.

And those eyes! Twin, bulging orbs rested in its sockets, the skin of each puckered around the curved edges. Each was pupil-less and filled with a cloudy substance that shifted in milky, variegated shades that ranged from puke yellow to bone white, with a range of grey and beige in between. Neither seemed the same color at any given time, and as the sickening creature stirred, they twitched about independently of one another. Ashmer again suppressed the urge to vomit then and there. Clawed hands scraped noisily at the gravelly soil, and its feet twitched, a black bony nub at either heel making a similar sound there. Like some invertebrate, it suddenly compressed, the whole form sucking itself into a compact sphere, before snapping out once more. It rose, standing at an odd angle, and gave a sharp, rattling hiss.

Ashmer kicked to his feet, and remembered a particular spell, though he could not recall where he had learned it. A shimmering shield wove itself into the wind-whipped air between the pair, itself a wide sphere around the Tsol'aa's slender

form. Ash skittered against it in bright violet ripples across the smooth surface as the wind picked up. The hideous thing strode forward, its alien organs pumping black fluid beneath its slick skin as sinewy muscle torqued against its bony joints. In spite of its stretched, gangly frame, each step was graceful as it closed the gap between them. Ashmer closed his hand into a fist, letting more of himself through the link to the shield, and the violet glow intensified where the stinging ash raked into it.

A low, grating laugh shook the monster as it strode through the sphere of power as if nothing more than a curtain of falling water. It parted, and the Tsol'aa felt a shock rip through his extended arm in a violent backlash. He was thrown to the ground, and the breath was slammed from his lungs with the impact. Gasping, he scrabbled back to his feet, and quickly cast about, searching for something, anything that he could use as a weapon against that disgusting thing. The wind howled as it approached, the ash and sand whipping across Ashmer's eyes as he squinted through his own tears at the ground. Desperate, he snatched up a jagged piece of broken basalt and lifted it in both hands, preparing to strike the skeletal entity that was now only a scant few feet away. With the proximity, its scent reached his nose - oddly, the smell was thick and sweet, like honey mixed with vanilla, though something darker underpinned that pleasant taste. As it neared, he lifted the stone in his hands overhead

and strode forward, a sharp cry leaving his lungs as he brought it down at the skeletal thing's chest.

Dismissively, it snapped a clawed hand out, raking the rock from his grasp, and that same hand reached out. A slick palm contacted his forehead, and before he could reach up to push that cold grasp from his flesh, another shock ran through him. With appalling strength, the creature forced him to his knees. The rough ground rasped painfully at his legs as he collapsed, and a grimace twisted at his lips with the odd sensations coursing through him. His fear dissipated, and he frowned intently at the horrific thing standing over him. A memory came to him then, of falling from this same sky and tangling with... something, as he swept towards these same broken plains of shattered basalt. The pain of the memory bubbled to the surface, and he reached up, touching lightly at one eye. Then, with a curious cant of his head, he reached up, touching at the claw resting atop his silver-haired head.

With the contact, he nearly swooned, as his vision narrowed to a point. Around the edges, seemingly surrounding him, images and sounds whipped by, myriad in color, shape, and tone. Some were bloody and violent, others euphorically beautiful, and still more he could not even begin to make sense of in their twisted, chaotic shapes. Words sifted along with them, male and female, shouting, screaming, and whispering simultaneously. The cacophonous, wild experience passed as swiftly as it had come,

and he toppled back, shocked suddenly back into awareness of who he was - when he was, as that final memory of burying himself alive was suddenly knotted to the present moment. He shook violently, muscles convulsing, as he reached up, touching at his face, then his hair and neck. Incredulous, he stared down at his own thin, willowy frame - with two sound eyes. Then, a look of utter shock casting itself across his expression, stared at the thing standing over him.

"Ras'valyra," he breathed, though the howling wind tore the word from his lips and swept it across the barren plain that stretched to the mountainous horizon. Short, crooked teeth showed as his counterpart grinned mirthlessly down at him, and a single clawed hand swept down. He took it, no longer disgusted at the slick feel of that translucent skin, and let Ras'valyra pull him to his feet. For a moment, he stared into those twin, cloudy bulging orbs, and an odd, warm feeling of affinity smoothed away his shock and residual fear. The demon stared back, and he heard an odd, rattling whisper at the edge of his consciousness. The experience of being able to think straightforwardly for the first time in over fifty years felt as if he had just been rescued from drowning. Still, each thought felt... communicated, somehow, as if some other attention also tugged and prodded at it. The whispering at the edge of his hearing grew louder, and he noticed the sickly creature's lipless mouth move in time with the unintelligible words.

"Ashmer," it said after a moment, the words raking up past its thin throat. For a moment, he thought he could discern an expression cross that thin-featured, alien face, but then it was gone as the hairless brow flattened once more.

"We... I..." Ras'valyra continued, its thick black tongue struggling to form each stuttered word. Ashmer held up a hand, then, silencing it.

"We," he said firmly, before slipping the hand into the pocket of his soft trousers. It was then he noticed the same thing he had worn the day he had been buried, at his formal introduction to his demonic half, though he was summarily taller and broader of shoulder than he had been. This must be what he would have looked like, had he and Ras'valyra remained separate. Quietly, he cast away the brief regret, and turned, squinting across the shattered ground.

"What is this place?" he asked, without looking back at Ras'valyra.

"It tastes of your mind," Ras'valyra answered, its spongy tongue expanding in a long, sinuous coil that flicked, snakelike, at the windswept air. Ashmer gave a soft, pensive grunt in reply as he flicked back through the memories of the place - as they fell, it had been hot, not cold, and the light a different color. Eyes tearing with the ash that was whipped across them, he peered up at that dark sky. The clouds moved across the sky like the surface of a cauldron, lighter spears of

the ashen vapors scudding along beneath the writhing shapes above. He blinked briefly, squinting as he thought he saw faces begin to form in that variegated canvas, their expressions caught somewhere between a scream and an exultant cry. When he looked more closely, they were gone, replaced again by the dark, bulging storm clouds from which that fine layer of ash rained. In the memory framed by his mind's eye, he saw them part, briefly revealing a fiery conflagration eternally erupting and collapsing in on itself above.

"This is where we fell," Ashmer finally said, and those cloudy, twitching orbs both flicked back down to settle on him. One claw rose, and he felt the razor point touch very lightly to the skin beside one of his almond-shaped eyes. He nodded, stiffly, and his counterpart mimed the gesture.

"You fell," the demon answered in its lilting, otherworldly voice, "and I followed." Again, those short, crooked teeth showed in a grin, and Ashmer answered it with a boyish grin of his own. It was an odd experience, actually conversing with the thing that had shared his body for so long, but he found that the intimacy afforded by their melded state remained. Again, his attention was brought back to the quiet whisper at the edge of his consciousness, and he thought he saw a pensive expression slip across Ras'valyra's translucent ivory face. Then, in the distance, fiery orange light slanted through the thick clouds above, onto a distant, jutting peak. With the limning glow, he

noticed it rose higher and closer than the fanged range beyond it. Ras'valyra noticed as well, its tongue pushing out of its lip-less mouth to taste at the ash-laden air as it looked in that direction.

"You see?" it asked him in a rattling hiss, and he nodded stiffly, his brow furrowed. There was something terribly familiar about that straight-backed mountain. Just then, there was a hissing, multi-toned shriek in the opposite direction, echoing between the jutting spurs of rock. The pair looked simultaneously, and Ras'valyra shifted uneasily from one foot to the other as it ran a single sharp claw down its hollow cheek. Again, that same shriek rose against the howling wind, closer than the first. Ashmer bowed his head, letting his eyes slide shut as he reached for what remained of his Necromantic essence. A sharp pain wracked his slender form as he found the well utterly dry, and he nearly swooned, stumbling dizzily to one side. He drew in a breath, struggling against his suddenly cramped chest, before letting it loose in a long sigh. Ras'valyra's hiss was a grating sound, and its knotted heart pumped more quickly beneath its thin ribs as it turned. The wind died down, then, though the clouds above still swept across the unseen sky at their swift pace.

"What is it?" Ashmer asked quietly, his flecked eyes squinted in the direction of that otherworldly shriek.

"I do not want to find out," Ras'valyra answered carefully,

before turning on his bony heel. His claws scraped noisily across the rough dirt as he eased into motion, striding towards a gap between two towering spurs of basalt in the opposite direction. With a stiff nod, Ashmer followed, and the pair slipped into that narrow, angled canyon, moving towards the lone mountain that stood against the backdrop of far more distant peaks.

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The chill wind never ceased for a moment, its hissing wail a third companion to the pair as they walked that labyrinth of shattered stone. Its icy fingers found their way into the gaps in Ashmer's clothing, and the cold seeped through his flesh into his bones, numbing him whenever the two paused in their trek. That hideous shrieking behind them grew closer, then fell back throughout their travel, seeming sometimes to have lost their trail and go far down a wrong corridor before finding them again. At times, their path was only a narrow track across the barren plain, hemmed in on all sides by towering cliffs of cracked basalt, and at others the twilight horizon swept before them, interrupted by the outline of much smaller stones that rose from the rough earth like cairns overseeing some long-forgotten battlefield. That jutting peak they sought lay stark against the writhing sky, its silhouette sometimes vanishing those sheer canyon walls, and at others revealed in all its contemptuous magnificence. There was no sign of life at all, no

plants or creatures, besides the shrieking that followed them, always close enough to be heard but never close enough to be seen.

Sometimes, Ashmer and Ras'valyra walked side-by-side, sometimes single file as the ragged terrain forced them to pick their way carefully through cramped canyons or over deep crevices. Time simply did not pass in this place. Neither tired, and neither hungered, Ashmer retaining some of the power of his mortal form and Ras'valyra drawing rapaciously upon that same essence. It was a more total fatigue that weighed on them, beyond any mortal need. It crept through their minds, still separated for the first time since their joining, and leached the strength from their bodies. Even Ras'valyra's hideous organs hissed and sputtered more slowly, as if straining against some invisible tar blockading its thick, black veins. Ashmer breathed more heavily, and each time they stopped to rest, it was a struggle to simply speak.

At first, they had spoken at length. Ashmer questioned Ras'valyra mercilessly, and Ras'valyra answered, before hissing questions of its own. For the first while, they spoke of their joining, and as Ras'valyra spoke of that time, Ashmer walked as much through the gallery of his memories as through that blasted wasteland. Some felt as if he had forgotten them up to that point, and others tasted sharp and bitter, like a familiar draught to cleanse the palate after a too-sweet meal.

Ras'valyra's quiet hiss, heard for the first time with his own ears and not echoing in the depths of his own mind, was a strange thing. It was too sharp for his memory, it seemed, and seemingly innocuous words uttered by his chaotic counterpart sent him spiraling away on the trail of tangential thoughts and insights. The strangest experience, he found, was that of being utterly alone with his own thoughts. The knowledge that nothing shared them, that each arose spontaneously and naturally of the workings of his own mind left him reeling. For the vast majority of his life, each thought, feeling, sensation, experience, insight, judgment, and every other mental working had been filtered, twisted, buffeted by the similar workings of Ras'valyra's mind. He realized, having reached this point, that after the first several years of his cohabitation by his parasitic companion, he had ceased to be "I," and become "we." When questioned on the subject, Ras'valyra was oddly quiet, as if unable to find the words to describe its own experience. That was, he thought, appropriately accurate. The memory of that effulgent, seething violence that was the chaotic being's mind beneath the level of its razor-sharp consciousness was seared into his own mind's eye, still fresh as that first day they had walked together from the graveyard in Bloodloch. A soft sputtering from beside him drew his attention, and he turned.

"We think much of our time before this place," it rattled thickly, as the slit carved across its belly again opened

slightly, releasing a steaming spurt of honey-scented air. Ashmer's slender mouth twisted into a faint smirk, and he knew where the creature's mind was taking it. The whispers at the very edge of his mind, which he were beginning to suspect was the faint point of contact between the previously-melded beings, intensified, though could still barely be heard, much less made out against the moaning wind.

"Yes, we are dwelling on the past, aren't we?" he replied quietly, his voice barely above the volume of that incessant rustling as the chill air blew against the shattered stones that surrounded them. He looked up, then, and noticed that the light had changed slightly - become lighter. Perhaps time did pass in this seemingly timeless place, and the clouds would burn away to reveal that horrifying fiery sky. He shuddered briefly at the thought, and returned his attention to the mutant walking beside him. Those twin, milky orbs were affixed on him in what he considered a pensive stare, though he still couldn't read the expressions on that hideous face. A slow, black-toothed grin spread across Ras'valyra's lip-less mouth.

"We should speak of our future," it hissed, accompanied by that wet sputter as its innards belched a small wisp of oily steam into the cold air. Ashmer's reply was a stiff nod as he angled his path, choosing a narrow crack among the various paths arrayed before them. He could now barely see the very peak of that distant mountain over the walls that crowded in around him.

"Do you know why I chose you?" Ras'valyra asked in its grating whisper. Ashmer's brows rose, and he shook his head. His lips twisted, and he reached out, running a hand along the dry stone to one side. It was icy to the touch, and his fingers quickly became numb. As the chill crept up into his wrist, he tucked his hand back into the pocket of his trousers.

"No, I don't," he finally answered, sparing his counterpart a hesitant look.

For a long moment, those cloudy orbs simply gazed back, and Ashmer grew increasingly uneasy beneath that unflinching, lidless gaze. If he heard Ras'valyra's mind as faint whispers at the edge of thought, could it know his? Suddenly, he had a brief pang of longing for their melded state, and edged a bit closer. As they squeezed into a crack that split a massive boulder, his jacket brushed Ras'valyra's bony arm. At the brief contact, a fiery, violent image flickered through his mind, then was gone, leaving only the memory of searing pain. His chest tingled, and he moved ahead of the creature as they slipped single file into the cramped passageway. With the cold stone pressing in around them, the shrieking and howling that followed them warped, seeming to multiply into the small hairline fractures running through the variegated basalt. Again, Ras'valyra was silent, and Ashmer was content to leave it that way. A brief flash of childish anger bubbled to the surface of his mind, and he watched it carefully. For the next several minutes, he barely

noticed the labyrinth around them shift, giving way to a field littered with smaller, jagged shards of the same dark stone. He followed that brief shimmer of rage deeper into his own memory, and found at its heart, the moment when he popped that slippery, blood-soaked stone into his mouth. As he unwound the brief experience, a low laugh reverberated in his chest, and he cast a look back at Ras'valyra as it stalked over the blasted ground.

If there could ever be a questioning look on that mutilated, thin-featured face, there was at that moment, and Ashmer cast a boyish grin at the hideous thing.

"I've hated you," he explained quietly, and a small sputter of oily steam again escaped from Ras'valyra's slitted belly, "for all this time, since I learned what you are."

The lip-less edges of the creature's mouth peeled back, revealing its black teeth in a mirthless expression. For a moment, Ashmer remembered what it was like, sharing his body with this twisted being. Suddenly, the oddness of his current physical form settled on him, and he shook himself bodily.

"I didn't know it until now, but I've hated you these past fifty years for what you've done to me," he continued, turning his soft, flecked gaze back to the path ahead. He picked his way over a flat-topped stone, and hopped back down to the gravel plain beneath, his stride loose. As he glanced back over his shoulder, he saw the last border of that razor-edged labyrinth fall away behind them, and heard the wild shrieking that had

dogged them for so long slowly fade, becoming quiet with distance. In that time, Ras'valyra was again silent, simply studying Ashmer as it loped easily across that shattered terrain.

"I have hated you, as well," it said after a moment, drawing a sharp look from Ashmer. Rage again shimmered to the surface of his mind, and his thin fist clenched at his side as he slowed. The creature's stride took it past him as it lithely cleared a wide stone in a single, sinuous bound. Its claws crunched at the broken stone underfoot, and it turned, casting its alien stare over one hunched shoulder at the Tsol'aa. "You are upset by this," it informed him in its rattling hiss, as that hairless head canted to one side.

"Y-You, have hated -me?-" he asked, his voice raising sharply.

"Yes," it explained gently, its tone at odds with the malignant rasp of its voice, "your body has been my prison for the past fifty years. It wasn't to be like this."

This stopped Ashmer in his tracks, and his gangly counterpart drew to a halt as well. It turned on its bare, taloned feet, and its thin arms folded over its emaciated chest. The organs that stretched between its torso and elbows gave a dry sputter, and some cloudy fluid leaked down its sides as it studied him.

"Your prison?" he asked Ras'valyra, his head canting to one

side. He tucked a lock of his silvered hair behind one sharply-peaked ear.

"Yes," Ras'valyra replied in a sputtering hiss, the sound accompanied by another spurt of that fluid over his emaciated ribs from the slits in his bony arms, "my prison. It was to be mine, and my way beyond that place."

For a long moment, Ashmer, simply stared at Ras'valyra, his honey-hued eyes squinted sharply. His fists clenched and unclenched along with his jaw, and he chewed on the thought, oddly enraged by the entity's perspective on the matter. Then, something happened. In a moment, he remembered their first introduction, in the ground beneath the graveyard in Bloodloch. There had been something besides their merged, twisted existence in Ras'valyra's plans at the time. He remembered the golden motes appearing before his vision, and... a fall. For the briefest of moments, the wind rustling through his clothes and hair turned searing hot, then back to chill, and the experience was like being dunked in icy cold water. He shook himself bodily as a shiver crept down his spine.

"I fought you," he said quietly, and Ras'valyra's sharp chin dipped in a brief nod, "and you couldn't finish your work. It had already started... you were already inside."

There was a moment of silence between the two, and the Tsol'aa studied his emaciated counterpart with narrowed eyes. The thing's arms unfolded, hanging too low at its side, and

became still, shifting its weight from one clawed foot to the other. The slit across its belly hissed as the organ beneath it clenched, spitting a curling wisp of smoke in the face of the wind that clawed at them both.

"That is how I came to be you," Ras'valyra rattled back, its thin-featured face flattening into what Ashmer now knew as an impassive expression. The whispers at the edge of his hearing became a sycophantic whimpering, and the corner of his hideous counterpart's lip-less mouth twisted. For a moment, he felt a stab of pity for the creature, startling in its intensity. As Ras'valyra's eyes twitched, a flash of sensation and skewed memory filtered through his mind. Two slits running back from either of the thing's temples gurgled softly, spitting oily smoke into the windswept air, and Ashmer felt a sharp pain in his own head.

Visions whorled past, familiar in their intensity, fading from trees waving in a chill wind to the darkened, bloody grove of a slain druid. Sabeine's face wavered before his mind's eye, twisted in agony before flattening into her regal impassiveness once more. His own face, the malachite skin dry and the brand in his forehead glowing malignantly, replaced it, and as his own amber eye flickered open, a sensation of tremendous movement overtook him. He rushed through violent fights, murdering and being slaughtered painfully. Abruptly, he slammed back into the chill plane across which he and Ras'valyra trekked together. His

breath was an exhausted pant, his chest heaving with each draw, and he stared incredulously at the creature. Slowly, the images stitched themselves together, and as he looked into those expressionless, alien orbs, understanding dawned on him.

He had just experienced the last fifty years from Ras'valyra's perspective, in a flash. The emotions and thoughts were little different from his own, twisted and morphed against the impassive wall of his own peaceful upbringing. He stalked forward, and Ras'valyra recoiled a step before becoming still. Its black teeth bared in a rattling hiss, and as he reached up, it raised its own sickly, clawed hand to intercept it. As their skin touched, Ashmer felt something drawn out of him in a slithering rush, leaving a hollow space that it had once occupied. It arced like electricity through that brief point of contact and into the demon's emaciated frame. Spare sinew knotted beneath its translucent flesh, and it was wracked with a small tremor. As it shook, the mutant organs knotted to its bones quieted, though a dark grey liquid leaked from the slits that left its inner workings bare to the eye in rivulets. Its skin was warm to the touch, and its scent a warm, sweet honey intermingled with vanilla as Ashmer drew a breath into his lungs. A lingering moment passed, and he simply maintained the touch, afraid that should he break it, whatever he had returned to the creature might find its way back into him once more.

It was Ras'valyra who pulled away, and folded its thin arms

over its starved-thin middle as it stared at him with those milky, bulging eyes. The two simply stared at each other for a long while, neither speaking a word, while the wind moaned about them and that distant shrieking faded further into silence. Soon, the only sound was that ever-present, rustling whisper of the chill air's motion across the jagged ground.

Ras'valyra's sharp chin dipped in a faint nod, and Ashmer returned it with a polite incline of his own head. With that, the pair turned and continued their interminable walk towards the still-distant peak that had imposed itself on the eternal twilight dusk of that stormy sky.

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For what could have been days, weeks, or even months, the pair walked tirelessly across that vast, broken expanse of basalt and ash. Here and there, huge deposits of obsidian hinted at a violent volcanic past, and somehow, the great gashes carved into the stony earth flicked at a deeply-embedded memory somewhere far beneath the surface of Ashmer's mind. His attention wove in and out of focus with the interminable march, and over time, he found himself feeling an intimate kind of familiarity with the hideous creature that walked at his side. It would not speak, and they found that they did not have to, even when forced to navigate complex and difficult terrain. The jutting spurs of stone fell into a craggy plain, though ahead,

Ashmer saw the hazy shadow of another labyrinth loom at the foot of the peak they sought. A storm had begun on the horizon behind it, and sharp blue lightning arced between the charcoal sky and the distant range of mountains far to the north and east. To the west and south, the land simply curved away into hazy nothingness, though that, too, was occasionally split with the thin veins of a flickering electrical storm. As the time passed, Ashmer noticed something change about the light, or the sound of the place, but simply could not pick it out from the graveyard stillness of their surroundings. The only sound was the moaning wind, still bearing a fine ash that rasped across any exposed skin it could find with dusty fingers. With each gust, Ras'valyra's alien organs sputtered, and thin wisps of oily smoke joined the restless air in its parallel journey across that vast waste.

"Do you wish to return?" the creature asked him, though he had heard the question form in the thing's twisted consciousness before its rattling hiss could be heard over the moaning wind. He cast a wry smirk at what had only recently been his other half, and canted his head aside in a curious motion. Those milky orbs that might have been its eyes shifted murkily as it turned to return his curious look, each shifting independently of the other as they both affixed him with their pupil-less stare. Something moved beneath the skin of its chest, as if settling into a more comfortable position, and its ribs distended

briefly.

"Do you wish to return?" it asked again in the same, sibilant whisper.

Ashmer pursed his lips pensively for a moment, sparing a glance to the path ahead as it split, riding either edge of a deep, jagged-edged ravine.

"If you mean return to Sapience, I hadn't thought about it," he mused aloud, now hearing the whispering at the edge of his mind echo his every word in a quiet prayer. His flecked, honey-hued eyes squinted for a moment, and he stared off at the narrow space between the low clouds and the broken horizon as he gathered his thoughts.

"Yes, I do," he said finally, drawing another eerie look from Ras'valyra. As the path sloped up between spars of stone that jutted like fangs from the edge of the lip-less mouth carved into the earth to the north, the gangly creature moved ahead, its clawed feet quiet on the smooth stone. Ashmer followed close behind, taking the same path as it slipped spider-like towards the peak of the ridge. After a moment, they crested it together, and jumped down to where a winding trail sprouted from the tumorous mass of stone behind them. Smashed-up stone intermingled with the soil underfoot, and each step echoed back at them with a grinding crunch as they cleared the high walls on either side. Beyond the ridge, the ground was perfectly flat, and the stone faded into fine, dusty ash that layered the

ground loosely. Small clouds of it followed them, the wind snatching it up as their feet freed it from gravity's pull momentarily and spinning it through the air in small, sinuous twisters.

"Very well," Ras'valyra finally answered, an odd, wry tone in its hissing rasp. Ashmer cast a curious look at it, his brow furrowed, and its black teeth showed in a glistening mockery of a smile as it simply looked back at him. The expression was impish, in a terrifying way, when cast across that thing's thin, translucent features. The rip-edged gashes above its mouth flared as something in its throat convulsed, and it sped its pace into a long-limbed, loping stride. Ashmer moved to keep up, and when he looked back to the east, he found that the peak itself was both much farther away, and much, much larger than he had originally thought. The great mass of shattered stone that lay in its shadow raked at the sky like so many stubby fingers, though as he studied it against the background of that lone, enormous mountain, he decided that those angled spars crowding each other would have trouble fitting into the great cavern in Bloodloch. Lightning cracked the dark sky behind it, its blue light flickering against the clouds and distant mountains alike.

As they walked, the wind increased its pace, the moaning becoming a low wail underpinned by the serpentine hiss of the fine ash underfoot as it was drawn up and dragged across the flat plain in scuttling waves. It found its way through every

gap in Ashmer's clothing, and soon, his whole body burned with the insistent touch of that fine, clinging dust as it nestled beneath his loose shirt and trousers. His feet itched madly, and he could feel the beginnings of a sore at the base of his neck, just beneath his collar. The slits that crossed Ras'valyra's gangly body were soon caked with a fine crumb of the dark ash, and every now and then it would stop and meticulously clean itself with its claws and sinuous, serpentine tongue. Even then, the constant abrasion drew its black blood from the raw flesh there in tiny dark rivulets that dried swiftly and clung to the smooth edges of each orifice in rough scabs. When it could not reach the slash that ran along the left side of its spine, Ashmer drew the knife he had found concealed in one boot and helped clean it. With every touch of the sickly, translucent skin, a slithering memory wound its way through his mind, though some of which, he was sure, had never actually happened. When the last bit of abrasive ash had been cleared from the raw grey flesh, the emaciated thing stretched its bony arms out to either side. Its twisted sinews shifted visibly beneath its translucent flesh, and the Tsol'aa's sharp ears made out a very faint series of wet cracks. With each, one of its ribs twitched, and Ashmer felt the vague urge to mimic its satisfied-looking stretch.

During what might have been the next day, the ragged labyrinth of razor-sharp stone approached swiftly, along the the towering mountain that they sought that loomed behind it. The

entire plane seemed to darken in its shadow, the indigo light deepening until Ashmer's eyes ached simply to see it filtered through the heavy, oppressive clouds that hung low overhead. Lightning cracked with increasing frequency into the distant, hazy mountains, where the storm gathered in a black pall that nearly touched the sharp peaks there. Soon, they were invisible in a grey haze, and only the lone mountain rose from the otherwise painfully flat waste ahead. Before them lay a jutting forest of shattered basalt, the cracks running through each becoming more and visible with each league that passed underfoot. The trails that wound off between them were layered with the same ash as the rest of the plain behind them, though it was intermingled with a rougher dust much lighter than the rest of the loose footing. It rasped against the hard stone beneath as the two stepped closer, and then, they stood directly before the first of those huge pillars.

Cracks spiderwebbed the length of each, and Ashmer could see that they bore signs of violent where something had gouged deeply into the dark, variegated stone. Round marks depressed the otherwise smooth surface of the nearest basalt spars, as if rocks the size of Ashmer's head had battered them viciously. Of whatever had caused the scarring, there was no sign, and the wind picked up to a chill howl as they moved within a few short steps of one narrow entryway into that cramped maze. Its icy fingers seemed to push Ashmer towards it, and he strode forward,

followed closely by Ras'valyra in its quiet, stalking lope. When he reached out, the stone was cool to the touch and rough. Curious, he ran a fingertip the length of one narrow crack, and noticed that the stone at its very edges was glassy smooth. It bore a slight edge, and he felt his flesh part against it. His brow furrowing curiously, he sucked the blood from the narrow wound, and motioned Ras'valyra to come closer. Its cloudy eyes twitched in their sockets, bulging slightly, as it leaned close, and it reached up, its claw scraping quietly over the dark stone as it traced the same track. A low, pensive hiss escaped its throat, and its head canted to the side curiously.

"Heat, and a great fall," it said quietly, its voice no more than a half-heard rasp. A brief flash of a violent memory flickered through Ashmer's mind then, fiery in its intensity and as brief as it was sharp. In its wake, the vague experience that he had forgotten something terribly important settled in his stomach. Uneasy, he peered at the crack more closely, attempting to rouse more of that bright, painful memory, and he felt his legs cramp painfully. With a frustrated sigh, he turned and stalked further into the narrow passageway. As the high walls closed around them, the distant wind faded to complete silence, and the terrible solitude of the wasted plain finally struck him. The charcoal sky was a narrow sliver above them, hardly differing from the stone walls of the maze in color, and seemed similarly cracked with lighter veins of thinner vapor. As they

turned each corner, the light grew deeper, the indigo darkening with such a concentrated intensity that Ashmer found it difficult to keep his eyes open against the ache that crowded into the sockets behind them. Soon, his whole head hurt, and the muscles of his neck were cramped and knotted against his spine within a few short minutes. The pain seeped down his back until it settled into his lower back in an almost pleasant soreness. Ras'valyra similarly moved in long, weary strides in the shadow of that enormous peak, and its milky orbs twitched with every distant crackle of violet lightning. This time, the thunder was a rolling roar that crashed around them, echoing off of the close walls of the basalt maze until it finally tumbled into complete silence once more.

Over time, the quiet whispers at the very edge of Ashmer's hearing quieted as well, and the sheer quiet that was left in their wake left him uneasy. For the first time since he was a young Tsol'aa, playing in the forest alone, he was alone with his thoughts, which carved unmolested across the blank canvas of his aching mind. Flickering leaps of intuition carried him sharply from abstraction to abstraction, as he took the opportunity to filter through all that he had learned in the past sixty years, since Ras'valyra had found him. He was finally able to complete thoughts that had been twisted by the warping influence of the creature stitched to his consciousness. Ras'valyra was similarly silent, aside from the faint rustle of

its stalking strides across the loose layer of ash and rough dust underfoot. Occasionally, it would reach out a black-nailed hand and rap lightly on the cracked basalt at its side, as if only to break the deafening silence of the deserted maze. Even the faint sound of Ashmer's breathing seemed to be swallowed by that oppressive blanket of solitude, and each of his thoughts echoed harsh and loud against the inside of his skull.

Ahead, the narrow path split, angling off in three different directions from the point where the ashen trail diverged. The dark stone parted at intervals further back into the maze as each head split again, and Ashmer halted at the first fork, his brow furrowed pensively. Briefly, he listened for any hint of the wind moving down any of the three crevices, and heard none. It was utterly silent. Ras'valyra paused beside him, and gave a brief, insectile click of its sinuous tongue against the inside of its teeth as it peered down the path to its left. Its slitted nostrils squeezed tighter as it sniffed sharply, and the spare, hard muscle corded over its ribs twisted beneath its translucent flesh like thick snakes.

"Can you smell anything?" Ashmer asked it quietly, his voice terribly loud in his ears after so long spent in utter quietude. The emaciated creature shook its hairless head quietly, then looked to the other two pathways that wended away between the tall basalt walls that pressed close on either side. One, Ashmer could see, only split after a few yards, and he

leaned into a smooth stride towards it. The very entry was cramped and narrow, and he turned to one side to fit through. Just beyond that first cramped few feet, the passage opened up, and the pair was forced to walk single-file into the depths of the twisted maze. At the split, Ashmer simply slipped left, moving to the north of a direct path to the peak that now loomed overhead. The sky seemed to press lower as they walked, and a faint mist of fine ash began to fall from above, coating their clothing in a thin layer of dusty grey. The ground became slippery with it, and it clogged Ashmer's eyes and throat, even as his nose burned and itched with the touch of the invasive stuff.

Hunched wearily, Ras'valyra soon gave up its meticulous cleaning, and its sputtering rasps became labored. Each dislodged bits of ash clotted with the creature's cloudy fluids, and they dropped to the ground, leaving a trail of dark crumbs that was soon covered with the floating ash. Over what might have been the next hour - Ashmer had lost all sense of time in this timeless place - the fall thickened, huge flakes of crumbling ash now alighting in his hair and clinging tenaciously to his shirt and trousers. Ras'valyra was coated in it, and with a low, rattling hiss, finally stopped and set to cleaning itself of the clinging dust. With much effort, it managed to rid at least the large slits on its belly and beneath its arms of the clotted mess that had caked there, and Ashmer again drew his

knife and gently scraped the vile-smelling intermingling of ash and Ras'valyra's dried fluids from the opening that split its back just to the right of its bony spine. Again, there was that pervading sense of familiarity with the hideous creature, and he squinted softly as he noticed the sinews beneath the sickly skin relax against its slender, curved ribs.

This time, Ras'valyra stalked ahead as they squeezed through another narrow gap between two jutting pillars of the cracked basalt. The ashfall continued in full force for what seemed like an eternity, until both were left utterly miserable as it rasped at their eyes and clogged their throats. Ras'valyra seemed particularly vulnerable, and soon, its stride was a weary, scraping thing. Ashmer coughed thickly to clear his raw throat of the invasive substance, and wiped uselessly at his nose, which had begun to burn fiercely. His hand came away red with his own blood, and for a moment he was startled by the bright color. Ras'valyra's blank eyes turned to him, then, and a twisted smirk torqued the edges of its lip-less mouth into a wry expression. Through a slivered space ahead, Ashmer caught glimpse of a canted overhang left when one spar of basalt had simply broken across its middle and toppled, leaning precariously against its neighbor. There was a small space pressed against its bottom that was relatively clean of the rasping ash, and Ashmer rapped Ras'valyra sharply on its bony shoulder before pointing to that spot.

"I don't know if either of us can die in this place, but if we can," he began, though was interrupted as his lungs spasmed, attempting to force some of that clogging ash from his raw throat in a gurgling cough, "we will, if we continue like this." The emaciated thing's reply was a quiet, weary nod, though as they approached the crack through which Ashmer could see the shelter, it became obvious that neither would be able to fit. After another long hour of searching down the nearest branches of the contorted maze without success, they returned, and Ashmer stared back at the tiny slit that had parted this one massive spar down the middle. To the north, he could see a precarious heap of similarly-shattered stone, and moved towards it. With one hand, he reached up and tugged on one of the sharp-edged chunks that jutted from the rubble. It shifted lightly, and the entirety of the thing groaned with the protestant moan of earth stirred after too long at rest.

"I could not climb this," he informed Ras'valyra after a moment's study of the rest of the pile, "it would collapse and bring me down with it."

"I can," it whispered back at him, and in a sinuous, insectile motion, twitched out a claw. It lightly hooked at one crag in the great broken stair, and it slithered up onto all four limbs. Its claws were entirely silent as it clambered to the saddled peak, and soon disappeared over, its emaciated body featherlight as it moved from sight. Ashmer pushed his breath

from his lungs in a rush, and simply watched to see if it would return. His vigil was interrupted by a faint, insistent scratching that echoed through the narrow crack to his right, and he stepped back over, one flecked eye squinted as it peered through it. One of Ras'valyra's bulging, milky orbs stared back at him, and he could see its glistening black teeth bared in a narrow grin.

"I cannot see another way through," it rasped, and the tip of its sinuous grey tongue flicked across the upper edge of its lip-less mouth, "this one will have to do."

Ashmer simply stared incredulously through the narrow crack at his hideous counterpart, his jaw clenching. What in the Pit was Ras'valyra talking about? Their whole search had begun because there was no way through, and they had nothing with which to climb that smooth, leaning wall. Ras'valyra's rasping laugh grated his nerves, echoed by the myriad quiet whispers hovering at the very borders of his consciousness. Frustrated, he pounded a fist against the hard stone to the side of the too-narrow crack, and Ras'valyra's laugh became a quiet, rasping snicker.

"Have you forgotten what you are? -You- are the master of the deathless arts, between the two of us," it hissed, as another clot of congealed ash and cloudy fluid fell from its slitted belly. Ashmer went quiet for a moment, his brow furrowed, and heard the brief notes of a discordant melody play

through his mind. It was vaguely familiar, but with an odd sense of certainty he knew it was not what he sought. In a moment, he remembered what he had forgotten, and the moment of his odd kind of death at the hands of the priest in that dank dungeon came back to him in a distant kind of memory. The brief taste of his previously-melded consciousness was heavy on his tongue, and lingered like the sharp bite of a too-strong drink. Pensively, he drew in a quiet breath, before realizing that he had not done so for the past hour, and laid a hand over his heart. It was completely silent, and the sound of his next breath in his ears was a faint rattling wheeze. As he breathed out, oily black smoke poured from his mouth, which after a moment was wet and filled with the sharp, coppery taste of his own blood. Stinging pain seeped into his jaw and throat, and he swallowed thickly, frowning.

Following the trail of that violent memory, he fell into a deep trance, and at a distance, felt his body come apart under the twisting influence of his own Necromantic power. He felt something cold and dry rake through his stomach, and ignored it. The experience was dizzying, but soon, his vision was little more than a dark blot against the hazy background of the ash-layered stone. He focused on the narrow sliver of Ras'valyra's ebon teeth he could see, and leaned towards it. His body, now entirely made up of that oily black smoke, slipped into that narrow crack, and he easily slithered across the rough stone on

either side. For a moment, he was on both sides of the massive pillar, stretched to no more than a narrow thread of barely held-together essence, before with a final pull, he forced himself through the other side. As he slid through that tiny crack in the dark basalt, memories assaulted him, visions varying from the waving trees of his youth to the violent, painful eternity of his decades after being joined to the creature now waiting on the other side for him. Still caught deep in the trance, he slipped up, curling into a thick cloud, and edged closer to his hideous counterpart, carried by an unfelt breeze.

With a terrifying jolt, he realized that he did not know how to reform, and the mist shuddered, twisting in the cold air. Unable to shout, each attempted breath forced from his diffused lungs simply distended a tendril of his smoky form towards the sickly demon. With a curious cant of its head, he reached up, lightly touching the tip of one wisping trail, and Ashmer felt something cold slither out of him and through that point of brief contact. The whispers at the very edge of his hearing went entirely silent, and in that hushed moment, he felt as if something deep inside him crouched, biding its time. Frantic, he scrabbled for the memory of his past life that would offer him the key to undoing what he had just done to his body, and bits and pieces of insane, esoteric thoughts and insights drifted through his mind. As he attempted each, he twisted with pain as

he felt something cold and dry within him drag like a ship's anchor across the bottom of the ocean. Somehow, he managed to piece together enough of his disjointed recollections to begin clotting that oily mist back into the shape it had previously known. Just as the first knot of roiling, oily black mist had compressed and begun to reform, he felt the well of whatever power he had drawn upon run suddenly and painfully dry. His focus faltered, and his form wavered, again dissipating into the loose, floating wisp that was his diffused body. The pain was extraordinary, and he briefly wondered at the ability of an insubstantial form such as his to feel such intense agony. Then, he began to thin even further, and there was a sharp wrench at the edge of his mind as something was torn away, drifting away in the cold wind. Panicked, he felt something else wrench away, and his next thought was little more than a twisted conglomeration of tattered concepts that filled his clouded mind with insane, violent images. That hard, smooth corner of his mind that annotated, collated and reported on every unrelated minutiae brought to its attention remarked that he was about to die. Little by little, more of him separated from the rest, and he turned his diffused attention to the hideous creature that stood nearby, his milky orbs affixed on him. As if understanding, it took a step forward, and its ribs distended in a great, sucking breath.

Ashmer felt himself drawn in with Ras'valyra's cold, sputtering breath, and the oily smoke that made up his body filtered through the narrow slits that dotted its emaciated form, as well as into the twin gaps where a nose should have been. He felt a dizzying kind of euphoria, and the cloying smell of honey overtook him, intensifying until it became the gagging stench of absolute decay. If he had had a stomach at that moment, he would have vomited, but instead simply seeped into the spaces between those alien organs. The oily smoke that was his body coiled in a thin, wispy tendril, and he briefly struggled, squeezing himself into any empty gaps he could find. That soon proved not an option as Ras'valyra took another slow, deep breath in through its slender, distended lungs, and the black mist that was Ashmer slid into those thin sacs. With that twist of his insubstantial form, the rest of him dissolved, and he was briefly dizzy as he was drawn into the myriad grotesque knots of tough muscle and glistening flesh that made up the emaciated creature's innards. After a moment, a wet coolness settled onto him, and there was a soft sputtering as one of those clotted organs clenched, and he was forced to distend with it. He slid down the length of the bony demon's arm, and as he slipped into the last empty gap in Ras'valyra's body, he became still, settling between the black bones and the thin, translucent flesh. He felt himself convulse briefly as the creature moved, leaning into a steady stalking stride towards

the sheltering overhang. Ashmer's vision was a darkened blot, drawn nearly to a point as he was forced against the ceiling of Ras'valyra's skull with each loping stride.

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It was a curious thing, to discover that deeply-entrenched point of view. It wasn't until this moment that I realized how truly narrow that view had become. For those decades, I had believed that Ras'valyra and I had been truly joined, only to discover in the next two hundred that I was fatally wrong. I am grateful, now, for whatever force had deigned to spare enough of its attention to demonstrate, with excruciating precision, how separate Ashmer and Ras'valyra truly were. In truth, in those decades, I was neither, little more than a collection of twisted thoughts, caught between two severing forces that would have each, alone, been sufficient to rule my aging corpse. For the first hundred years of my imprisonment in that other place, I found myself reduced to shameful, wailing regret, wishing that Ras'valyra had simply cast me adrift from my body and taken it, as it had intended. Every ounce of Ashmer was brought forth and examined, weighed, in that blasted place, just as every piece of Ras'valyra was brought before me, and summarily judged. It was a vast undertaking, made the more difficult for our mutual disassembling, and I was sure that it and I were doomed to spend an eternity together, sorting through the myriad twisted strands

of each other's very essence. After the first hundred years of untying the knots and examining every inch of that threaded viscera that had once been Ras'valyra.

Then, he felt himself approach a darkened place somewhere deep in the form he now bodily occupied. As the oily grains of his material form touched to what might have been the thing's nerves, sharp jerks of force arced through him, and his vision darkened further. As Ras'valyra moved, he felt his own body move, and soon, instead of the dark basalt maze all around him, he strode alone through a grey wood. The boughs of the trees hung lifelessly in the still air, their leaves withered, twisted claws at the end of each gnarled branch. The bark was gouged in long, peeling gashes, and the pulp of the trunks beneath was a mass of writhing maggots. The corpses of fallen birds littered the trail, and Ashmer kicked them aside as he loped up the gentle slope. There was something terribly familiar about the forest, but no place as grim as this existed in his memory, prior to his joining with the creature he knew he now occupied. In the distance, he heard a cacophonous avian shrieking, grating and guttural, and it echoed oddly through the mists that curled around the bases of the trees that dotted the rolling landscape. Soon, it concealed the ground entirely, and Ashmer's legs beneath his hips were entirely invisible as he waded towards that unknown destination. The sky above was high and grey, a

curtain of bright grey clouds drawn over, as if barely concealing the sun above that, and every grotesque detail of his rotting surroundings was brought out in sharp relief in that diffused light.

After a moment, he no longer felt the limp bodies of the bird carcasses underfoot, though the ground still crunched softly each time he put his weight down, and the mist seemed to seep through his clothing, leaving his skin wet beneath. The air itself was stale, and each breath was somehow entirely unsatisfying, as if just barely enough to keep his body moving without the visceral pleasure he remembered feeling with each deep breath. That was before, he realized, and again, there was that grating call, sounding eerily like a hideous, hysterical laugh. A great black bird launched itself from a grove at the base of the low hill to Ashmer's right, but vanished beneath the sparse tree line almost immediately as it dipped in an outstretched dive. It rose again much farther away, but he couldn't make out anything besides the great, powerfully-flapping wings of the huge creature. As he neared the crest of the hill, the trees came closer together, their limp boughs hanging wet and heavy over the trail as they crowded at its edges. Thick, gnarled roots snatched at his booted feet, and with each step, he felt something brittle break between them. Each step was a muffled crunch, and his breath came laboriously as the air became thinner, now bearing a thin, stagnant stench.

Ahead, the path bent, arcing left through the trees, and as he took it, the trees changed, their bark changing from that dirty charcoal grey to a pale white. Abruptly, he noticed that each had a subtle motion to it, and when he looked closer, he saw thousands of tiny worms clinging to the bark underneath, obscuring it entirely in a wriggling blanket of small, fat bodies. Ahead, even the boughs of the trees that hung over the trail drooped with the grotesque weight of that army of segmented bodies, and as he passed under them, one would occasionally drop from above, landing on his shoulder like a fat raindrop before bounding into the mist underfoot. The ground between the trees softened, first becoming churned mud, then small ponds of still, stagnant water, and as he reached the base of the hill, he trudged on soft, invisible ground through a wet waste of foul pools. Here and there, the mist that clung tight about his legs began to thin, and as it dissipated, he found that he walked on a carpet of thin, tiny porous bones. They crackled and broke underfoot, and he briefly suppressed the urge to vomit at the multitudes of those same, maggot-like worms that crawled through the gaps in the jagged soil, tunneling out of sight and emerging to wave their eyeless tips in the air. He was nearing his destination, he knew, and moved forward with unknowing certainty. Ahead, all of the trees faded away save for a few, leaving a small, shaded copse amidst the reeking swamp that spread contemptuously in every direction.

The mist cleared, and at its center, he saw the corpse of an over-sized crow, its porous ribs torn open and its viscera plainly visible in the stark iron light. Its heart, too small for its sprawling body, beat in small, furtive motions, occasionally loosing a spurt of dark blood into the well of its torn ribcage. In its beak was caught a small berry, white in color and capped with a tiny black stem. The crow briefly lifted its smashed wings, and its head turned, though it kept the berry held fast. Ras'valyra stood over it, and Ashmer drew to a halt a short distance away, his arms folding over his middle. Oddly enough, the carcass didn't smell, and as its throat bobbed and its lungs fluttered sickeningly, no sound came forth.

His brow furrowed, he looked to Ras'valyra, whose face was caught in a wide, black-toothed grin.

"Why didn't you eat the berry?" it asked him in its quiet rasp, and Ashmer felt an insistent tug, as if he had forgotten something terribly important. Still, the question made little sense to him, especially in this grey waste, and he simply stared questioningly at the emaciated creature for a long, lingering moment.

"What berry?" he finally asked, his eyes drawn to the white fruit held in the dying crow's beak. Its end was torturous to see, and it struggled again, as if railing against its inevitable fate. Still, the bare heart beat, and the lungs that cradled it fluttered as those ruined wings curled and uncurled.

Its throat bobbed again, as if to force a sound from its beak, but it remained eerily silent, save for the faint rustle of its tattered feathers across the crushed bones and wet, clotted soil beneath it.

Ras'valyra's only reply was a beckoning curl of its thin hand, and he stepped forward. He followed the gangly thing into a crouch beside the ripped bird, and Ras'valyra reached out, lightly touching the thick white berry held tenuously in its curved beak. Its eyes rolled in its skull, dried blood clotting them, and Ashmer saw it stare, wild-eyed, at the black-nailed fingertip held before it. Quietly, the demon almost lovingly stroked a finger the length of its beak, and its helpless struggle renewed as its lungs twitched, heaving silent breaths into its torn-open chest. Muscle glistened in the hard grey light as it twisted against anchoring bone, and the legs kicked, its claws curling into avian fists and uncurling to rake at the ground beneath. Briefly, those wide, blood-crustured eyes shot to Ashmer, as if pleading, and his lips twisted into a thick frown. Briefly, the visages of his former victims marched past in agonized succession, a series of torn bodies and faces contorted with terror and pain. With the recollection came that odd feeling that he had, again, forgotten something horribly important. Ras'valyra's laugh was a grating thing, and it reached out, a single black nail trailing through the frayed feathers at the crow's throat. It left a wide, bleeding gash in

its wake, and with a quiet gurgle, the thing finally died, its lifeblood spilling onto the bone beneath in a dark colorless spurt. The segmented worms made their way out of the broken bone beneath, their white bodies quickly stained dark and slick as they rolled in the sticky fluid, their eyeless tips touching lightly to the edge of that brutal gash.

"What berry?" Ashmer found himself asking Ras'valyra again, this time more insistent.

Ras'valyra met his intent stare with its milky, clouded orbs, and its black teeth showed as the edges of its lip-less mouth slowly spread in a wide, mirthless grin. It reached out and plucked the fat fruit from the corpse's beak. When he offered it to him, he noticed it was stained with the thing's blood, and he simply stared at it for a moment. After a lingering moment, he reached out and took it carefully. It was hard to the touch and its skin smooth and sticky. As he touched it, he felt the whisper of a memory as it seized him, and the image of this very same grove, though vibrant with the colors spring, slammed against the window of his mind. This same berry had been held in the beak of a crow, left similarly splayed, and it had offered it to him as it died slowly. He had seen the furtive motion prior to finding the bird, and believed that whatever had clawed this crow to death had stolen away at his approach. Its innards were half-eaten, and its wings crushed.

With its dying breath, it laid the berry on the ground

before Ashmer's hand, and he remembered plucking it up, curious at the smooth, hard touch of the sticky thing. It had smelled softly of sweet honey and vanilla, and as he had run the nail of his thumb over the thick flesh, the scent had intensified until he was dizzyed by the pleasant wash of it. Cloudy white juice had run from that tiny wound, and tingled on his skin just as a chill breeze had flitted among the trees. A shiver crept down his spine, and he returned to his study of the gruesome corpse, careful not to carelessly crush the unique fruit in his hand. When he was preparing to leave, return home and tell of what he had found, he quietly studied the fat white berry in his hand, its flesh sticking lightly to his as the juice dried between them.

Then, in a moment of utter, childlike curiosity, he ate it. The flesh itself was sharp and stringent to the taste, though it soon faded for a dizzyingly sweet flavor as the pulp melted on his tongue. He swallowed the whole thing, pit and all, and flicked the thin black stem to the ground. Briefly, he wondered at why he would have ever done such a reckless thing, but brushed it aside. He would look up what manner of berry it was when he returned home, and it had tasted so good!

The memory faded swiftly, along with the entirety of the vision, and Ashmer found himself looking out at a serene, ash-layered corridor of dark stone. The sky roiled darkly, and the deep, indigo light made his eyes ache. When he reached up to

scratch at the corner of one ash-choked eye, he noticed his own hand - sickly, translucent skin clung to his sinewy muscle and black bone, and the tip of each finger was distended in a hard black claw. He curled it briefly into a fist, reveling at the alien feel of something that clenched under his arm, sending a rush of cloudy fluid through the veins beneath his flesh. As the ash fall ceased, leaving the cold air still once more, he rose, and, alone in Ras'valyra's body, picked his way through the labyrinthine trails between those great pillars of stone. With each step, something stirred in him, and he felt his unfamiliar organs move of their own accord beneath his thin black ribs.

"Ras'valyra..." he heard a faint, melodic whisper, just at the edge of hearing. As he stopped in a small clearing, where the pillars had begun to space out, leaving enough room to walk between them aside from a single, winding trail across the blasted waste, he realized that his own body was nowhere to be found. His head swam dizzyingly, and he felt something crawl beneath his translucent skin. Suddenly, his vision darkened to inky blots once more, and he felt that body move of its own accord as a sinuous trickle of odd, unfamiliar emotions filtered into his mind. The experience was euphoric, and he swam in eddying tides of oddly-skewed emotions. Slowly, his vision darkened, and as it finally went black, all sense faded from him entirely.

When I awoke, Ras'valyra sat at the base of that enigmatic peak we sought. From that distance, we found it was not stone at all, but a mountain of shattered rubble. The smashed detritus of dead cities, mortared with crushed bone, rose like a great fist towards that violent sky. The ground there was uneven, and thick, viscous pools of ashen acid smoked and spat where they flowed contemptuously from wells somewhere deep in the torn earth. The black clouds overhead parted over that peak in long gashes, bleeding bright light from the flames above onto the shattered ground, and as I looked upon that burning surface hanging so close overhead, I knew we had arrived in the place where he and I had denied death, and later fought for my body. It was an odd experience, sharing a body without sharing our minds, though as we spoke in that silent language, and I was once again entwined with this thing that had shared my fate for so long, I realized just how little I knew of the creature that had occupied my very being for so many years. When my mind surfaced once more, I continued my silent exchange with Ras'valyra. Over time, I slowly felt my mind drawn close against the rattling workings of its twisted consciousness, and, having gone without a body of my own for so long, I found myself settling into this formless state.

Ras'valyra Ashmer sat cross-legged, in the same position it had held for what might have been a decade, atop a flat boulder

at the foot of the huge mountain of ancient ruin behind it. At its back, a ridge made up of the shattered remains of towering columns rose against the spine of the peak, and the gaps in it whistled quietly with the passage of the wind. Its milky orbs were affixed on the horizon, where huge black storm clouds had gathered, and briefly, one of the distended corners of its dual minds noted that the wind was blowing towards it, and picking up speed. Brief terror bubbled to the surface in the narrow space between the melded beings that occupied its emaciated form, and was immediately shattered, raked into a cold, hissing rage at the swiftly-approaching violence. The sky overhead roiled violently, and wide chasms opened in the clouds there, offering Ras'valyra a wider view of that curious burning ceiling. Then, its black teeth bared, it glanced back to the storm that raked closer across the shattered plain to the south. A tornado reached down in a twisting finger and, as it touched lightly to the ground, raked a great gash through the stone there, tossing massive boulders and sharp spurs of basalt into the air. Violet lightning sundered its depths, and the roar of the thunder that rolled across the empty expanse to Ras'valyra Ashmer was deafening. Even at this distance, the ethereal vision offered by his pupil-less orbs threw every detail into sharp relief against the backdrop of the distant, hazy horizon. Black rain flew from the cloud in a torrential downpour, and another trio of the fat twisters dropped from above, similarly ploughing deep into the

already broken earth below.

Briefly, it considered the pools of ashen acid that gathered about the foot of the mountain, then back at the awe-inspiring violence of that approaching maelstrom. After a short while longer, it stretched from horizon to horizon, and he was close enough to see the oily steam rising from the ground wherever those fat drops of rain hit. They hissed and spat as they touched the cold stone beneath, audible only as a gathering whisper that reached with sibilant certainty to the base of the mountain Ras'valyra sat beneath. A cursory glance was spared for the labyrinth that sprawled away to the southwest, though it knew that nothing there would offer it shelter from the sheer violence that approached. There was an odd tugging sensation at the very edge of its melded consciousness, and it felt an odd sensation arise somewhere deep in its emaciated belly. Its tertiary organs hissed and sputtered with their incessant, ragged breathing, and the cloudy fluid that kept its body in motion leaked from the slits in its front and sides in thin rivulets. It drew a cold breath through the three distended sacs that might have been lungs in a human, and the air dissipated through his smoke-infused form.

Then, in a flash, it felt an oddly mortal memory filter through its shared mind, and it briefly pulled it apart, toying with it from various angles as the various sights, sounds, smells, and underlying context of the recollection seeped

through that quiet gap between its still minds. It remembered the euphoric experience of dissolution, and the invulnerability offered by formlessness. Quietly, it uncoiled, and rose, stalking towards the nearest stagnant, hissing pool. Again, purple lightning lit everything sharply for a moment, and a split second later, thunder hammered across the plain. Small stones leapt from the ground with the sheer violence of the crashing blow, and as Ras'valyra knelt, reaching one claw to the ashen pool at its feet, it looked up, noting the menacing closeness of the storm as it loomed nearer.

The creature dipped one claw into the acidic pool at its feet, and the myriad threads of sensation that filtered through the vessels that served as nerves for the otherworldly thing lit up, mirroring it. It captured it there, letting the experience tingle through its body. Then, without a word, it slid into the pool, reveling in the hissing pain that followed as its body and minds dissolved entirely.

A few moments later, that storm swept out entirely just short of the mountain, the black clouds dissipating in a windblown rush.

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Ashmer Ras'valyra set the quill aside and closed the journal as he finished. Its pages were etched in myriad hands, interspersed with the runic forms of various numerological symbols, and at some point during the writing he had scratched a series of kalsu runes into its binding. Without a word, he gathered the materials, quietly replaced each where he had found, and, with the journal held in one sickly hand, stalked from the Sanctum.

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Sabeine's black eyes turned up, and she briefly twisted against her bonds as Ashmer drew a deep gash in his wrist with the the thin blade of his athame. His black blood spilled generously from the wound, and he chanted in a soft rasp as it ran onto the small black journal beneath it. It sizzled, hissing vehemently, and the leather was eaten away as that sticky fluid seeped into it. Soon, the bowl was filled with little more than a pulpy mixture of blood and dissolved paper. Inky blots swam beneath the vampire's translucent flesh as he grasped the bowl with both sickly hands, and it gave another hissing sputter, a single bubble rising to the surface to pop contemptuously. As he moved, the liquid moved thinly, like oily water, with none of its former thickness.

"Drink," he commanded in a soft rasp, the edge of the bowl lifted against Sabeine's lips.

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