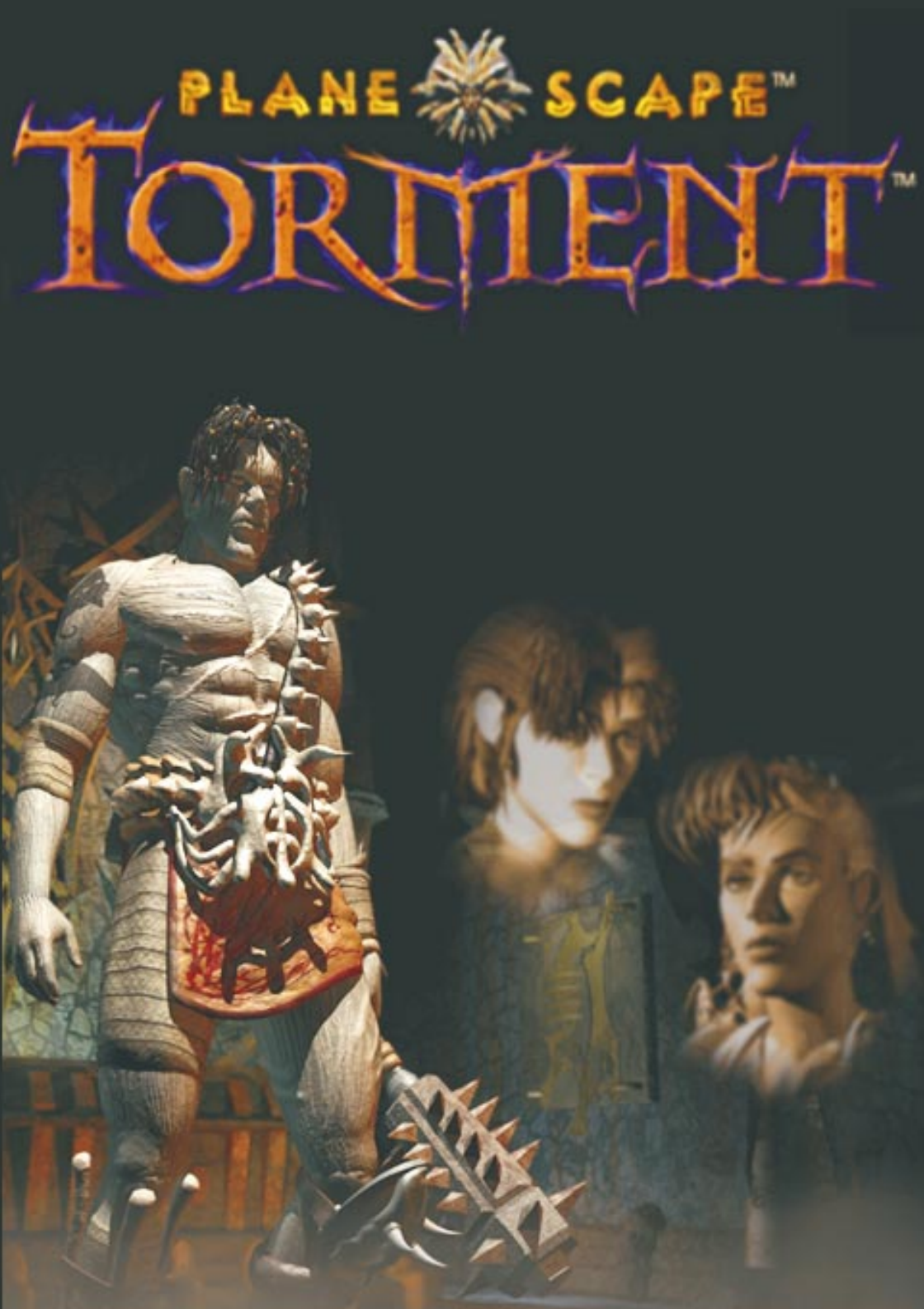
PLANESCAPE™ TORMENT™



PLANESCAPE
TORMENT

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

Original text by Chris Avellone and Colin McComb
Novelization by Rhyss Hess

Original text by Chris Avellone and Colin McComb
Novelization by Rhyss Hess

This novel has been composed from text copied from the computer game Planescape: Torment by Black Isle Studios. It was turned into a novel by Rhyss Hess, and typeset by Lucian Wischik. (There is a separate novel called just "Torment", based on the plot and characters of the computer game, and written by Ray and Valerie Vallesse). Rhyss writes:

"Even after playing Planescape: Torment several times, I found I was still interested in going back and replaying some scenes, just to read through the excellent dialog again. What I really would have liked would have been a listing of the dialogs in the game, which brought about the project you are reading here."

"I decided not to literally pull the dialog trees from the game, since in a linear format like this it would have made for very awkward reading. Instead, I followed one path through the game, creating a written story from the source material. The quoted speech, along with much of the other material, is taken directly from the game and only lightly edited."

"It is possible to read the entire, continuous story. I have suppressed much of the combat in the game to concentrate on the story and the interaction with the characters, and some sections and characters have been entirely omitted. Even so, the entire document runs to over 150,000 words. It is also possible to skip to certain sections, re-reading selected portions of the story, hopefully allowing you a new chance to appreciate the writing, or perhaps discovering a dialog option you had not investigated before."

"If by chance you are reading this without first having played Planescape: Torment, and what you read is of any interest at all, get the game and play it; the actual game, including excellent voice-acting, music, art and game system, is a much richer experience."

"I would ask that if this document is distributed in any form that it be kept intact and unchanged, and that no fee be charged in association with such distribution.
Thanks to the entire team at Black Isle which worked on Planescape: Torment, especially those responsible for the story and dialog."

The Mortuary.....1
Deionarra.....14
The Hive.....20
Morte, Part I.....29
Hive Market.....31
Mazed.....38
Smoldering Corpse.....42
Dak'kon, Part I.....52
Ragpickers' Square.....56
Buried Village.....66
Unbroken Circle Of Zerthimon, Part I.....74
Weeping Stone Catacombs.....80
Dead Nations.....86
The Fate Of Soego.....92
The Silent King.....93
Drowned Nations.....98
The Tomb.....100
Pharod.....104
Xachariah, Part I.....110
Dak'kon, Part II.....114
Xachariah, Part II.....119
Annah, Part I.....122
Chaos Dogs Barking.....128
Alley Of Lingering Sighs.....134
Master Of The Bones.....138
Unbroken Circle Of Zerthimon, Part II.....144
Lower Ward.....150
Coaxmetal.....163
Clerks' Ward.....167
Ignus.....174
Fall-From-Grace, Part I.....183
Brothel Of Slaking Intellectual Lusts.....188
Nenny Nine-Eyes.....191
Marissa.....194
Kesai-Serris.....196
Kimasxi Addertongue.....199
Dolora.....203
Yves The Tale-Chaser.....208

Art And Curio Galleria.....218
Curiosity Shop.....223
Aelwyn.....231
Civic Festhall.....236
Festhall Lectures.....241
Public Sensoriums.....253
Tieing Loose Ends.....260
Rubikon.....264
Nordom, Part I.....273
Quell.....277
Sensory Stone Trap.....282
Deionarra Sensory Stone.....285
Message From Ravel.....291
Fall-From-Grace, Part II.....294
Nordom, Part II.....304
Dodecahedron Journal.....313
Advocate Iannis.....319
Preparations.....326
Ravel Puzzlewell, Part I.....332
Ravel Puzzlewell, Part II.....345
Unbroken Circle Of Zerthimon, Part III.....357
Curst.....361
Trias.....366
Vhailor.....371
Annah, Part II.....379
Fhjull.....382
Pillar Of Skulls.....388
Morte, Part II.....397
Carceri.....402
Trias The Betrayer.....404
Sigil.....408
Mortuary Portal.....411
Fortress Of Regrets.....416
Companions' Fate.....419
Trial Of Impulse.....423
Maze Of Reflections.....426
Escape.....440
The Transcendent One.....443

THE MORTUARY

A Dream: Lying on a slab, in a mortuary. A pillar covered with names. Racks of skulls. A symbol. A woman. A ghost.

I awoke, on a slab, in what was obviously a mortuary. As I levered myself up, I caught movement from the corner of my eye. A floating skull. No, I realized as it spoke: a floating, *talking*, skull.

"Hey, chief. You okay? You playing corpse or you putting the blinds on the Dusties? I thought you were a deader for sure." I was confused, and had trouble focusing on what the skull was saying.

"Wh…? Who are you?"

"Uh… who am *I?* How about *you* start? Who're you?"

"I… don't know. I can't remember." I realized that I didn't remember anything about myself.

"You can't remember your *name?* Heh. Well, NEXT time you spend a night in this berg, go easy on the bub. Name's Morte. I'm trapped in here, too."

"Trapped?"

"Yeah, since you haven't had time to get your legs yet, here's the chant: I've tried all the doors, and this room is locked tighter than a chastity belt." I needed to orient myself, and find out from the skull where I was.

"We're locked in… where? What is this place?"

"It's called the 'Mortuary'… it's a big black structure with all the architectural charm of a pregnant spider." Could I have died? Did that explain the lack of memories?

" 'The Mortuary?' What… am I dead?"

"Not from where I'm standing. You got scars a-plenty, though… looks like some berk painted you with a knife. All the more reason to give this place the laugh before whoever carved you up comes back to finish the job."

"Scars? How bad are they?"

"Well… the carvings on your chest aren't TOO bad… but the ones on your back…" Morte paused. "Say, looks like you got a whole tattoo gallery on your back, chief. Spells out something…"

I looked down at myself, and realized the truth about the scarring. They covered every visible bit of skin. There was a tattoo on my arm as well, the same one from my dream. I wondered what was on my back, though.

"Tattoos on my back? What do they say?"

"Heh! Looks like you come with directions…" Morte cleared his throat. "Let's see… it starts with… 'I know you feel like you've been drinking a few kegs of Styx wash, but you need to CENTER yourself. Among your possessions is a JOURNAL that'll shed some light on the dark of the matter. PHAROD can fill you in on the rest of the chant, if he's not in the dead-book already.' "

"Pharod…? Does it say anything else?"

"Yeah, there's a bit more…" Morte paused. "Let's see… it goes on…"

'Don't lose the journal or we'll be up the Styx again. And whatever you do, DO NOT tell anyone WHO you are or WHAT happens to you, or they'll put you on a quick pilgrimage to the crematorium. Do what I tell you: READ the journal, then FIND Pharod.'

"No wonder my back hurts; there's a damn novel written there. As for that journal I'm supposed to have with me… was there one with me while I was lying here?"

"No… you were stripped to the skins when you arrived here. 'Sides, looks like you got enough of a journal penned on your body." The skull wasn't being that much help.

"What about Pharod? Do you know him?"

"Nobody I know… but then again, I don't know many people. Still, SOME berk's got to know where to find Pharod… uh, once we get out of here, that is."

"How *do* we get out of here?"

"Well, all the doors are locked, so we'll need the key. Chances are, one of the walking corpses in this room has it."

"Walking corpses?" I queried.

"Yeah, the Mortuary keepers use dead bodies as cheap labor. The corpses are dumb as stones, but they're harmless, and won't attack you unless you attack first." The thought of killing, for some reason, made me uneasy.

"Is there some other way? I don't want to kill them just for a key."

"What, you think it's going to hurt their feelings? They're DEAD. But if you want a bright side to this: if you kill them, at least they'll have a rest before their keepers raise them up to work again."

"Well, all right… I'll take one of them down and get the key."

I approached one of the zombies mindlessly moving about the room. The corpse stopped and stared blankly at me. I could see the number "782" carved into his forehead, and his lips were stitched closed. The faint smell of formaldehyde emanated from the body.

"This looks like the lucky petitioner here, chief. Look… he's got the key there in his hand." I didn't need Morte's help to see that. It was holding the key tightly in its left hand, its thumb and forefinger locked around it in a death grip. I probably needed to hack the corpse's hand off to free the key.

I must have a weapon to get the key. I searched the drawers in the room I was in until I came up with a scalpel. Morte, who was following my every move, chimed in.

"All right, you found a scalpel! Now, go get those corpses… and don't worry, I'll stay back and provide valuable tactical advice."

"Maybe you could *help* me, Morte."

"I WILL be helping you. Good advice is hard to come by." I felt sudden anger towards the jabbering skull.

"I meant help in attacking the *corpse*."

"Me? I'm a romantic, not a soldier. I'd just get in the way."

"When I attack this corpse, you better be right there with me or you'll be the next thing that I plunge this scalpel in."

"Eh… all right. I'll help you." I approached the zombie again.

"I need that key, corpse… looks like you're not long for this world." Several thrusts with the scalpel quickly turned the creature into a now unmoving corpse, and I used the key I had obtained to open one of the doors of the room.

"Some advice, chief: I'd keep it quiet from here on — no need to put any more corpses in the dead book than necessary… especially the femmes. Plus, killing them might draw the caretakers here."

"I don't think you mentioned it before… *who* are these caretakers?"

"They call themselves the 'Dustmen.' You can't miss 'em: They have an obsession with black and rigor mortis of the face. They're an addled bunch of ghoulish death-worshippers; they believe everybody should die… sooner better than later." I wondered about the caretakers.

"I'm confused… why do these Dustmen care if I escape?"

"Weren't you listening?! I said the Dusties believe EVERYBODY'S got to die, sooner better than later. You think the corpses you've seen are happier in the dead book than out of it?" Once started, I found I was full of questions.

"The corpses here… where did they all come from?"

"Death visits the Planes every day, chief. These lummoxes are all that's left of the poor sods who sold their bodies to the caretakers after death."

"Before you said something about making sure I didn't kill any *female* corpses. Why?"

"Wh — are you *serious?* Look, chief, these dead chits are the last chance for a couple of hardy bashers like us. We need to be *chivalrous*… no hacking them up for keys, no lopping their limbs off, things like that." I couldn't understand where Morte was leading.

"Last Chance? What are you *talking* about?"

"Chief, THEY're dead, WE're dead… see where I'm going? Eh? Eh?" I could now understand, but I had difficulty believing.

"You can't be serious."

"Chief, we already got an opening line with these limping ladies. We've *all* died at least once: we'll have something to talk about. They'll appreciate men with our kind of death experience."

"But… wait… didn't you say before that I'm *not* dead?"

"Well… all right, *you* might not be dead, but *I* am. And from where I'm standing, I wouldn't mind sharing a coffin with some of these fine, sinewy cadavers I see here." Morte started clacking his teeth, as if in anticipation. " 'Course, the caretakers would have to part with them first, and that's not likely…"

Morte continued, "Look, chief. You're still a little addled after your kiss with death. So two bits of advice for you: one, if you got questions, *ask* me, all right?"

"All right… I'll… try to remember that."

"Second, if you're *half* as forgetful as you seem to be, start writing stuff down — whenever you come across something that *might* be important, jot it down so you don't forget."

"If I had that journal I was *supposed* to have with me, I'd do that." I felt a touch of anger at whoever had removed the journal.

"Start a new one, then, chief. No loss. There's plenty of parchment and ink around here to last you."

"Hmmmm. All right. It couldn't hurt… I'll make a new one, then."

"Use it to keep track of your movements. If you ever start to get cloudy on important things, like who you are… or more importantly, who *I* am… use it to refresh your memory."

The next room had more of the … zombies. They were wandering about, most obviously on tasks set by the Dustmen. One in particular, though, caught my attention. The male corpse was lumbering along a triangular path. Once it reached one of the corners of the triangle, it paused, then turned and staggered towards the next corner. "965" was tattooed on the side of its skull. As I approached, it halted and stared at me.

"Heh. Looks like someone forgot to tell this sod to stop walking the Rule-of-Three," Morte commented.

"What do you mean?"

"These corpses don't have much left in the attic, so they can't do more than one task at a time… when they're told to do something, they'll keep doing it until someone tells them to stop. This poor sod probably finished some task, and they forgot to tell him."

"The 'Rule-of-Three.' What did you mean by that?"

"Eh? Well, the Rule-of-Three is one of those 'laws' about the Planes, about things tending to happen in threes… or everything's composed of three parts… or there's always three choices, and so on and so forth."

"You don't sound like you hold much faith in it."

"It's a load of wash, if you ask me. If you look for a number, any number, and try to attach some great meaning to it, you're going to find plenty of coincidences."

I left the corpse tracing its triangular path and moved into the next room. In the center of the room was the first living person I had seen, obviously one of the Dustmen. He was writing in a huge book.

The scribe looked very old… his skin was wrinkled and had a slight trace of yellow, like old parchment. Charcoal-gray eyes lay within an angular face, and a large white beard flowed down the front of his robes like a waterfall. His breathing was ragged and irregular, but even his occasional coughing did not slow the scratching of his quill pen. The book he was writing must have contained thousands of names. As I approached him, he did not look up from what he was doing.

Morte interrupted, "Whoa, chief! What are you doing?!"

"I was going to speak with this scribe. He might know something about how I got here."

"Look, rattling your bone-box with Dusties should be the LAST thing —"

Before Morte could finish his rant, the scribe began coughing violently. After a moment or two, the coughing spell died down, and the scribe's breathing resumed its ragged wheeze.

"And we *especially* shouldn't be swapping the chant with sick Dusties. C'mon, let's leave. The quicker we give this place the laugh, the bet —" Before Morte could finish, the scribe's gray eyes flickered to me.

"The weight of years hangs heavy upon me, Restless One." He placed down his quill. "…but I do not yet count deafness among my ailments." I wondered if he could help.

" 'restless One?' Do you know me?"

"Know you? I…" There was a trace of bitterness in the scribe's voice as he spoke. "I have *never* known you, Restless One. No more than you have known yourself." He was silent for a moment. "For you have forgotten, have you not?"

"Who *are* you?"

"As always, the question. And the wrong question, as always." He bowed slightly, but the movement suddenly sent him into a bout of coughing. "I…" He paused for a moment, caught his breath. "I… am Dhall."

"What is this place?"

"You are in the Mortuary, Restless One. Again you have… come…" Before he could finish, Dhall broke into a fit of coughing. After a moment, he calmed himself and his breathing resumed its ragged wheeze. "…this is the waiting room for those about to depart the shadow of this life."

"This is where the dead are brought to be interred or cremated. It is our responsibility as Dustmen to care for the dead, those who have left this shadow of life and walk the path to True Death." Dhall's voice dropped in concern. "Your wounds must have exacted a heavy toll if you do not recognize this place. It is almost your home."

"Shadow of life?"

"Yes, a shadow. You see, Restless One, this life… it is not real. Your life, my life, they are shadows, flickerings of what life once was. This 'life' is where we end up *after* we die. And here we remain… trapped. Caged. Until we can achieve the True Death."

"True Death?"

"True Death is non-existence. A state devoid of reason, of sensation, of passion." Dhall coughed, then gave a ragged breath. "A state of purity."

"Perhaps you can explain why the Dustmen want me dead."

Dhall sighed. "It is said there are souls who can never attain the True Death. Death has forsaken them, and their names shall never be penned in the Dead Book. To awake from death as you have done… suggests you are one of these souls. Your existence is unacceptable to our faction."

" 'Unacceptable?' That doesn't sound like it leaves me in a good position."

"You must understand. Your existence is a blasphemy to them. Many of our faction would order you cremated… if they were aware of your affliction."

"You're a Dustman. But you don't seem to be in favor of killing me. Why not?"

"Because forcing our beliefs upon you is not just. You must give up this shadow of life on your own, not because we force you to." Dhall looked about to break into another coughing jag, but he managed to hold it in with some effort. "As long as I remain at my post, I will protect your right to search for your own truth."

"You say that I have been here more than once. How is it that the Dustmen do not recognize me?"

"I am a scribe, a cataloger of all the shells that come to the Mortuary." Dhall broke into a fit of coughing, then steadied himself. "Only I see the faces of those that lie upon our slabs. The dark of your existence lies safe with me."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I know scant little of you, Restless One. I know little more of those that have journeyed with you and who now lie in our keeping." Dhall sighed. "I ask that you no longer ask others to join with you, Restless One — where you walk, so walks misery. Let your burden be your own."

"There are others who have journeyed with me? And they are here?"

"Do you not know the woman's corpse interred in the memorial hall below? I had thought that she had traveled with you in the past…" Dhall looked like he was about to start coughing again, then caught his breath. "Am I mistaken?

"Where is her body?" I asked, even as I wondered how I knew her.

"The northwest memorial hall on the floor below us. Check the biers there… her name should be on one of the memorial plaques. Mayhap that will revive your memory."

"Are any others interred here who journeyed with me?"

"Doubtless there are, but I know not their names, nor where they lie. One such as you has left a path many have walked, and few have survived." Dhall gestured around me. "All dead come here. Some must have traveled with you once.

"How did I get here?"

"Your moldy chariot ferried you to the Mortuary, Restless One. You would think you were royalty based on the number of loyal subjects that lay stinking and festering upon the cart that carried you."

"Your body was somewhere in the middle of the heap, sharing its fluids with the rest of the mountain of corpses." Dhall broke into another violent fit of coughing, finally catching his breath minutes later. "Your 'seneschal' Pharod was, as always, pleased to accept a few moldy coppers to dump the lot of you at the Mortuary gate."

"Who is this Pharod?"

"He is a… collector of the dead." Dhall drew a ragged breath, then continued. "We have such people in our city that scavenge the bodies of those that have walked the path of True Death and bring them to us so that they may be interred properly."

"Doesn't sound like you like Pharod much."

"There are some I respect, Restless One." Dhall took a ragged breath and steadied himself. "Pharod is not one of them. He wears his ill repute like a badge of honor and takes liberties with the possessions of the dead. He is a knight of the post, cross-trading filth of the lowest sort." He paused a moment, frowning at the thought of Pharod.

"All Pharod brings to our walls come stripped of a little less of their dignity than they possessed in life. Pharod takes whatever he may pry from their stiffening fingers."

"Did this Pharod take anything from *me*?"

Dhall paused, considering. "Most likely. Are you missing anything… especially anything of value?" His voice dipped as he frowned. "Not that Pharod would take exception to anything that wasn't physically grafted to your body, and sometimes even that's not enough to give his greedy mind pause."

"I am missing a journal."

"A journal? If it was of any value, then it is likely it lies in Pharod's hands." I now had another reason to find this man.

"Where can I find this Pharod?"

"If events persist as they have, Restless One, you have a much greater chance of Pharod finding you and bringing you to us again before you find whatever ooze puddle he wallows in this time."

"Nevertheless, I must find him." I said, annoyance edging my voice.

A slight warning creeped into Dhall's tone. "Do not seek out Pharod, Restless One. I am certain that it will simply come full circle again, with you none the wiser and Pharod a few coppers richer. Accept death, Restless One. Do not perpetuate your circle of misery."

"I *have* to find him. Do you know where he is?"

Dhall was silent for a moment. When he finally spoke, he seemed to do so reluctantly. "I do not know under which gutterstone Pharod lairs at the moment, but I imagine that he can be found somewhere beyond the Mortuary gates, in the Hive. Perhaps someone there will know where you can find him."

"Earlier you mentioned my wounds. What did you mean?"

"Yes, the wounds that decorate your body… they look as if they would have sent a lesser man along the path of the True Death, yet it seems as if many of them have healed already." Dhall coughed violently for a moment, then steadied himself. "But those are only the surface wounds."

To my questioning look he replied, "I speak of the wounds of the mind. You have forgotten much, have you not? Mayhap your true wounds run much deeper than the scars that decorate your surface…" Dhall coughed again. "…but that is something that only you would know for certain."

For the first time, I considered Dhall as an individual, rather than as a talking information source. I felt a trace of concern.

"You sound ill. Are you not well?"

"I am close now to the True Death, Restless One. It will not be long before I pass beyond the Eternal Boundary and find the peace I have been seeking. I tire of this mortal sphere…" Dhall gave a ragged sigh. "The planes hold no more wonders for one such as I."

"I do not wish to live forever nor live again, Restless One. I could not bear it."

I stood for a moment, considering him and reveling in this new found feeling of 'concern.' But I needed to find a way out of the Mortuary.

"So be it. Farewell, Dhall." As I turned to leave, Dhall spoke.

"Know this: I do not envy you, Restless One. To be reborn as you would be a curse that I could not bear. You must come to terms with it. At some point, your path will return you here…" Dhall coughed, the sound rattling in his throat. "It is the way of all things flesh and bone."

I moved towards an exit at the far side of the room, nearly bowling over a female zombie.

This female corpse was making the rounds from slab to slab in the room. Her hair was knotted into a long braid and looped around her neck like a noose. Someone had stenciled the number "1096" onto her forehead, and her lips had been stitched closed.

Surprised, I mumbled "Uh…nice braid." The corpse did not respond, doubtless not even knowing I was there. As I made to move on, Morte spoke up.

"Psssst. You see the way she was looking at me? Huh? You see that? The way she was following the curve of my occipital bone?" I tried a joke, as far as I could remember the first I might ever have tried.

"You mean that blank-eyed beyond-the-grave stare?"

"Wha — are you BLIND?! She was scouting me out! It was shameless the way she WANTED me."

"I think you and your imagination need some time away from each other."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. When you've been dead as long as I have, you know the signals. They may be too SUBTLE for you to pick up on, but that's why I'll be spending MY nights with some luscious recently-dead chit while you're standing around goin' 'huh?' 'Whatzz goin' on?' 'Where's my muh-muh-memories?' "

"Whatever, Morte. Let's go."

As I moved on into another room, I noticed another of the Dustmen busy at a bier. She was a slight young woman with pale features. The sunken flesh around her cheeks and neck made her appear as if she were starving. She seemed intent on dissecting the corpse in front of her, prodding the chest with a finger.

I moved up to her, and said "Greetings."

The woman did not respond… she seemed too intent on the body in front of her. As I watched her work, I suddenly noticed her hands… her fingers were talons. They were darting in and out of the corpse's chest cavity like knives, removing organs.

"What's wrong with your hands?" I muttered, but Morte must have heard me, because he replied.

"Eh… she's a *tiefling*, chief. They got fiend blood in their veins, usually 'cause some ancestor of theirs shared knickers with one demon or another. Makes some of 'em addled in the head… and addled-looking, too."

Determined now, I tapped the woman, to get her attention.

The woman jumped and whipped around to face me… I could now see her eyes, a rotting yellow, with small orange dots for pupils. As she saw me, her expression changed from surprise to irritation, and she frowned at me.

She didn't seem to hear my attempted greetings, instead leaning forward, squinting, as if she couldn't quite make me out… whatever was wrong with her eyes must have made her terribly near-sighted.

"You —" She clacked her taloned fingers together, then made a strange motion with her hands. "Find THREAD and EM-balming juice, bring HERE, to Ei-Vene. Go — Go — Go."

I moved off, smiling to myself at her reaction. I tried to put her out of my mind, but couldn't shake the conviction that I had by implication undertaken a task, a task I didn't feel right about ignoring. Fortunately, a quick search of the biers and tables in the immediate area turned up the necessary items. When I returned to Ei-Vene, she was still dissecting the corpse's chest with her talons. Again, tapping her to get her attention, I gave her the thread and embalming fluid.

Without missing a beat, Ei-Vene snapped the thread from my hands and hooked it around one of her talons, then began sewing up the corpse's chest. She then took the embalming fluid, and began to apply a layer to the corpse.

Fascinated by her work, I stood and watched her. Within minutes, she was finished. She clicked her talons, then turned to face me. To my surprise, she extended her hand and dragged her talons along my arms and chest. I stiffened, playing my part as a zombie, ignoring Morte's comment, "Looks like you have a new friend, chief. You two need some time together, or…?"

As she traced my arms and chest, I suddenly noticed she seemed to be examining my scars. She withdrew her talons,

clicking them twice, then bent forward and examined some of the tattoos on my chest.

"Hmmph. Who write on you? Hivers do that? No respect for zomfies. Zomfies, not paintings." She sniffed, then poked one of my scars. "This one bad shape, many scars, no preserfs."

Her talons suddenly hooked into the thread I had brought her, and lightning-like, she jabbed another talon into the skin near one of my scars. The sensation was curiously painless as Ei-Vene began to stitch up my scars.

When she was done, she sniffed me, frowned, then stabbed her fingers into the embalming fluid. Within minutes, she had dabbed my body with the fluid… and strangely enough, it made me feel *better*. Morte couldn't resist a comment.

"This may be the second time in my life I'm thankful I don't have a nose."

Ei-Vene put the last touches on my body, gave me another sniff, nodded, then made a shooing motion with her talons. "Done. Go — go."

I stumbled around a bit more, then found a stairwell down to the ground floor. I saw another of the Dustmen, who I approached. To my dismay, he regarded me with an alert, stony gaze, saying "Are you lost?"

"No." I quickly replied.

"If you are not lost, what is your business here?"

"I was here for an internment, but there seems to be have been a mistake. " For one brief, giddy moment, I wanted to continue, to say the mistake was I was the internment, but I wasn't quite dead.

"Who was interred? Perhaps the services are taking place somewhere else in the Mortuary."

"That could be. Where are these other services taking place?"

"Several internment chambers line the perimeter of the Mortuary. They follow the curve of the wall on the first and second floors. Do you know the name of the deceased?" Trapped by my own prevarication, I could only give one answer.

"Yes," I replied. The Dustman was silent, obviously waiting for more. I had to make up something.

"The name is… uh, Adahn."

"That name is not familiar to me. Check with one of the guides at the front gate… they may be able to direct you better than I."

"Very well. I will do that. Farewell." I moved away, glad that the Dustman seemed so eager to return to his interrupted duties that no suspicions had been raised.

DEIONARRA

I moved about the perimeter of the first floor, among the memorial biers placed along the wall. Unfortunately, Dhall's directions were of little use, since I had no idea which way was northwest. I studied the name on each bier as I came to it, hoping one would trigger a memory, carefully staying far away from any other Dustmen.

I came to a bier with a plaque which read, "Here lies Deionarra."

Shockingly, an insubstantial phantasm of a woman appeared before the bier. A strikingly beautiful ghostly form, her arms crossed, her eyes closed. She had long, flowing hair, and her gown seemed stirred by some ethereal breeze. I realized I had seen her before. This ghost had appeared in my dream before I awoke in the Mortuary. As I watched, she stirred slightly, and her eyes flickered.

Her eyes slowly opened, and she blinked in confusion for a moment, as if uncertain where she was. She looked around slowly, then saw me. Her tranquil face suddenly twisted into a snarl.

"You! What is it that brings *you* here?! Have you come to see first-hand the misery you have wrought? Perhaps in death I still hold some shred of use for you…?" Her voice dropped to a hiss. "…'my Love.' "

Surprised by her venom, I plaintively asked, "Who are you?" In a sudden change of emotion, the spirit made a begging motion with her hands.

"How can it be that the thieves of the mind continue to steal my name from your memory? Do you not *remember* me, my Love?" The ghost stretched out her arms. "Think…" Her voice became desperate again. "…the name *Deionarra* must evoke some memory within you."

"I *think* I feel the stirrings of memory… tell me more. Perhaps your words shall chase the shadows from my mind, Deionarra."

"Oh, at last the fates show mercy! Even death cannot chase me from your mind, my Love! Do you not see? Your memories

shall return! Tell me how I can help you, and I shall!" There was one main question on my mind.

"Do you know who I am?"

"You are one both blessed and cursed, my Love. And you are one who is never far from my thoughts and heart."

" 'Blessed and cursed?' What do you mean?"

"The nature of your curse should be apparent, my Love. Look at you." She pointed at me. "Death rejects you. Your memories have abandoned you. Do you not pause and wonder why?"

"Memories aside… and assuming death has rejected me… why is that a curse?"

"I do not doubt your ability to rise from the dead. I do believe that every incarnation weakens your thoughts and memories. You claim you have lost your memory. Perhaps it is a side effect of countless deaths? If so, what more will you lose in successive deaths? If you lose your mind, you will not even know enough to realize that you cannot die. You shall truly be doomed." I wondered how many times I had awoken in this Mortuary.

" 'Countless deaths?' How long has this been going on?"

"I do not truly know. Except that it has gone on long enough."

"What else can you tell me about myself?"

"I know that you once claimed you loved me and that you would love me until death claimed us both. I believed that, never knowing the truth of who you were, what you were."

"And what am I?"

"You… I… cannot…" She suddenly froze, and spoke slowly, carefully, as if her voice frightened her. "The truth is this: you are one who dies many deaths. These deaths have given the knowing of all things mortal, and in your hand lies the spark of life… and death. Those that die near you carry a trace of themselves that you can bring forth…"

As Deionarra spoke the words, a crawling sensation welled up in the back of my skull… I suddenly felt compelled to look at my hand. As I lifted it up, *looked* at it, I could SEE the blood coursing sluggishly through my arm, pouring into my muscles, and in turn, giving strength to my bones…

And I knew Deionarra was *right.* I suddenly remembered how to coax the dimmest spark of life from a body, and bring it forth… the thought both horrified and intrigued me.

"Can you tell me where I am?" I asked.

"Where are you? Why, you are here with me, my Love… as in the times when life was something both of us shared. Now it is the Eternal Boundary that separates us."

" 'Eternal Boundary?' "

Deionarra sounded saddened. "It is a barrier I fear you shall never cross, my Love. It is the barrier between your life and what remains of mine…"

As I was about to ask Deionarra about escaping this place, it caught in my throat. It occurred to me that if I told her I was looking for an escape route, she might feel I was abandoning her. I needed to be delicate about it.

"Deionarra, I am in danger. Can you guide me to a place of safety? I shall return as soon as I can to speak to you again."

"In danger?" Deionarra looked concerned. "Of course, my Love. I will aid you any way I can…" She closed her eyes for a moment, and I watched an ethereal zephyr pass through her body, stirring her hair. After a moment, the zephyr died, and her eyes slowly opened. "Perhaps there is a way." She stared about her, as if seeking out hidden enemies.

"I sense that this place holds many doors shrouded from mortal eyes. Perhaps you could use one of these portals as a means of escape. Portals are holes in existence, leading to destinations in the inner and outer planes… if you could find the proper key, you could escape through one of them." Deionarra paused for a moment, as if attempting to remember.

"Portals will reveal themselves when you have the proper 'key.' Unfortunately, these keys can be almost anything… an emotion, a piece of wood, a dagger of silvered glass, a scrap of cloth, a tune you hum to yourself… I fear that the Dustmen are the only ones who would know the keys you could use to leave their halls, my Love."

"Then I shall ask one of them. Farewell, Deionarra." I turned away, too overcome with emotion to continue talking to the spirit. Deionarra spoke again before I could move away.

"Hold a moment… I learned much when I traveled with you, my Love, and what you have lost, I have retained. I have not divulged all that I know to you. My sight is clear… whilst you fumble in the darkness for a spark of thought."

"And what is it your sight sees that I do not?" I asked.

"Time itself relaxes its hold as the chill of oblivion slowly claims us, my Love. Glimpses of things yet to come swarm across my vision. I see you, my Love. I see you as you are now,

and…" Deionarra grew quiet. I felt apprehension, but the desire to know what she saw was stronger.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"I see what lies ahead for you. It ripples through the planes, stemming outward from this point. Shall I speak of what I see?"

"Tell me."

"First, I require a promise. Promise you will return. That you will find some means to save me or join me."

"I swear I will find some means to save you or join you." I didn't know what impulse had triggered this statement, but I did know I would be forced to attempt to fulfill my promise.

"This is what my eyes see, my Love, unfettered by the shackles of time…"

"You shall meet enemies three, but none more dangerous than yourself in your full glory. They are shades of evil, of good, and of neutrality given life and twisted by the laws of the planes."

"You shall come to a prison built of regrets and sorrow, where the shadows themselves have gone mad. There you will be asked to make a terrible sacrifice, my Love. For the matter to be laid to rest, you must destroy that which keeps you alive and be immortal no longer."

" 'Destroy what keeps me alive?' " I asked.

"I know that you must die… while you still can. The circle *must* come to a close, my Love. You were not meant for this life. You must find that which was taken from you and travel beyond, into the lands of the dead."

"I shall wait for you in death's halls, my Love." She smiled, but there was only sadness in it. She closed her eyes, and with an ethereal whisper, she faded.

I turned away from Deionarra's bier, still stunned at what I had promised. Morte asked a question, in a concerned voice.

"You back with me, chief? You kind of drifted out on me there."

"No, I'm fine. Do you know who that spirit was?" Morte was puzzled.

"Eh? Spirit?"

"That specter I was talking to. The woman."

"You were rattling your bone-box with some woman? Where?" Morte looked around, excited. "What did she look like?"

"She was right on top of the bier. Didn't you see her?"

"Eh… no, you just kind of drifted out for a bit there, just stood there, statue-like. I was a little worried you'd gone addled on me again."

"I'm all right. Let's move on."

I continued moving along the perimeter of the Mortuary. Too bad I didn't have any idea where any of these 'portals' Deionarra had mentioned could be.

However, I did see something ahead almost as good. Doors, which most likely led outside. Hoping I wouldn't find them locked, I moved towards them. Unfortunately, another damned Dustman had approached on silent feet, and was too close for me to pretend I didn't see him.

He was a tired-looking man in a black robe. His narrow face was extremely pale, and he didn't look as if he had been sleeping: his shoulders were slumped, and the flesh sagged loosely beneath his bloodshot eyes. He looked so lost in thought he might not even have noticed me, but I couldn't count on that.

"Greetings…"

"Greetings…" The man turned to face me and made a slight bow. I suddenly noticed that his eyes weren't bloodshot so much as they had a red tinge to them. "I am Soego. How may I…" He suddenly seemed to notice my scars, and the corner of his mouth twitched. "I'm sorry, sirrah, are you lost?"

"No."

"I do not recall admitting you." Soego looked at me suspiciously, and his eyes gleamed red in the light of the torches. "May I ask what you are doing here?"

"I was here for an internment, but there seems to have been a mistake."

"Who was being interred? Perhaps the services are taking place somewhere else in the Mortuary."

"The name is… uh, Adahn." The lie came easier this time. Soego's eyes narrowed, and the red tinge I saw in them before seemed more pronounced.

"No one of that name resides within the Mortuary halls, living or dead." His mouth twitched, and to my surprise, he sniffed the air for a moment.

"Uh… then I must have misspoke." I silently cursed myself for using that name. Of course the Dustmen would know the names of their dead. I floundered, came up with another excuse, "I am here to see Dhall."

"Dhall? Dhall the Scrivener can be found in the receiving room on the upper floor." The corner of Soego's mouth

twitched briefly. “He is rather busy and his health is failing. Unless you have pressing business, I would not disturb him.”

“What’s wrong with Dhall?”

“Oh, there is nothing wrong with him. Dhall is…” Soego clicked his teeth. “…*old*. His long devotion to cataloging the dead has nearly run its course. Death will no doubt soon follow the wasting sickness he has contracted.”

“You know, I could do this another time. Can you let me out now?” Soego nodded, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

“Why… of course, of course. Let me open the front gate for you.” He moved to the doors, and unlocked them. I had the strong feeling that he knew I was lying, but for reasons of his own he didn’t want to expose me, or didn’t care what I did. I hurried to leave the building.

* * *

A slab in the Mortuary, where a short time before the corpse of an immortal lay. The flickering light in the room cast moving shadows. A careful observer might have noted that certain shadows didn’t obey the motion of the light, but moved on their own, as if driven by a malign intelligence. The shadows moved about the slab for a few moments, as if questing. Then all was as before; the only shadows present were those caused by the simple blockage by objects of the light.

THE HIVE

I passed through the doors, glad to be free of the Mortuary at last. I passed through a small courtyard in front of the building, and walked out into a city. This must be the section known as the Hive. My eyes traveled across the buildings in front of me, then up. And up. The city arced overhead. I realized the city must actually form a circle, and join with itself. Morte, noticing my stunned expression, offered an explanation.

"The city is Sigil, the city of doors. Sigil's a ring-shaped city that's squatting on top of an infinitely tall spire in what some claim to be in the center of the Planes… of course, *how* it could be at the top of an infinitely tall spire, and how the city could even *be* at the center of the Planes raises some questions."

"Anything else?"

"Sigil's called the 'City of Doors,' mostly because there's a LOT of invisible doors that lead in and out of it — just about any arch, door frame, barrel hoop, book shelf, or open window might be a portal under the right conditions. It all depends on if you have the key to open it."

"See, I guess the best way to explain it is — most portals are 'sleeping,' right? You could walk through them, by them, on top of them, and nothing would happen. Now, every portal has something that 'wakes it up.' That could be a tune you hum to yourself, a loaf of week-old Bytopian bread, remembering what your first kiss was like, and then — BAM — the portal gets its juices flowing, and you can jump through it, to whatever's on the other side."

"Like where?"

"Anywhere, chief. Literally. Any place you can think of, there's a portal there. That's why Sigil's so popular across the Planes." As I started to walk away from the courtyard, a passing woman started upon seeing me. She seemed to recognize me instantly; she stepped back in horror, and cried out.

"After all this time… ye *bastard*! May all th' fiends in Baator take ye! One day ye'll be sorry fer what ye did ta Aerin… by all the Powers I *swears* it!" She turned and fled.

I just let her go. I realized I might run into many in the city who recognized me, and I would have to be on my guard. But it

was critical that I gain as much information as quickly as possible, and I resolved to ask anyone I met about the city, and particularly about this Pharod.

I ran into a few others that day who would not talk to me, who just made a sign against evil and ignored me.

A harlot was particularly helpful, after accepting a few coins, that is jink. She told me the collectors congregated in a section of the Hive not too far away, in an area known as Ragpicker's Square. Morte spoke up as I finished with her. He was becoming predictable on certain subjects, I realized.

"Chief, can you sport me some jink… it's… eh… been a long time, it has."

"I'm not even going to ask how you intend to accomplish this."

The woman broke in, "It's twice the cost fer the mimir… or any other degenerate."

At my questioning look, Morte replied, "Mimir's a talking encyclopedia. That's me, chief." I motioned to Morte to forget his idea.

"Don't sweat it, Morte. From the looks of her, I'm probably saving you from dying twice." At this the woman cursed at us.

"May a pox shrivel yer innards! Ye have the stink and fashion sense of a goatherd, and ye're twice as ugly!" She continued cursing us for several moments. Morte stared, hypnotized, as the harlot let loose this stream of obscenities. At the end of the verbal avalanche, Morte was silent for a moment, then turned to me.

"Wow, chief. Got a few more taunts for the ol' arsenal." He turned back to the harlot, who was catching her breath. "I'm also in love."

Chuckling at Morte despite myself, I moved off.

I decided that although I now knew a general area to look for this Pharod, it would be better to learn some more about Sigil, and maybe fill in a few of the holes of my past, before searching him out.

I continued questioning those I met. Some of the local toughs must have taken my questions as a sign of an easy mark, because they drew knives and attacked. As I drew the blade I had found forgotten in a drawer in the Mortuary, I realized that I had used a blade before, and knew it well. Although I suffered a few shallow cuts, soon I was standing over the body of one tough as the rest fled. I also realized I must have killed before, perhaps many times.

The next Hive dweller I talked to was frightened, no doubt from the scars and the blood of my recent fight. He had little to say I hadn't already heard, but I felt sorry for him, and gave him a few coppers. He glanced around to see if anyone saw the exchange, then tucked the jink in the folds of his robe.

"Thank ye kindly, cutter! May the Lady's shadow pass ye by!" This piqued my interest.

"Wait a minute… Lady? What do you mean?"

"The mistress o' Sigil? Ye've not *heard* o' her? Ye must be blessed or more cluel… eh, know little about Sigil, indeed." He laughed weakly. "Lady's word's law here in Sigil." He thought for a moment. " 'Cept she don't say much. Dead silent she is, actually." He looked at me warily.

"Don't want ta be talkin' too much about her, cutter… ye don't want ta cross her shadow nor be singing her praises, all right? Now, let's say no more about it. Rattlin' yer bone-box about the lady is dim, dim indeed."

I came across a small Dustmen memorial not far from the Mortuary, just four walls around a central plinth. Dustmen stood outside, chanting about their 'True Death.' Curious, I stepped through an arch in one of the walls, and saw that the interior and the plinth were covered with thousands and thousands of names. I recognized the plinth from the dream or memory I had had before awakening in the Mortuary. I asked a man standing staring at the central plinth what it was.

"It's a tombstone for the Planes." He scoffed. "Graveyards of names are scratched on that rock. Can only hope my name's the one that'll split this stone in 'twain." He pointed at the base of the monolith. " 'Quentin,' right there, hammered in just hard enough to send the damned thing crashing down."

"The Dusties scratch the names of the dead on this monument here…" He gestured around him. "And on the walls of this place. Not enough space by my reckoning, but no matter… they do their best. Can barely read half the names." I asked why he was here, especially since he was hostile to the Dustmen. His reply was illuminating.

"Reading the new arrivals. Try and find a new one every day, try and remember if I knew 'em, nothing more."

"The Dustmen record the names of all that have died on this monument?"

"Aye, they scratch 'em on this rock… and scratch 'em on the walls in this place, too." Quentin scowled. "I don't know

why they take the trouble to take a counting of the dead… the Dusties have more care for the living."

"The living?"

"Aye… y'know about the Dustmen mourners that come to this place? They aren't mourning the dead, see, they're mourning the living. You can barely get a word in them edgewise without 'em asking to mourn some poor *living* berk for ye."

"Seems to me the dead are thrice-worth the pity of any poor sod living in this pit." He nodded at the monument. "Every name on there is blest in my book, it is." He returned to his brooding, ignoring me.

As I was leaving, on a whim I stopped and spoke to one of the Dustmen mourners. I told her that my 'friend,' Adahn, was feeling anguish over a person who had died. She promised to mourn his pain. A smile quirked my lips as I walked away, as I heard the name Adahn mixed in among their chanting.

I continued questioning those I met in the streets of the Hive. One in particular had an interesting story, a haggard woman wrapped in rags. Her hair was disheveled and dirty, and her complexion was extremely dark. Burns covered her arms, and her right hand was a fused lump of flesh… it looked melted, like wax exposed to a great heat. I greeted her, to get her attention.

"What issit y'wanta me?" The woman's accent was thick, and I had difficulty making out what she was saying. "Y'wanta me t'leave? NOT leaving this city, so I'm not. I can't, tried, it's not a city, it's a prison t'everywhere."

"Everywhere?" I asked.

"There's Worlds, there's…" Her eyes gleamed madly. "… planes that be sinking sands, fields thirsty nettles be, sightless worlds where y'limbs are given life and hate, cities of dust whose people are dust and whisper ash, the house without doors, the Twilit Lands, the singing winds, the singing winds…" She started to sob quietly, but she seemed all out of tears. "And shadows… the terrible shadows there be."

"Where are these places?"

"Where'z? Where'z them places?" She flung the lump of her right hand in an arc, gesturing at the cityscape. "They'z all HERE be. Doors, doors, here to *everywhere.*"

"Doors?"

"You! You're not knowing this?!" She squinted at me, and her teeth started chattering. "Tell you, I will: Beware every

space you walk through or touch in this thrice-cursed city… Doors, gates, arches, windows, picture frames, the open mouth of a statue, the spaces ‘tween shelves… Beware ANY space bounded on all sides. ALL these’re doors t'other places.”

“Every door has a KEY it does, and with this key, they show their true nature… an arch becomes a portal, a picture frame becomes a portal, a window becomes a portal… all eager t'take y'someplace ELSE. They steal you away…” She raised the lump of her right hand. “And sometimes what’s on th'other side takes part of you as a TITHE.”

“What are these keys?”

“The keys, the keys number as many as the doors of this city. Every door, a key, every key, a door.” Her teeth started chattering again, as if she were cold. “And a key is…? A key is *anything.* It may be an emotion, an iron nail held ‘tween y'second and fifth fingers, a thought thought three times, then thought once in reverse, or it may be a glass rose.” She clenched her mouth closed to try and still her chattering teeth, and squinted her eyes. “Can’t leave… can’t leave…”

“How did you get here?”

“From…” She seemed to calm slightly, and her eyes took on a thousand-league stare. “Came from a place else from here, almost a life-ago, hummed a tune by a glade with two dead trees that had fallen together. A brilliant door opened in th'space ‘tween the crossed trees, showed me this city on th’ other side… I'z stepped through, ended here.”

“Why can’t you go back?”

“Tried! ALL doors here lead to OTHER places.” She shuddered and gripped her melted right hand. “Went through thrice-ten portals, some a-purpose, some a-accident, none a-them right. Can’t find way back…”

“There must be a portal that can take you back.”

“Can’t even leave here! This square! And there, th'place of death behind th’ gate waits for me!” She pointed at the Mortuary behind the gate, then turned back to me, her face desperate. “Can’t go anywhere in this city!”

“Anythin’ could be a door. Any arch there, any door here, could be a portal, don’t know the key, could get a-sent t'another horrible place…” Her teeth started chattering again. “…got t'stay way from the closed spaces, all could be doors, could have a key on me, an’ I not be knowing it…” I found this hard to credit.

"You… you're afraid to go through ANY door or arch because it *might* be a portal?"

She nodded, her teeth chattering.

"How long have you been afraid of this?" She squinted, pondering.

"Since the last time I walked through th' last portal, th' place where m'hand…" She stops. "Since m'tenth Turning… I'm in me fourth tenth Turning that, now." Her teeth begin chattering again.

"Thirty years? You've haven't walked through *any* door for thirty years?"

Her vision seemed to clear slightly. She looked up at me, her teeth still chattering.

"If you got here, there must be a portal that can take you back. It's only a matter of finding it —"

She smiled. Her teeth weren't chattering because she was cold… they were moving around inside her mouth, her gums twisting as the teeth shifted about. They rose and receded as I watched, chattering as they rattled against each other. She hissed at me.

"Only takes ONE portal you steps through a-accident, t'drive th' FEAR into you. I went through thrice-ten, lost m'hand, burned m'flesh, and lost m'sense." She looked at her feet. "N'more, n'more."

"I'm sorry… if I can find some means to help you, I will. Farewell." I hoped I didn't promise to help everyone I met in the Hive. I suspected the city generated unfortunates faster than anyone, even if he were immortal, could hope to help.

I passed by the Gathering Dust bar, but it was a Dustmen hangout. I had had enough of them, so I didn't go in.

"Looks like the Dusties lost one of their deaders…"

I realized the comment was referring to me. The speaker was a striking red-haired girl dressed in leather armor. Her right arm was covered with a series of interlocking plates that looked as if they were taken from the skin of some creature, and a horned shoulder piece protected her left arm. Oddly enough, she had a tail… that was flicking back and forth as I watched. She noticed my interest.

"Pike off."

Ignoring the comment, I greeted her, asking who she was. The girl sneered, then made an obscene gesture with her tail.

"Pike off, yeh clueless sod."

The girl herself was well worth looking at, but did she know she had a tail? I realized I must have actually blurted out what I was thinking when she replied.

"*Do* I now?" The girl looked at her tail. "So I do! An here I was thinking that it was a trick of me eye. My, aren't yeh a sharp cutter?" She bared her teeth. "Why don't yeh piss off ta whatever hole yeh crawled out of and leave me be?! Me nor me tail is for trade, jig?" As I fumbled for a reply, Morte interposed,

"It's just as well neither you nor your tail are for sale. You couldn't squeak out a living with 'em, anyway." Fortunately, his voice was too low pitched for her to make him out, and she just looked questioningly at Morte. I'd already made a fool of myself. Might as well try to satisfy me curiosity.

"He didn't say anything… but I'm still curious… *why* do you have a tail?"

"Are yeh *daft?* Can it be that yer dumber than stone, or mayhap yer the Power o' ignorance? May the dabus brick yeh over and make yeh a street!" Morte answered my question.

"She's a tiefling, chief. They got some demon's blood in 'em, and that makes 'em paranoid and defensive… nice tail, though. Shame it's plastered on such an ugly body." I tried to interpose a comment, uselessly, as she replied.

"Yeh better latch yer bonebox, yeh foul-mouthed mimir, 'fore I splits it from yer jaw, jig?"

"Why don't you *try* and split my jaw, chit?! All I'm hearing is a lotta chatter from some Hive trash! Throw a punch! I dare you! I'll bite your legs off!"

"Enough!" I finally got out.

"Aye, that's right. Leash yer mimir, 'tard, or I'll bury him with his body, jig?" I figured I wouldn't get anything more out of this one.

"Farewell, then."

"Aye, pike off ta wherever yeh came from, then."

I wondered on. A street vendor caught my eye. This foul-looking man was quick to notice he'd caught my attention; in moments he was upon me, hawking his 'wares.' He carried a long wooden pole; dozens of skinned and cooked rats dangled from it. As he spoke, he gestured to them with a broad, filth-encrusted hand, smiling a yellowed, snaggle-toothed grin all the while.

"Oye, cutter, 'ow ye doin' there? Wot sorta deeee-licious ratsies is ye interested in this fine day?"

I examined the ‘ratsies.’ Each rat had been skinned and gutted, their feet and tails removed; they dangled from the pole by hooks punched though their necks. As I examined the various manners in which they'd been prepared, I realized their heads were slightly misshapen — a bulbous knot of bone protruded from each cranium, covered in whorls that gave it the appearance of brain tissue.

“Those are strange-looking rats.”

“Ah, ye've got a keen eye there, cutter! All I sell is brain vermin, I do… I'm sure ye'll find they've got a much richer flavor than yer usual rat. Quite nice, really!” He proffered them to me once more, waving the pole before my face enticingly… the rats swayed to and fro, hooked like tiny sides of beef.

“Brain vermin?”

“Aye, cutter, brain vermin. Foul creatures, they are. Now, yer normal rats, they just eat stored goods an’ multiply, spread disease an’ all that… a nuisance, really, no more. Yer *cranium* rat, though — brain vermin, wot *I* go after — they’re just trouble. When ye get more than a ‘andful a’ the little pikers together, they start to get smart on ye… sometimes *real* smart.”

“They become more intelligent?”

“Sure as I'm standin’ here before ye, they do! If I ran across any more than two score of ‘em, I'd flee for me case like *that*…” He snapped, to emphasize the point. “…I would! Ye get that many of ‘em in a pack, why… why, they gets smart as a man, they do!”

“Here’s my best advice for ye, cutter… if ye’re bent on catchin’ brain vermin, stick to small packs. A dozen or so, at most. But I'll tell ye…” He stepped close, his breath fetid in my face, and spoke in a hushed tone: “Ye run into more than that… more than a couple dozen… ye run like ye’re in the shadow of the Lady!” He backed away from me again.

“Sorcery, cutter… sorcery! Ye gets enough of those lil’ fiends in a space, they gain all sorts a’ odd powers! Make a basher’s brain pour out ‘is ears, they will! Downright frightenin'… it’s just wrong, I tell ye.”

“Who are you?”

“Wot, me? Why, I'm Creeden, sometimes called Creed — the Butcherer-of-Rats!” He smiled grandiosely, exposing ill-matched rows of yellowed, broken and crooked teeth.

“You certainly seem… friendlier… than most around here.”

“Well, cutter, I try. Result a’ my business, I thinks… most folks around ‘ere are a peery an’ downright unfriendly lot, but I

want every cutter to know that Creeden's always got a warm smile an' a pipin' 'ot, fresh-cooked ratsie for 'em!" He winked at me, and touched my arm.

"I see ye're leavin', cutter, but a'fore ye go, wouldst ye like a nice, deee-liscious ratsie? One for the road, ye might say?"

"Why not…"

"Good, cutter, good! Wot sort wouldst ye like?" He pointed to each in turn with a grimy fingernail. "I got them baked, spiced, boiled, an' charred! All fresh, all scrumptious… and only three coppers for two!"

"Charred," I replied. That should hide any nasty taste.

I handed over my coppers and, in one swift motion, he ran a pair of charred rats through with a wooden skewer, unhooked them, and placed them in my hand. He winked at me.

"Enjoy, cutter!"

The rat was burnt and crispy outside, but tender and juicy within. It was a bit greasy and rather rich, tasting of some… other… meat I was sure I'd had before. The man looked at me expectantly.

"Did ye like? Wouldst ye like another?" Motioning that I didn't, I continued on.

MORTE, PART I

I felt it was time I learned a little more about Morte. I asked him to tell me about himself. He chattered so long as we were walking I was afraid he would never stop.

"Of course you got questions about me — you probably have questions about ALL sorts of things. Let me boil it down for you: when you've been as dead as long as I have… without arms, legs, or anything else, you spend a lot of time thinking, y'know? I figure it's been a few hundred years since I got penned in the dead book, but time doesn't really tally up the way it used to… without that mortality thing pressing down on you, all the days and nights kind of blend together. So you think about this, and you think about that… and the most important piece of wisdom I've learned over the past hundred or so years is this:"

"There's a LOT more obscene gestures you can make with your eyes and your jaw than most people think. Without even resorting to insults or taunting, you can really light a bonfire under someone just with the right combination of eye movements and jaw clicking. Drives them barmy! If you ever get beheaded and your skin flayed from your skull, I'll show you how it's done. I got some real gems, chief — they'd drive a deva to murder, they would."

"I know what you're thinking: I'm dead. I've lost so much. It should have sobered me up to all that joy I missed, all those loves I've lost. Some people get all depressed about death — they haven't TRIED it, of course — but one thing they never seem to realize is how it changes your perspective on things; it really makes you take a second look at life, broaden your horizons. For me, it's pretty much made me realize how many dead chits are in this berg and how few sharp-tongued men like myself there are to go around — you spin the wheel right, and your years of spending nights alone are over!"

"Shallow? I'm not shallow. I just don't get caught up in all that philosophy and faith and belief wash that every berk from Arborea to the Gray Waste rattle their jaws about. Who cares? The Planes are what they are, you're what you are, and if it changes, fine, but things aren't bad the way they are — and I

should know. Go on, ask me some questions about the Planes, or the chant, or the people, or the cultures — when you end up like me — without eyelids, that is — you end up seeing a lot of things, and I can tell you almost everything you need to know."

"It's like this: We're in this together, chief. Until this is over, I stick like your leg."

HIVE MARKET

I realized I had come into a market area in the Hive. I was passing an old woman standing silently by the wall, staring off into the distance. She seemed to be unconcerned with the flow of traffic around her, and clutched a wooden pole from which dozens of small fish were dangling. I moved in front of her, catching her attention.

" 'Lo, sir, care to purchase some…" She squinted at me for a moment, trying to discern my identity. "Oh my! 'Ere I was, thinkin' ye one o' me regular customers. Hrmm…" Her mouth pressed down into a tight-lipped frown, and she stared off over my shoulder.

I looked behind me, trying to see what she was staring at. I could see nothing of interest behind me. As I turned back to her, I caught her looking at me… she looked away quickly, resuming her staring off into the distance once more.

"What? Do I look familiar to you?"

"Goodness, no!" She paused for a moment. "Aye, ye do. I think… ye, or a man with yer very likeness, sir. T'was so long ago."

"Tell me…"

"Well, sir, ye see… me sight's not so good now, t'wasn't back then, neither. But I thought I saw ye walkin' past with a small group trailin' along behind ye. It's t'was so long ago, and ye walked by so quick-like. But I remember, now, the way ye held yer head up… there was a woman followin' ya, tryin' to stop ye. To get ye to turn around, speak to her… but ye pushed her away."

"Beautiful woman, she was… looked so sad, so angry, all at once. She stood there for a moment, then followed along behind ye just the same, hustlin' to catch up. There was at least two other gentlemen with ye, sir… the only one I remember too clearly, though, was tall, thin. Reeked of bub, he did; I smelled him from across the way. Looked like he hadn't bathed in ages, too. He followed ye close, he did, an' never said a word. Acted like the woman wasn't even there, even when she bumped against him, tryin' to stop ye. That's all I remember, sir."

Another incident from my past. I gave the woman a few coppers, walking on and straining vainly for any memory that would connect with this incident.

An area of the market ahead was filled with debris. A broad-shouldered woman was shuffling about amongst the huge beams lying on the street. She kicked at the beams with iron-shod boots; every once in a while, she bent down and wrenched a nail from one of the boards with her bare hands. She held each one up, appraising it, then dropped it into a leather sling bag. She straightened up, hearing my approach. She smiled politely, but from her stance and the way her hand rested close to the hilt of her weapon, I could tell she was ready for trouble. I noticed one of her eyes had a milky film over it.

"That's close enough there, cutter… what do ye need from me?"

"Who are you?" She pulled three nails from her sling bag, tossing them spinning into the air and catching them in her palm.

"Iron Nalls, they call me." She dropped them back into the bag with a muffled *clink.* "I sell 'em to a man, name a' Hamrys, in the Lower Ward. Maker of coffins, he is."

"Where's the Lower Ward?"

"Eh… I used to know the way, I did, but the dabus have changed the streets 'round again. Don't know how to get there, now — I'll need to chart a new path — but I figure the dabus'll straighten things out eventually." I had heard that term before, and wondered at it.

"Dabus?"

"Aye, dabus — the Lady's servants." She looked at me, puzzled. "Ye must be new to Sigil. They work all over the city, doin' the Lady's will. Always buildin' an'rebuildin', they are, usin' what's fallen or torn down to make somethin' new."

"The wood come from here an' there. Sometimes dabus drop the stuff off, an' I go through it before another pack comes to fetch it away. Probably rubble from buildin's or walls they're puttin' up or tearin' down."

Dabus — I realized I now had a name for the mysterious floating creatures I had seen performing work about the city. I noticed a stench about this time. The smell like a sewer was getting worse as I moved forward, rising above the usual miasma I had already associated with the Hive, and which I was learning to ignore.

A man was looking at me with a strange, bug-eyed stare. His eyes were *huge*… so huge they looked ready to pop out of his sockets and roll across the cobblestones. He nodded eagerly as I approached, bobbing his head like a bird… and as I neared him, I suddenly noticed the smell of urine and feces surrounded him. The man sniffled, wiping his nose on his sleeve, then opened his mouth to reveal blackened, rotted gums.

"Stories-for-coin, sirrah?" His breath reeked; it smelled like this man had been keeping rotten meat stored inside his mouth. "Stories-for-coin?"

"Who are you?" The man snorted, thick with phlegm.

"Names, names… who you are, who you are…" His head did a slight twitch every time he repeated himself. "Names… dangerous, dangerous." He glanced at the ground and stirred the dirt with his foot. "Knowing a name or bein' stuck with one, both's a mess of trouble." He looked back up at me. "My name's a given name, not one asked for. Reekwind." Once again I became conscious of his reeking breath and the smell of urine and feces that surrounded him. "A given name, a given name."

"An… appropriate name."

"Not my true name, true name." Reekwind mumbled on, his head twitching every time he said *name.* "A true name's a dangerous thing, gives others power." He stared at me with his huge eyes and wagged his finger. "Keep your name secret, keep it close, never let it out."

"Names are like smells… things can track you with them." Reekwind coughed, his eyes almost popping out of his skull as he did so. His cough seemed to loosen his bowels, for he broke wind loudly, as if to accentuate his point. "If someone knows a true name, it gives them power." He licked his lips. "The power to *hurt.*"

"I don't know my true name." Reekwind's eyes widened at this; seeing his eyeballs bulge even larger made me uneasy.

"Then you are blessed, blessed. Remain nameless, and you shall be as a spirit on the Planes, untraceable, untrackable, unseen, undiscovered." He smacked his gums wetly. "A name chosen, a name given… it allows others to find you and hurt you."

"Have you been hurt?" Reekwind gave a twitching nod, then scratched himself.

"Let my name slip once, once, only once, only once." His eyes filmed over as if the memory was painful, then glanced at

me uneasily. “Tell you the story I can, I will, but three coppers must I see.” His face split into a smile as he said the word *coppers,* and his reeking breath hit me like a hammer.

I passed him the jink. Reekwind got into a stance, looked left, looked right, then faced me. His face clenched, then with a grunt, he broke wind again. The smell nearly leveled me, but he took no notice.

“Cursed, I! Walked the wards in splendor…” He stood up stiffly, nose high in the air. He sauntered back and forth, nodding to invisible passers-by. Reekwind froze, his arms akimbo.

“Crossed paths with a crossed one. Had the looking of a pumpkin, his seeds, curses!” Reekwind then thrust his belly out so as to appear fat, slicked back his hair with his filthy palm so he looked almost bald, and began drumming his fingers on his ‘fat’ belly. He then walked about, circling the spot where his ‘stuffy, upper class persona’ used to be. “All-a-jumble with curses, this one was.” With a sneer and a careless gesture, Reekwind tossed an invisible curse at the ‘stuffy persona.’

“Knew my name, let it slip I had, I had, all it took, took it all!” He stiffened up again, inhaling deeply and resuming his ‘upper class’ persona. The persona suddenly crumpled, and Reekwind broke wind violently, then exhaled, filling the air with his foul, reeking breath. “Cursed with stenches, smells, excrement! Came here to tell tales, all good for, all good for now. Now Reekwind is the name, given name, given name…”

“The Hive, the Hive… a tale I can tell, a tale I can tell, I will, but three coppers must I see.” He smacked his gums together and snorted like a pig. Intrigued to hear another of his tales, I passed over more jink.

“Spireward, spireward…” He pointed to his left, at the charred alley in the distance. “An Alley of *Dangerous Angles.*” He bent his limbs in a twisted parody of one of the skeletal buildings. “Not always angled, not always burned and charred, once alive, no longer.”

“Flames, fire!” He flung his hands up in the air, then waved them to simulate flames. “The alley burned, great smoke, ash everywhere… in the end, only *skeletons* of buildings left, bones of dead buildings, bones of dead buildings. Angles… everywhere, angles.” He hunched forward, his voice a whisper. Again, the stench from his body hit me like a wave.

“Dangerous, now, bad men have set up their kip there, kip there.” He bowed, then broke wind in quick spurts, like a bugle

blowing. “That is the tale of how a street becomes an Alley of Dangerous Angles.” He made a semi-circle over his heart.

“A man made it so. A beast made it so. A man whom even *fiends* admire. A sorcerer’s tale, filled with madness, sadness, burning, yearning…” He hissed, then cackled in a way that reminded me of a fire burning. “A dangerous tale, a dangerous tale.”

“A sorcerer there was, no simple hedge wizard this, but a mage of *power*.” Reekwind brought his hands together reverently, then smiled evilly. “He burned with the Art, and the Art burned him.”

“The name given him was Ignus, a name respected, then feared, then hated, then punished.” Reekwind gave a rattling wheeze, then clawed the air and hissed, apparently imitating ‘Ignus.’

“Taught by one of the last great magi Ignus was, and as an apprentice, Ignus learned much, much… and nothing at the same time.” Reekwind shook his head sadly. “In his heart, his coal-black heart, a fire blazed. It burned, it burned, and it *hungered*.” Reekwind clawed at his chest, as if pain. “As it hungered, Ignus hungered. It was his wish to see the Planes *burn*.”

“In the night…” Reekwind hunched down and began to slowly stalk in the direction of the alley, a mad grin on his face. “Ignus came to the Alley that was to be the Alley of Angles, and the fire in his eyes, the fire in his heart, both he let out.” Reekwind pointed at the Alley, then flung his arms in the air, silently screaming and laughing at the same time.

“Flesh ran like wax, people like candles, and Ignus laughed, laughed…” Reekwind crumpled to the ground, his body wracked with imagined pain. “An evil, an evil was done, and forgotten not, forgotten not.” He stood up, then hunched over, looked left, looked right, then started mumbling, as if secretly in a conference with someone. “Something was to be done, be done…” He stood up, stiffly, his face resolute.

“A punishment was decided, all the hedge wizards, midwives, rune-tellers, copper-pinching witches, all manner of magelings… they came, all, even those with the smallest trace of the Art, to punish Ignus. Separately, they were flies…” He made a buzzing noise between his rotten gums. “Together, dangerous, dangerous.” He hummed, then raised his hands…

“Caught Ignus, granted his wish…” He swirled his hands, as if casting a spell. “He wished to burn, they granted it, using

his own desire to fuel the casting. They made his body a door to the Plane of Fire — they intended to kill him, kill him…"

"Failed, failed…" Reekwind broke wind again, as if to accentuate the failure of the wizards. "Ignus lived, Ignus lived, only slept, blanket of flames, flames, turned in his sleep as he burned, never happier, never happier…" He shut his eyes, wrapped his arms around himself and turned slowly. "Burning… ever-burning…" His eyes suddenly snapped open. "One day he will wake, and then, then the Planes shall *burn!*"

This Reekwind seemed to know much. Perhaps his knowledge extended to the one I sought.

"Can you tell me where I could find someone named Pharod?" As I thought would be the case, this elicited a demand for more copper to hear a story. I agreed.

"Once a man of respect, Pharod was, a man, a man of goals, and *position.* All became nothing, nothing, turned to air." Reekwind squinted, then broke wind, filling the air with a gut-churning smell. "Turned to air… and stink."

"A liar, a cheater, a man who twisted law, Pharod was." He hunched over, as if writing at a desk. He 'wrote' for a moment, then suddenly stopped, afraid. "Then one day, he found that he had twisted himself!"

"Such a liar he had become, that when he died, he was to go to a horrible place…" Reekwind shook his head sadly, then hunched over again and looked wildly in all directions. "Pharod would not accept it, would not, would not! He had cheated others, he would cheat his fate, too!"

"He read, dug in books, and consulted seers…" Reekwind stalked back and forth, his hand over his eyes as if staring off into the distance. "…and they told him that only in trash could he find that which would let him cheat his fate." Reekwind broke wind again, then gave a reeking cough. "Perhaps they lied…"

Reekwind stood up stiffly, then began to fling off imaginary clothes. With every piece of 'clothing' he threw away, he became more hunched.

"Pharod threw away his position, his goals, and took up a new title…" Reekwind stopped, then leered at me. He clawed at his rags, shaking them. "And became a King of Rags! He would rule the trash, have his subjects search it all, and find that which he needed." He shook his head. "He looks even now, even now…"

"Uh… do you know where I could find him?" Reekwind shook his head.

"He lives amongst rags and trash. There, you will find him, find him…"

No real help then. I continued walking, leaving the market area.

I was curious about this Alley of Dangerous Angles Reekwind had mentioned. It was nearby, and we entered. There were numerous burnt shells of buildings, and two gangs, who charged us a toll to enter the area. In a ruined church I met a man who named himself Aola, who seemed eager to talk to me, immediately coming over to greet me as soon as I entered the building.

"Welcome to the cathedral of Aoskar. Have you come to worship Aoskar with me? You can be his second disciple."

"Tell me more about Aoskar." Aola's voice took on a tone of adulation.

"Aoskar is the Keeper of Gateways. Within Aoskar lies the power of portals, doorways and opportunity. Sigil, also known as the City of Doors, used to be the home of Aoskar, until he was 'cast' out by that accursed Lady. Now there are few worshippers of Aoskar here because the Lady forbids it. That will soon change, however, as I help the people to see the greatness of Aoskar. She cannot stand against the will of the people!" Aoskar, huh? I didn't see how it could hurt to have a deity on my side. Even if this priest's god didn't help me, he himself might be useful.

"I wish to become a disciple of Aoskar."

"Wonderful! It's been so long since the last person asked." Aola made me perform a series of complex rituals and then said, "You are now a disciple of Aoskar; go now and spread the word to the denizens of Sigil, so that all may know the glory of Aoskar!" Belatedly, I grew worried.

"Why are there no other disciples of Aoskar?"

"Over the years I have had many disciples. Unfortunately, they have all disappeared. It's quite frustrating, actually. As soon as they become initiates I never see them again. Lately, there has been a rumor going around that the Lady herself is the cause. Now no one comes by any more. You are the first soul I've seen stop by in a long while."

MAZED

I left the ruined building, troubled. I took a step… and found myself elsewhere. I was alone. My surroundings were totally different. I was standing on stone, formed into concentric rings. There were gaps between the rings, although stone bridges connected the rings at irregular intervals. The rings themselves also had gaps in them.

When I looked down between the stones, all I saw was a gray nothingness. There were only a limited number of rings as well. Beyond the outer ring was more of the gray nothingness, as though the space I now occupied was somehow bounded. Arches were placed regularly along the next to outermost ring, each arch I soon learned contained a portal. However, the portals only transported me across the rings; none seemed to lead out.

As I was verifying this, I noticed a place that wasn't bare rock, where rubbish was piled. I moved to investigate, and found someone before me had camped here. I found a curious object at the camp site.

It appeared to be some sort of journal. Sheets of dried human skin had been stretched across a framework of bone, and strangely enough, it appeared the sheets of skin had healed together at the seams, forming the spine of a makeshift book. It looked like the outer sheets of skin formed a cover for a series of other skin sheets locked inside the bone frame.

A series of symbols had been written in blood across the exterior of the sheets of skin, but I couldn't make them out; they appeared to be some form of writing, but they seemed to be written upside down, right to left, and at odd angles that made my eyes hurt.

Despite the crudity of the writing, I had to admit the design of the bone frame was actually quite intricate; the bones had been carved so that they snapped neatly together. It looked like the bones could be unhooked from each other, allowing the book to be opened and read.

I unlocked the bone frame, which unfolded with a neat *snap*. I opened the book, and studied the pages… they were

filled with the same strange series of symbols as were on the exterior cover, and they didn't seem to make any sense.

Much as I tried, I couldn't make sense of the symbols. I despaired, and decided to put the journal down. As I re-hooked the bone frame, I was suddenly struck with a strange thought — that the pages of the interior weren't *supposed* to make any sense. I… whoever I was at the time… put the symbols there to deceive anyone looking to read the real contents, which were hidden somewhere else in the journal frame.

I examined the edge of the frame, and noticed that one of the bones had a hairline fracture around one of its ends; I put my hand over the edge and twisted off the top of the bone, revealing a hollow space. Inside the space was a small, rolled-up scrap of skin.

It was difficult to read, but I could make out most of it.

TRAPPed TraPped LADY'S WILL be done DODge her gaze… too MANY I KILL'd, too MANY strangle and kill and stop the BREATH in their throats… there's a WAY OUT I KNOW it then I'll give the BLADed one the laugh…

… ONE of the ARCHEZ holds way Out, ONE of them does, ONE has the way out, can't just keep GOING through them one at a time, maybe — maybe I should go through one, THEN walk back to the same portal without…

The entry trailed off into indecipherable scrawls. For some reason, I had a feeling that was the last entry… either the incarnation died in the maze or escaped somehow.

I found that if I entered the portal in one of the arches on the periphery, then went back to that same portal without entering any other, I was transported to an arch I could not reach before. The portal in that arch allowed me to leave, returning to the Hive at the spot where I left. I felt I now knew where Aola's disciples had disappeared.

I briefly explained to Morte what had happened. We left the Alley of Dangerous Angles on its other side, not too far from the Mortuary if my reckoning was right. I continued exploring the Hive, heading towards a section I had not visited before.

I heard a howling up ahead. What strange animal was producing the sound? Then I saw it was actually a wild-eyed man, hunched over, snarling and giving low growls. It looked like he hadn't trimmed his hair in years… it was so long it formed a veil over his eyes. He had a long, stringy moustache caked with grease and sweat, and the tips of the moustache

drooped so much that they had become tangled in his ragged beard.

I greeted him. The man stopped in mid-snarl, and he reached up to part the curtain of hair that covered his eyes. As his withered hand pulled away his dirty locks, several strange, puce-colored bugs fell from his hair and scattered across the cobbles. Behind the cloak of hair, the man's flesh was moon-pale and creased with wrinkles. His thick, bushy eyebrows formed a 'V' as he stared at me.

"Hand, my take th' moon fly, toooo?" I had difficulty, but thought I could puzzle out his meaning.

" 'Take your hand and fly to the moon?' Not today, my friend."

The man frowned, but his eyebrows tilted upwards in a reverse 'V,' creating a bizarre expression. I had no idea how he accomplished the facial expression, but it made me uncomfortable watching the muscles beneath his face shift into the new pattern. I couldn't tell whether he was angry, curious, both or neither.

"Singed kisssspeak a man, answersss pre-fur a wood woman heart."

" 'A single kiss speaks a woman's heart, but a man's answer is what you would prefer?' Very well, then, but know this: my answer is a question, and an answer from you is what I would prefer." The man seemed mesmerized by my voice. With every word I spoke, a light flickered in his eyes.

"Barking Wilder Am-I, I-Am! A-Wanting, Asking-A, May-You, You-May?" I was starting to get a feel for his language.

"You may, and I will: Who… or what… are you?"

"Kay-osh!" He stuttered out the word, as if having difficulty getting his tongue around it. "Some say Xaositects, I say S-tect-I-soax. CHAOS-men. Men no. Nem no, men yes, three nose make a yes." He hunched down on his knees and began to rock back and forth, singing in a child-like soprano. "Chaos-man, chaos-man, hop-a-long home, a faction-it-is, yet we-are-alone." Not having anything to lose, I asked another question.

"I'm looking for a lost journal. Do you know where I might find one?" He frowned, squinted his eyes shut, then opened them back up. When he spoke again, his voice was level and straightforward… it was like a different, saner, person was speaking. The effect was eerie.

"More than one lost, more than one must you find. Each part of you had one, so more than one must you find." He

blinked and shook his head for a moment, as if surprised at himself, then chuckled uneasily. I asked if he could tell me where at least one of them was. He looked like he was about to object, then suddenly his left fist came up and smacked him in the temple. He howled in response, then suddenly stopped, blinking.

"One is in a cupboard in your guest room in the hall of the Sensates, and another is on the walls of a tomb sealed deep beneath the city where the stones weep. The others are…" Before he could finish, his right fist came up and smashed him in the face, causing him to yowl again. He blinked and shook his head for a moment, as if surprised at himself, then smiled uneasily.

That was his last moment of clarity. No matter how much I questioned him, I got no more answers. In fact, he didn't even seem to remember what he had already told me about the journals.

Rather than spend the rest of the day in pointless conversation, I turned away. Morte commented on Barking Wilder.

"Well, that's one tree with a snapped branch too many." Morte rolled his eyes. "No sense in chatting with Xaositects, chief. They're a barmy bunch." I asked him to expand on the Xaositects.

"They're a 'faction' who don't have any rules… except don't keep one thought in their head for too long. They're sometimes called 'Chaosmen.' No need to explain why. They just seem to attract members like flies… well, members that are crazy or chaotic enough, I suppose. I don't think they have any recruiters… though you really can't say anything about them for sure."

SMOLDERING CORPSE

A tout was calling out to passerbys as we meandered down a street.

"Step right up, come see the burning man! Try to put him out, buy him a drink. He's thirsty. He's on fire. He's red hot. Come on in. Come on in, see what I mean!" I paused, glancing at the building behind the tout. Seeing me stop, he yelled to me.

"Come on in cutter! Come on in cutter, you're goin' ta love this!" The building was evidently a bar; this seemed like a good place to gather information. I entered. To my surprise, there was in fact a flaming corpse, twisting in mid-air above red hot grills set in the floor.

There was a woman standing nearby, with fading bruises on her face and arms and a look of despairing longing in her sunken eyes. She might have been pretty once, but those days were long ago. She turned slowly to face me. Life poured into her features, and the spark of sardonic light that danced in her eyes now made me wonder if my eyes were deceiving me.

"Welcome to the Smoldering Corpse, scarred man."

"Who are you?"

"I? I am Drusilla. And you must be clueless. Don't ask me how I know that. It just shines off you." Ignoring the interjection, I asked a question.

"What can you tell me about this place?"

"Here? This is the Smoldering Corpse, though the person smoldering ain't dead yet. He's just keepin' himself alive 'til someone comes along to help him out. Sods who like to see people in pain come here. Fiends like it. Folks who don't much care for bein' bothered come here too… the name alone keeps out most of the berks."

"Who is that burning by the entryway?" That despair I saw on her face before flitted across it again like a black-winged shadow before she mastered herself.

"That's Ignus, one of the greatest wizards ever to come out of this slummy excuse for a cesspool. They caught him and they opened a channel to the plane of Fire through him, and now he's just a doorway for it, keepin' himself alive by force o' will alone. If someone could douse him for a few moments, it'd give

him his life back again — but they don't make enough water to do that." I considered the burning corpse a moment. It seemed to me there should be some way… never mind.

"What's your connection to him?" Her voice in reply practically throbbed with a deep ache.

"I was Ignus' lover and he, my beloved. He loved the flame more than me and now he has become the flame — and because I love him, I love the flame… but that's all done with now. Now I wait for him to douse himself. I sell what little I have just so I can be near him."

I turned away from her sorrow, heading over to the bartender. I saw a leather-skinned man with just a hint of ashen color to his face. His teeth seemed sharper than normal, and his eyes were filled with the boredom that comes with having seen too much. His voice was nasal and clipped.

"You again, eh? Whaddya want this time?"

" 'You again?' What do you mean?" I spoke with resignation, since I had been recognized yet again.

"Yeah, 'you again'. You got a hearing problem or something now? You was in here 'bout fifteen years ago, got all bubbed up, smashed up the place, and left a pile o' coin that wasn't enough to pay for the damages. So you plucked out your own bleedin' eyeball and tells me you'll be back to reclaim it when you got two hundred coins together. With fifteen years of interest, you got about five hundred coins. You got the jink, pal, I got your eye."

"Five hundred? That's ridiculous!" He paused for a moment, considering.

"That it is. Tell you what. Give me three hundred, and the eye's yours." Something prompted me to agree.

"It's a deal. Here's your money."

"It's a deal." He produced a darkened, wax-stoppered, wide-mouth bottle from his pocket. I heard the sound of liquid sloshing around inside it, along with a heavier, squishier noise. Opening it, the stench of some sort of preservative agent nearly made me gag. Floating in the viscid muck was an eyeball. "You'd better figure out what you want to do with that… now you've exposed it to the air, you might as well put a pickled egg in the jar for all the good it'll do you. Make up your mind, cutter… pickled egg or not?"

For a moment I stared at the eyeball, unable to believe I had spent nearly all my remaining money for it. Then I acted, before I could think myself into inaction.

I reached into my socket and popped my eye into the palm of my hand. The bartender helpfully severed the optic nerve, and directed my hand to the jar of goo that sat on the bar. I deposited my eye in the preservative, wrapped my fingers around the old one, and slid it into my empty socket. The pain of this entire operation was incredible. After a moment, though, I could feel the optic nerve reattaching itself to this new eye… and suddenly, I was hit by a flash of memory!

Memory flash: A vast expanse of chaotic, ever-changing wasteland stretching before me, a group of humanoid vultures plummeting toward me, cruel weapons ready to strike, and my own shining blade clutched tight in my fist…

Memory flash: Three toughs surrounded me, in the colors of an enemy I couldn't quite place. Long daggers glistened in their hands, and the light glinted cruelly from their exposed teeth. I glanced at my scarred hands, and knew that soon they would be covered in blood…

Memory flash: An enormous frog-like creature came bounding over/through/under chaos-stuff, headed for me with a mouth full of teeth. I hurled my javelin through the shifting matter and pinned the creature to a sudden stone plinth…

I realized I had recalled some of my lost fighting skills.

I asked more questions of the barkeep, who was named Barkis. There were numerous customers in the bar, including a couple of fiends, and I asked him who might help me. He gave me a short list of the patrons who might be able to help, and I moved out to talk to them.

I saw a slightly stooped old man with a full grey beard and a lion's mane of grey hair. He wore a couple of shoulder guards as armor, and he kept a helmet nearby. He smoked a pipe and carried a pouch of tobacco around his waist. He looked pretty strong, but he was a little plump and also appeared to have some sort of breathing trouble.

"Well, now, aren't *you* a sight, lad! Never have I seen so many scars blanketing a fella — like a scar cloak ye're wearing! Where you been — hanging out in a grain thresher?!" He laughed. "Oh, I'm just jesting with ye, lad, no offense meant and I hope no offense taken. I'm Ebb." He extended his hand.

"Greetings, Ebb." His handshake was firm.

"Now, I hereby tender my apologies for the unfair jesting, lad. Hope no hard feelings; can I buy you a tankard or two of something to smooth any ruffled feathers?" I hadn't taken any offense, and nodded agreement.

"That's the spirit, lad! Bide a moment." He rose to his feet and headed to the bar. After a moment, he returned to his seat with a pair of tankards. "Here you go, lad. Drink up!" He took a massive swallow from his own tankard, puffed on his pipe, and said, "What can ol' Ebb do for you on this fine Sigil day?"

"I had some questions about this place."

"Oh, well I gathered that, jest to look at you. I mean, you don't look like you're from around these parts, lad… you look a little too out of sorts to be a seasoned native!" Ebb chuckled, then took another drink. "So what can I help you with, lad? You need to know the lay of the land?" Ebb winked.

"Who are you, and what are you doing?"

"Ebb Creakknees, Third Measure of the Harmonium, now retired and being a tout with one's voice since I don't step as lightly as I might these past two or three decades!" He chuckled.

"Third Measure of the Harmonium?" Ebb puffed up slightly in pride and got a semi-stern look on his face.

"Aye, Third Measure of the Harmonium…" He relaxed a little. "Though I haven't served a tour of duty in many a decade. Pushing a quill wasn't quite up my alley after all the fights and skirmishes I been in, so I just bide my time keeping tabs on things down here in the Hive and helping out a little where I can. An' you look like someone who might need a hand… are you in some kind of trouble, lad?"

"What fights and skirmishes have you been in?" I asked, refusing to be deflected.

"More than I can remember, lad!" Ebb rolled his eyes. "Well… *almost* more than I can remember, leastwhys. I did an all too-long tour in the Blood War, that infernal muck-up War of Lies on Terras, far too many years in the Black Centuries War…" Ebb began to tick off the wars on his finger and counted silently to himself. "…eh, then there was the Three-Planes War, and many others, I even took part in the Harmonium War of Liberation. Oh, towards the end there, I was also in the Sigil City Watch… some could argue that was the most dangerous of them all!" He laughed loudly. The mention of the Blood War felt like a cold dagger slipping into my heart. I asked him to tell me more of the Blood War.

"Aye… the Blood War: The most dangerous family feud this side of the primordial soup. A mean-spirited mob of fiends on one side, a batch of war-monger fiends on the other. It's the war that creation sparked, and they've been digging into each other ever since."

"The tanar'ri, vicious killers who care for none but themselves, and the baatezu war machine, all for law and order under their infernal rules. The whole mess spills out into other planes from time to time, and it's made the multiverse a less-pleasant place to live." I thought he might know something of the man I sought.

"What do you know of a collector named Pharod?"

"Well, now I don't know everything there is to know about ol' Pharod, but I know some of the dark surrounding him. If you're determined to track down that spider and nail him to a wall, then I suppose I could spill some of the chant so you know what you're tangling with." He paused to tamp his pipe. "Pharod dug his nest deep into Ragpicker's Square not too long ago, got a bunch of collectors and gangs together and started what one could almost consider a collecting faction… be that as it may be…"

"Where can I find him?"

"Well, lad, if you're looking for Pharod, which I would say is pretty barmy of you, you're a little off the beaten path. You want to be finding Ragpicker's Square. Chant is that Pharod's set up his kip somewhere in the Square. Even an ol' fella like me who's been around the ring a few times don't know exactly where. I figure that Pharod wants to keep the dark on his location dark. If you're all bound and determined to find Pharod, go to Ragpicker's Square, and try and dig up Pharod's location from some of the locals. Try and be careful about it, since there's plenty in the Square that would make a gut-harp outta you as soon as look atcha." I then asked a question I had been wondering about the city.

"Tell me of Sigil's layout."

"Whew. Let me wet my tongue." He took a pull from his tankard. "The city floats above an infinitely tall spire — the Spire. It lies on its side like a discarded wagon wheel, but there's no spokes that connect it to the Spire. It's divided into six wards, each of them with its own function. Right now, you're in the Hive. I think the purpose of the Hive is to be squalor to the rest of the city's grandeur!" He laughed. "Factions — philosophical clubs, or gangs if you prefer — divide up the running of the city between 'em."

"Were you in a faction?" Ebb raised his hand as if to stop me and laughed slightly.

"Oh, now, hold on, lad — I'm no has-been faction member… they say, and they're right, that once ye're one of the

Harmonium, ye're a Harmonium for life. We're the bloods that try and make sure Sigil stays outta trouble. No rocking the spire, no folks getting too over-enthusiastic about hurting each other, keeping the city down to a low roar. We try and keep the peace, lad, and most times, we do a decent job." Another question bubbled to the surface of my mind.

"Tell me of the Lady."

"Well, now, not many know much about her, lad, and I'm figuring even those that know more than a little don't know too much more. She's a mystery, she is, and even should you run across her… Powers forbid… she's silent and deadly. She's not evil, far's I can tell, but she keeps the dark about herself and Sigil pretty tight. None's been able to penetrate it, and if they have, they've been mazed." I asked him about mazing, which I had already experienced for myself.

"Aye. Sometimes bloods will be packed off to a place where they can't do no harm. The Lady, see, she'll take a bit of Sigil, and make a little dimensional pocket out of it, a maze. She places those that have crossed her in there and lets 'em rot." Ebb puffed his pipe. "Now… you can't escape getting mazed once the Lady sets her gaze on you, lad. She'll get you eventually, no matter how hard you try and dodge her. You'll be walking down an alley, or about to step through a portal, or take a left turn down a street you've gone manyfold times before, and suddenly you're someplace you don't recognize. Now, mazes aren't escape-proof. There's always a way out of each one… a portal the Lady places there. You just have ta figure out where it is and how to use it."

"Getting back to the Lady, chances are you won't meet her unless ya do something really bad… Hurting a lot of people, killing a dabus, challenging her rule, worshipping her… She hates that, we figure, or interfering with a dabus' work (which may as well be the Lady's work)… If you're lucky, just the Mercykillers will come for you, but if she comes, you'll be dead as soon as her shadow falls on you."

"Now, the Lady can do almost anything in Sigil, lad, near as we can figure. Make it bigger or smaller, make new portals, seal off old ones, make sure the Blood War don't break out in the streets, keep folks from teleporting into the city, keeping the Powers out."

"Powers. It's another way of saying Gods, lad. And there's a great horde of them across the Planes." Ebb took a puff from his pipe. "They can't come to Sigil, though… the Lady has a

way of keeping them out that she hasn't spilled the chant to yet. Be that as it may, it's kept Sigil from being seized by outside interests."

I now turned to another who had been sharing Ebb's table, silent up to now. I saw a soft-looking man with gentle, far-staring eyes. He dressed in supple leather clothing, and carried various implements of use and destruction about his body, such as ropes, spikes, tinderboxes, and empty vials of air. He looked half-gone — literally. There was an insubstantiality to his existence, as if his essence had been partially leeched away. He focused those eyes on me, and suddenly I found them gripping and determined.

"Greetings to you, o seeker," he said. He carefully set down the mug he was holding, and gave me all his attention.

"I have seen the far reaches of the multiverse and returned to tell the tale. I have walked upon the bodies of dead gods and spun moonbeams in the Astral ahead of a thousand shrieking githyanki knights. I have passed the edges of existence and watched my essence shiver away before me. What is it I can do for you?"

"Who are you?"

"I am Candrian Illborne, traveler, dreamer, talespinner, and so forth."

I talked to him for a long while about the different planes. The Inner Planes of matter, substance, true physicality. The Ethereal Plane, through which the Inner Planes were filtered, to form the elements of the Prime Material, the worlds of mortals. In the Prime Material belief was born, from which the spirits that created the Outer Planes were born. When mortals died, their spirits passed through the Astral Plane.

The Outer Planes and the beings which inhabited them were created by and of belief and thought and faith. The Outer Planes were divided by travelers into the Great Ring, of which Sigil was a part. This Great Ring was of immediate interest to me, and I questioned Candrian closely on the planes which make it.

The lawful Upper Planes. Candrian gave a small shudder when describing them. "I am not the best person to speak of the planes of law," he said, "for the innate structure and ultimate patterns they impose frighten me. I steer clear of them, because I value my individuality more than I value the knowledge they'll bring me. They include regimented Arcadia, nearest of the good planes to the unbending order of Mechanus, and Mount Celestia, home of the archons, an island in the Silver Sea."

The neutral Lower Planes. “The neutral planes, eh? They’re vile and barely understandable, and they’re more insidious on their own than you could ever imagine. Take Gehenna, for example: Four volcanoes in stages of dormancy floating in an infinite void, each of them somehow *alive*, and each of them wanting your soul by whatever means they can get it. Populate it with yugoloths — the worst of the fiends, in my opinion, and you've got the place. The plane of ultimate evil — at least, that’s what they call it — is the Gray Waste, a no-place that drains color from your body and spirit, stealing away even your apathy — and it’s the site of the worst battlegrounds in the war down there. Don’t get me started…Then you've got Carceri on the chaotic side…”

“Ah, Carceri and its poisonous jungles, acid swamps, destructive waters, strung like a string of rotten pearls nestled within one another…” He paused and looked at me carefully, again fixing me in place with his eyes. “Remember this, seeker: Carceri is a prison, home to the gehreleths, one of the most dangerous types of fiends there is. The strength of the prison is the strength of the captor, as strong as the prisoner lets it be. Destroy the prisonkeeper, and a body can escape the Red Prison. There is almost no other way out, not when the gates close themselves against you and watch you spin off into the vast space surrounding the orbs. Be wary of Carceri, traveler, for its bonds can be greater than flesh.”

The lawful Lower Planes. “As much as I detest the order of the lawful Upper Planes, at least they present a modicum of goodness. Their lower planar counterparts, though… Acheron’s a place of ricocheting cubes that never see an end to battle, swarming with the souls of dead humanoids. Baator…” he shivered involuntarily. “Baator is a place best avoided. Those fiends you see over there are but the merest expression of the deviant corruption embodied in that soulless machine of order. All that is bad about bureaucracy and order originates from Baator, and it spreads like a stain across the hearts of mortals. Though there is some knowledge to be found there, it is rarely worth the spiritual rape the plane inflicts.”

The chaotic Lower Planes. “The Abyss isn’t someplace you should consider going. Where Baator’s all orderly, the Abyss is full of chaos and change, and none of it’s pleasant. When it becomes something that approximates normality, that’s when you should be most wary of it. It’s home to the tanar’ri, what most primes call ‘demons', and they've got that name for a

reason. They are unpredictable and murderous, and the few you can trust are few and far between. The few I have met who I'd trust, I still don't trust entirely — they are creatures of chaos and evil incarnate, and if they're putting on a friendly face, who's to say it's not part of a larger agenda?"

The Boundary Planes. "There are two Boundary Planes to my mind, and they are diametrically opposed. One of them, Mechanus, is the very essence of law, a place where beliefs fit together, interlocking, turning, in a massive machine that is the entire plane. Some folks'd have it that the gears of Mechanus are the engine that drives the planes. The other plane is Limbo, a swirling morass of Chaos that follows no rules, none, and just when a body thinks he's classified its behavior, it goes and changes on him — or it doesn't. You just can't tell. I was in Limbo not too long ago…"

He closed his eyes, remembering: "I had a githzerai guide with me, an anarch who could shape the illogical matter of the plane into forms of his desire. We had fought off the harrying of the slaadi, the chaos-creatures who call that plane home. It seemed there were more than usual, but then, one can never tell what's 'usual' in Limbo… but I digress. In the midst of all this chaos, we came across a series of huge, metal, interlocking cubes, like some sort of puzzle box. It wasn't something we had shaped, consciously or not, and we couldn't find a way inside. It was like… like a bastion of order within the confines of disorder, a seed of law. That is the best I can explain it."

The Outlands. "The Outlands are absolute neutrality. Probably the best place for a body to visit in the Outer Planes, outside of Sigil, if you don't want to have a plane's morality forced into your heart. Everything balances out in the Outlands — as it should be, for the plane that sits at the center of the Outer Planes. Powers'realms are scattered about here, and there are handfuls of 'gate towns' that open into the rest of the Outer Planes. The gate towns usually mirror the philosophy of the plane their gates open on to — and if the balance of belief isn't kept in the town, the town slips into the nearby plane. It's a bad situation for everyone, because few of the folks in the towns really *want* that change."

He had also just come back from the Negative Material Plane. When I asked him of it, his eyes clouded over. "I went to the Inner Planes to discover my true essence. I made the mistake of visiting the Negative Material Plane in order to understand my body's urge to decay and the cycle of death in life. I thought

myself protected against the ill effects of the plane with my magic, but I was wrong. The blackness of infinite nothing pressed on my soul, and I was beset by shadows that sought to snuff out my very soul. I lost my way for a time — for an eternity — and nearly lost my existence. I could feel my essence falling away from me, and am even now half-gone. Never will I return."

"How did you survive?"

"How did I survive?" He smiled tightly. "With a piece of nothing that held back the nothing. Nothing can stop nothing, you know, and so I carried nothing in my hand to protect me. Do you plan to journey to the ultimate negation yourself? You have the smell of desperation about you, and so I make you this gift. Hold it in your hand when the shadows press in, and it should protect you and your friends somewhat, should they remain close to you. Heh." He passed me a small, black token that looked as if it had no dimensionality to it all.

DAK’KON, PART I

This exhausted the short list I had gotten from the bartender of those who might help, but I approached another table, something drawing me. The man before me was *old*. His dry, yellow skin had the scars of one who had traveled everywhere and never rested long in any one place. His pinched face was inhumanly angular, and his ears swept out from his skull, tapering to points. He wore a loose-fitting orange tunic, and a strange, shimmering blade was strapped across his back. The blade looked to be a two-pronged glaive, made of some metal whose surface swirled like a film of oil on a pond.

The man turned to me, his eyes like polished coal. He stared through me, and for a moment, I wondered if he might be blind. The weapon suddenly turned a dead, flat black, mirroring the man’s eyes.

“Are you all right?” I asked. He said nothing for a moment, merely searched my face with his eyes, then he replied.

“Hail… traveler.” His voice was quiet and somber, like a wind whispering through the branches of a great tree. The man met my gaze, his eyes burrowing into mine. His weapon drained of its black color, resuming its shimmering I noticed before I spoke to him. “Your eyes have the weight of one who has traveled far to be in this place.” The man’s gaze did not waver from mine.

“I am *known* as Dak'kon.” The emphasis he placed on the word *known* struck me as odd… yet familiar at the same time. “You… are not *known* to me.”

“I do not know myself. “ I replied honestly.

“That is for the best. In *knowing* yourself, there would be little in the Planes left worth *knowing*.” He fell silent for a moment, still studying me with his coal-black eyes. “I would *know* why you have come to this city.”

“I'm looking for answers… I have many questions.”

“Speak your questions. I will hear you.”

“Your features are… unfamiliar to me. What are you?”

“A githzerai.” When he said no more, I repeated his statement, as a question.

“A githzerai?”

“A githzerai is one of the People.” Again I had to prompt him.

“One of the People?”

“A githzerai.” Wondering if he wasn’t as humorless as he appeared, I asked my question again.

“Yes, but what is a githzerai, exactly? “ Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then spoke.

“Our history does not need to be made *known* to you. We would bleed to death on time’s blade before I recited a fraction of the histories of our People.”

“I don’t need to know your histories… but I would know of your people as they are now.”

“*Know* this and accept it as an answer: We are the People who make our home upon the shifting plane of Limbo.” With a deft motion, Dak'kon slipped the blade from his back and held it before him.

“There, we mold the matter of Limbo with our minds. We forge cities with our thoughts.” As I watched, a series of rippling waves of metal began to roll forth from the center of the blade. The pitch and crest of the waves matched the inflections in Dak'kon’s voice. “In its chaos we dwell, with only our *knowing* to preserve us. We are the githzerai.”

“What is that blade you have… it moved, shifted in response to your voice.”

“It is a *karach* blade. It is an object that lets others *know* the rank of the wielder.”

“What rank does the blade signify?”

“The blade is a symbol carried by the *zerth.* A *zerth* is one who *knows* the words of Zerthimon. In *knowing* the words of Zerthimon, they *know* themselves.”

“Zerthimon?” I prompted again.

“Zerthimon founded our race. He *knew* the githzerai before they *knew* themselves. He defined the People. He gave them one mind.”

“You seem to place a special emphasis on ‘knowing.’ What do you mean?”

“All things, whether structure or flesh — their existence is defined by their *knowing* of themselves.”

“And if a man does not know himself?”

“When a mind does not *know* itself, it is flawed. When a mind is flawed, the man is flawed. When a man is flawed, that which he touches is flawed.” Dak'kon paused. “It is said that what a flawed man sees, his hands make broken.”

"Do you know yourself?"

Dak'kon fell silent. His coal black eyes took on the same distance that I noticed when I first spoke. I sensed this question was important, so I pressed him.

"I ask again: Do you know yourself?" When Dak'kon spoke again, his voice had changed; his words echoed, like a great stone dropped into a chasm. It looked like he was forcing the words from his chest.

"It is not my *will* that you *know* this." I was now sure his answer, or refusal to answer, would tell me much.

"Perhaps I was being too kind phrasing it as a question: Tell me." The answering words came out of Dak'kon slowly, as if they were being carried one by one.

"It… has come to pass that I do not *know* myself." Dak'kon's voice dropped to a whisper, like sand. "I do not *know* why. I *know* it has happened, but I *know* not the how, nor the when… nor how to *know* myself once more." I felt a sadness at these words, which I was careful to keep on the inside, away from Dak'kon, for it was obvious he would not appreciate it. I turned to a more neutral subject.

"Can you tell me about this city?"

"It is *known* by the name 'Sigil.' Among the People, it is *known* as the city that does not *know* itself."

"It doesn't know itself? What do you mean?"

"The city exists, but it does not *know* itself. In not *knowing* itself, its existence is flawed."

"The city exists in opposition to itself. It has set itself apart from the planes, yet it seeks to be everywhere at once. Its walls are doors, yet it keeps these doors locked. Such an existence tells of a thing that does not *know* itself. In not *knowing* itself, it is flawed." I considered his statement, and formulated a counter-argument, displaying a suppleness of mind which I felt sure I could not have managed a short time before.

"What if the city is *not* flawed? A thing does not need to be ordered and have a purpose to know itself. What if these contradictions are strengths that you cannot see?"

"To your question, a question: What if the city is flawed, and you see its contradictions all around you?"

"To *your* question, a question: You claim this city's existence is flawed. You have accepted this rather than explore the possibility that something greater may exist. That suggests you are flawed… and that you do not search for knowledge, but only for a convenient answer." Dak'kon fell silent.

“There is no *knowing* the answer to the questions we have asked. Yet the city exists. That is all.” I was not ready to let the subject drop.

“Yet I would maintain that we *know* ourselves by the questions we ask and the ones we do not. If we cease asking questions and accept only what we can perceive…”

“Then we will cease to *know* ourselves.” Dak'kon’s voice had changed slightly, become heavier. “Such words have been spoken before. I have heard them and *know* them.”

“Where have you heard them?”

“The words are mine. Once, I *knew* them and *knew* their meaning. I had forgotten them until you spoke.” Dak'kon’s gaze traveled through me, and his blade stopped shimmering, bleeding of all color until it was translucent. There was a moment of silence, then Dak'kon looked up at me. “I would travel your path with you.”

I sat, stunned yet again this day. I looked at Dak'kon, and realized I could not refuse him. I felt a connection, somehow, to him.

As I agreed, he said “Your path is mine.” Strangely enough, his voice seemed distant, and it echoed, as if he were speaking from across a great distance.

I decided I had had enough for one day, and headed back to a small inn I had passed earlier. Along the way, when Dak'kon had fallen a little behind, Morte hurried up alongside, and commented to me in a low-voice.

“Ah… I don’t trust the gith. I say we leave him behind.”

I was surprised at his words. What could Morte possibly know about Dak'kon, anyway? I ignored him, and continued on.

RAGPICKERS' SQUARE

We spent the night at the inn, sharing a common room with a Bariaur, a centaur-like creature, and a crazed man who kept muttering about his fork.

Early next morning I set out for Ragpicker's Square, where I thought for sure I would find some word of Pharod. A miserable place it was, full of piles of trash, and broken down buildings that looked as though they would soon collapse and add new piles.

As I entered the square, I noticed several figures draped in filthy, tattered brown robes, a long hood concealing most of the face from view. This costume I had learned to associate with collectors. I approached one. I saw his eyes narrow beneath his hood, and he took a step back.

"What do ye want?"

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm lookin' for some damned bodies is what I'm tryin' ta do, but ye'd think the Dead Powers had packed up their kip an' left the Planes, the way people are stayin' healthy an' all." There was a sudden gleam in his eye: "We had a pox last month, an' it was a glorious time, it was… bodies stinkin' ta the high heavens, an' plenty of jink ta be had, too."

"Why are you looking for bodies?" He looked surprised.

"Well, y'haul the blighters ta the Mortuary. There, ya talk ta the Dusties, haggle a little, an' get a few bits of jink. The Dustmen, they gather the dead… it's their job. They pay us ta cover more area an' bring any bodies we find ta 'em. Then they make sure that the blighter's body goes ta its proper place or gets cremated. They're all serious about it, their barmy philosophy, but it just means more jink for me." He winked.

"I'm looking for a man named Pharod." I knew what his next question was going to be, and before he could ask I threw him several coppers. He narrowed his eyes suddenly.

"Pharod… what about 'im?" Despite the jink, he still seemed hesitant.

"You seem suddenly wary… why?"

"Pharod, hmph!" He spat, sneering contemptuously. "Ragpicker's Square is Sharegrave's — me boss' — territory,

ye see. Pharod an' his dogs came in a whiles back an' tried ta oust us. We fought 'em off, we did, so's they're all in hidin' somewhere, now. We still catch one a' his lads now an' then 'round the Square. Usually we turn 'em inta a quick spot a' jink at the Mortuary, the pikin' sods."

"Tell me about Sharegrave."

"He's me boss… casts his shadow o'er a whole mess a' Collectors, he does. I'd stay away from him unless ye gots *right* good cause ta talk ta the man… I've never spoken with him personally, meself."

"Do you know where Pharod is?"

"I know where the rat-bastard isn't… he ain't where most a' the Collectors call kip, in Ragpicker's Square, but that he's close by there somewhere's the chant." Perhaps this Sharegrave could help me, assuming he was easier to find than Pharod. As I moved off the collector called out.

"Well, keep yerself safe, cutter. If I find ye on the streets, I'll be kind ta yer corpse."

A weasely-looking fellow was skulking about the garbage like a tattered shadow. Seeing me and Morte, he beckoned to me.

"Hssssst… ey! Th'skull. Where ye get the skull, ey? Me skull, it is! Give it backta me." Morte turned to the Hiver.

"Pike off." I was more curious about this fellow.

"Who are you?" He ignored me, still staring at Morte.

"Skull's mine, mine, ey! Give it ta me, I'll forgit ye stole it." He mumbled, his narrowed eyes darting. I was getting rather annoyed with this fellow, and decided to let him find out for himself.

"Go on, take the skull." As if there was any chance he would be able to.

He chuckled dryly and smiled. As he reached for Morte, there was a *snap!* and the man's hand whipped back. The man began screaming. "Aiggghhhh! Aighhh!!! I'll *kill* ye! *Kill* ye!" Morte was holding one of the man's fingers between his teeth like some macabre cigar. He spoke around the finger.

"Touch me again, and yer hand's gonna join yer finger, berk."

"Morte! Give the man back his finger." Morte spat the finger at the man. It bounced off his chest and fell to the ground. No need to waste any more time here.

"That's a hard lesson learned. Farewell." The man, biting his lip from the pain, glared at me. Suddenly, he attacked! He

was no match for Morte and myself, and folded almost immediately with a wound from my knife in his belly. I noticed Dak'kon, who had been silently watching, had joined in my defense.

I considered asking Dak'kon what he thought of my actions, but I was… apprehensive that I might find he did not approve. I noted for later consideration that his mere presence seemed to be having an effect on me.

Another man had been watching the fight. He was now whistling a cheerful tune and playing with a well-kept fighting knife. As I approached him, he stopped whistling and gave me a curious look.

"Hm? Wot ye want?" He continued, "Me name's Ratbone, cutter. I'm a thief-fer-hire in the employ o' Sharegrave, the boss o' the Collectors ye see 'round this square. He pays me mostly ta learn his lads ta be real quiet-like, an' how ta fight if they runs inta a spot o' trouble. That's likely the only questions I'll answer fer ye, cutter." He sniffed and shrugged.

"Where's this Sharegrave fellow?" He nodded towards the large, dilapidated house beside him.

"Careful though, cutter. He don't like visitors. He's right suspicious o' everyone. Sharegrave's not even his real name… just what me and some o' the others calls him."

"I'm looking for a man named Pharod. Do you know where he is?" Ratbone shook his head.

"Nay, I don't. Hear he's nearby, though. Some o' his lads come runnin' though at times, makin' fer some hidey-hole that's who-knows-where. Somewhere up around those elevated platforms, I'll bet, but it's none o' me business." He shrugged and spat on the ground. "Live an' let live, says Ratbone."

I waited a moment, since I thought he might have more to say, but he remained silent. I decided I might as well go in and visit his boss, and see what he had to say.

There were three men in the main room of the house as I entered. Two were obviously low level collectors, in dirty robes. The third was different. Tall and lanky, this pale, grim-looking man exuded authority despite his gangly and somewhat awkward frame. A good portion of his left ear was missing; what little that was left was a ragged mess of scar tissue, as if the ear was bitten off, rather than cut. His narrow, shifting eyes — almost mere slits — looked clever… and dangerous. This must be Sharegrave. I greeted him. He spat out a reply.

"I don't know you, berk." He glared at me. "What do you want? Answer quick, before I call in some men to make quick work of you." I suspected he did not suffer fools easily, and I had had enough of appearing foolish yesterday. I got right to the point.

"I'm looking for a man named Pharod." The tension in the room suddenly rose.

"Now, what a funny thing to be asking about. What do you want to know about old blood Pharod for?" I knew better than to appear friendly with Pharod.

"He has some things of mine, and I want them back." The man was silent for a moment, then cracked a smile.

"He steals from us all, doesn't he, whether we're living or dead?" He chuckled.

"What do you mean?"

"Our main source of… living… around here is the dead. You follow?"

"You're a Collector."

"Aye, that's right." He looked at me as if he was considering something. "Now, there's only so many deaders at any one time. My bloods and I can only gather so many. If somebody else is gathering deaders, that's that much less jink that goes into our pockets."

"Pharod is taking bodies, too?"

"Aye. The rub is that that he's found a *mother-lode* of them. Now, I haven't heard of any massacres in Sigil." He frowned, tapping at his chin. "So I'm quite interested in knowing where all the deaders are coming from."

"I could find out for you, if you'd like."

"Oh, aye? And how would you do that?"

"All I need to do is find him. Let me worry about the rest." I left unstated that, if I found Pharod, I would be the one determining when and how I would fulfill this promise.

"Hmm. Heh. You got it; I'll even give you one hundred copper commons for your trouble. Go up on the platforms, follow them to the North and West, and you'll come to a gate that leads to Pharod's bolt-hole. Getting in and getting the information is your deal. And if anyone asks, you don't know me, and we never had this talk, hear?"

I left Sharegrave disgruntled. I still had no clear idea of how to get to Pharod. I might as well inspect the area of the Square that had been described to me, but I still kept an eye out for anyone else who might be questioned.

I ignored the collectors about the square. It was doubtful they knew anything more than their boss. There was, however, a wooden hut ahead. It didn't look as far gone as most of the other wooden structures about, so I determined to see if anyone was inside.

There was one occupant. The squat old woman looked like she had had all the color bled out of her — everything from her hair, to her shawl, to her robe — all were shades of gray. The only splotches of color on her came from several strange herbs, which were tied to her belt by their stalks. The herbs made a strange *swsshhh* when she moved, like a broom.

The elderly woman turned and stared at me… and I noticed the gray shades blanketing her body extended to her features as well. Her hair was a wispy gray, and her eyes were like chips of granite. She frowned when she saw me.

"And who might ye be, hmmmn?" Once again caught by the embarrassment of not having a name, I fell back on my all-purpose lie.

"The name's Adahn. Who are you?" With a sly cackle, she wagged her eyebrows.

"Have ye not heard of Ol' Mebbeth then, the midwife of the Square? Have ye not now?" She narrowed her eyes, and her voice dropped. "Well, now ye have, fer *I* be Mebbeth."

"You're a midwife? What do you do?"

"I set bones right, drive the cough outta the sick, yank out squealing, stubborn babes, mend cloaks or a rag or two, make cures and herbs and other such." She squinted at me, studying my scars. "Be needin' a cure or three, do ye then?"

"Aye, ye be needin' some cures ta lookatcha. D'ye want ta buy some, do ye…?" She glanced at the scars covering my body again, then shrugged. "Too late ta be askin' for them, I think."

"Do you know someone named Pharod?"

"Pharod?! That — that — pah!" I watched as Mebbeth spat once… twice… three times, then followed it by making a semi-circle over her heart. "That gull tird! Whatcha be wantin' with the likes of him?"

"I need to find him. Do you know where he is?"

"He's not *in* Ragpicker's Square, that much I ken tell ye… ye need ta find a way *under* the Square ta get ta that tird spider's kip." She spat again. "Even talkin' 'bout him leaves a foul taste, it does."

"He's under the Square?"

She jabbed her finger at the floor. "Aye, he's buried beneath these piles of trash, him and his boys, and a tough time ye'd have diggin' him out of his nest." She shook her head. "Let be, let be, child."

"I need to find him. How do I get down there?" Mebbeth frowned, then sighed.

"Hear tell, Pharod's got a gate that leads to his nest somewhere here in the Square… it's jist a matter of findin' it. Ye might want to ask some of the others, some who travel a bit more than Ol' Mebbeth."

I had a curious impression looking at Mebbeth. I thought I could see a faint glow about her body. I had a feeling I should know what that meant. More, I had a feeling it was something I could once do — and needed to do again. I tried to empty my mind, to somehow reach what I couldn't consciously remember. To my surprise, it worked. Out of the darkness popped a question.

"Are you a witch, Mebbeth?" Mebbeth scrutinized me.

"I say naught as to what I am and isn't, but whatcha be wantin' ta know so fool bad for that ye hound an' ol' woman, barkin' and sniffin' fer a juicy bit of gossip?" Of course, that was where I was headed — magic.

"I want to learn about magic. Could you teach me?" Mebbeth laughed.

"Pah! I'm no teacher, no school-mistress all set up ta teach like them in the big Festhall! There's others somewhere I'm sure that'd spill the dark of it… ye'd be wastin' yer time with ol' Mebbeth, so ye would."

"I don't agree. I think you'd have a lot to teach." Mebbeth looked at me intently.

"Oh, aye? *Why* do ye want to learn such things?"

"Because I may need it to solve the mystery of who I am." After a moment, Mebbeth nodded.

"The Art may help, it may not, and ye must not rely on it ta solve all o' yer problems." She sighed. "Child, it's most like only going to add another chip to yer pile o' questions…"

"I understand. Will you teach me?"

"Pah!" Mebbeth shook her head. "One should make songs rather than make magick. Songs have more beauty. Magick's been made dull, common-place, soiled by the mob of people that have tromped through it… hmpppph." She squinted at me. "I'll teach ye… but first ye'll need to do some things for *me*, ye hear?"

Mebbeth set me a series of tasks before she would tell me any more. I eagerly rushed to fulfill them, the urge to find Pharod temporarily forgotten. I vaguely recognized the tasks set me as tedious jobs often given to test the dedication of someone just apprenticing in the art.

I spent the rest of the day running about the Hive, mostly going between Mebbeth's and the market. From my errands she ended up with a crude frame made from a barbed plant, over-starched rags and a container of fish ink. She spoke to me when all was done.

"Ye've done well, child. All I've asked. Now, I ask ye again: after all ye've seen, do ye still want to learn the art?"

"Yes. After all, the guiding goal of your errands was to test my persistence, was it not?" Mebbeth smiled, then nodded.

"Yes… mayhap, child, mayhap."

"And that's not all; you knew who I had to see to accomplish each errand, didn't you?" Mebbeth nodded again, slower this time.

"Mayhap, child, mayhap… iffen so, what did yer senses tell ye about them?" I reflected on what I had learned from those I had talked to while running my errands.

"Mourns-for-Trees showed me that my beliefs affect the world around me, Giscorl taught me that ritual is a wasted effort if the purpose of the ritual is ignored, Meir'am taught me that no matter how much I think I know, there is still much I can learn from another's eyes."

Mebbeth was silent for a moment, then she walked slowly over to me and touched me on the cheek. "Oh, child…" She sighed. "Ye will be a master sorcerer one day, ye will. Ye have the knowin' of it, yet… ye've come to Ol' Mebbeth for help, ye have. What could a midwife teach such a one?"

"Much, Mebbeth. I want to learn all you have to teach."

"So ye'll walk the path then…" Mebbeth paused. "Well, first things firstly: jest havin' the knack for the Art isn't enough. Ye need some means of givin' it focus: usually 'spells.' The spells are usually in a book. So the Art demands ye have a spell book or its like a-fore ye ken cast spells. Ken ye read?"

"Yes." I had no trouble reading inscriptions when I was in the Mortuary.

"Then let's test it, ken ye read this?" Mebbeth drew forth a small tattered card… it looked like a recipe.

I examined it. The writing on the recipe swam before my eyes, each symbol twisting out of focus whenever I tried to read

it. Almost instinctively, I relaxed my eyes, allowing them to take in the page all at once… and the symbols suddenly bled together: the recipe listed measurements, ingredients… it appeared to be some minor divination.

"This is a minor divination, isn't it? It looks like it's a spell that allows the user to see the 'nature' of an item… to see whether it's enchanted or not." Mebbeth's eyes widened.

"Who are ye to test Ol' Mebbeth so?! Are ye some fiend?"

"No… well, not to my knowledge. What's wrong?"

"Well… not expectin' it, was I…" She nodded at the recipe, then plucked it out of my hand. "What ye see, it's written in the language of the *Art.* If ye're not a mageling yet, it should be all-a-swirl-jumble of mish-mash." She snapped her finger. "Yet, clear as crystal, ye pluck the sense of it right up. Mayhap ye tell Ol' Mebbeth why that is?"

"I think I may have known once, but forgot… seeing the symbols just jarred my memory."

"Or else a natural gift, ye may have… no matter, no matter, ye've just shaved seasons off of yer learning, ye have." Mebbeth *harumphed.* "An I'd been lookin' fer someone to handle the chores around here, I had…"

"If you need help with anything around here, you can still ask… it's the least I can do in exchange for you teaching me." I cursed my run away mouth. I still wasn't sure why I reacted so favorably to Mebbeth, but I couldn't afford to waste too much time here. Fortunately, her answer allayed my concern.

"No, no, don't worry yerself about that…" She frowned. "Well, ye ken read spells well enough, but spells are no good to ye without a book to put them in…"

"Do you have one?"

Mebbeth glanced around the hut, and then she caught sight of the black-barbed picture frame I made. She picked it up carefully and studied it. "This'll do."

"That thing? It's just a frame."

"Ah, but so are ye, child…" Still holding the frame, she picked up one of the starched rags I got from Giscorl. With a yank, she pulled off the greenish starched-surface film; it fluttered in the air like a wispy bit of cloth. "Whatever Giscorl uses in the wash, it works better than curing, stretchin' and stonin' does on a normal rag. Can't afford parchment, I can't…"

She took the starchy film and pulled it over the black-barbed frame, latching the rag's edges onto the hooks around

the frame until it looked like a small greenish-black painter's canvas. "It's missin' something…"

"It needs something written on it…" She took the tankard of ink I had given her and set it down next to her. She dipped one of her fingernails into the tankard, then drew it out, mumbling to herself. She began to scratch symbols onto the frame, one by one, still mumbling to herself. Some time passed, before Mebbeth looked up at me.

"All's done." She stood, drying her ink-stained fingernail on her robe. She tilted her head, regarding the strange, framed page in front of her. "A page fer yer spell book, it is." She indicated I should pick it up.

I realized I was familiar with the purpose of a spell book. I could copy spells into it in from scrolls I might come across, and then memorize and cast those spells drawing on my own control of magical forces. I could feel my knowledge of these magical forces strengthening, and knew I would be able to learn in days what would take others years of study to master. I could see that Mebbeth knew I didn't need her help any longer.

"All right child — don't tarry here any longer. One such as ye has other ways to spend one's time rather than hang around Ol' Mebbeth."

"You're not so old."

"Pah, ye flatterer! Yer tongue is so lined with silver it'd shame a Baatezu! Get ye hince!"

"Thanks for everything, Mebbeth."

"Pah! Ye ken thank me by not playin' the addle-cove with what've learned. The Art's damned many a fool who sought to bend it in ways the Art weren't meant to bend. Now get along with ye!"

The was still enough time in the day to investigate the entrance to Pharod's Lair. I found a wooden walkway leading in the general direction I had been told of, and followed it, careful to avoid the planks that looked too rotted.

The causeway ended in an archway, which led only inches into a small building before becoming blocked by a solid wall of refuse. The rubbish was packed so tightly it may as well have been stones and mortar. Morte was staring at something.

"Hold up, chief… look at this." Peering down, I noticed a number of dirty footprints that led into the archway… and did not turn around. "There must be a portal through here or something."

"A portal? How do we open it?"

"Haven't the slightest, chief. It's got to be a common key, though — look at all the traffic that's gone through! Maybe one of the low-lives around here will know…"

"I'll ask around, then. Let's go." I remembered earlier when I thought Ratbone might have something more to say. I returned to him, to question him further.

"Do you know how to get through that trash-packed archway northwest of here?"

"Eh? Nay, I don't. Say… ye could ask Creeden, the Rat-Catcher. Sometimes he goes pokin' about up there an' disappears for an odd while. Creeden's usually in the Hive, right outside the Office o' Vermin and' Disease Control."

I thanked him, and hurried back into the hive near the market where I had met Creeden before. He was still there, selling his ratsies. I asked him about the archway in Ragpicker's Square. He thought for a moment.

"Aye, I know wot ye're speakin' of. There was a lass, name o' Nalls, who I saw walk through there, once, while I was lookin' fer rats. Don't know how she did it, though. Ye can prob'ly find her northeast a' here, rootin' around a pile o' lumber for nails an' the like."

My questioning of Hive inhabitants was paying off, since I knew just where she was as well. I thanked Creeden and went off in search of her. She, too, was where I had seen her last, pulling nails from old timbers. I asked about the archway. Nalls nodded slowly.

"It's a portal, ye know. Stumbled on it quite by chance, I did… alls ye need ta do is have a handful o' junk on ye when ye walks up ta it, an' ye'll be able ta pass right through. There's a small open space past the portal, an' a gate leadin' underground, but I figured no sense in askin' fer trouble so's I just turned around an' went right back. Here…" She handed me a handful of junk. "Use this, if ye likes. I was gonna toss it away, anyhow."

I thanked her, and since it was rather late headed for the same inn to spend another night.

BURIED VILLAGE

The next day I headed back to the square, and followed the path to the trash-packed arch. The junk I was carrying did, in fact, open a portal. I entered, and reappeared on the other side of the small building the arch was part of.

I followed the footprints in the dust a short way to a door, which led underground. I hurried forward, only to realize there were a group of collectors just inside the doorway. I looked around for my companions, but I had distanced Morte and Dak'kon. Figuring that an air of confidence was my best strategy, I moved forward, only to be blocked by one of the berks, who held a naked blade. The others closed in around me, all with drawn weapons. I drew my own weapon, but there were too many to guard against, and I quickly went down, half a dozen blades piercing me. My last thought was, don't let it end this way.

I awoke on a blood-stained table. On one side were Morte and Dak'kon. I realized I could recognize them. All my memories since wakening in the Mortuary seemed to be intact. I didn't doubt for a moment that I had died beneath those blades. But whatever had affected me in the past, this time death hadn't erased what I had learned.

I got up from the table, and saw someone else was nearby. She was a blockish woman dressed in a heavy burlap robe. She lumbered about the room, her joints popping as she bent to pick up objects from the various tables. Her hair was bound back from her head with a bone hairpin, and she had a sour, curd-faced expression. She was mumbling to herself in a sing-song voice.

I attempted to get her attention. The woman didn't appear to hear my greeting — instead, she stumbled back to one of the long tables and began picking at one of the corpses.

"C'mon, now…" She clicked her teeth. "Don't be all-difficult on Marta… he's bein' difficult isn't he, Marta…? Yes, yes he is…" From what I could see, it looked like she was digging teeth out of the corpse's mouth… with only her hands and fingernails. When that didn't work, she pulled out a splintered wooden chisel and a mallet and *thwacked* at the gums

until the tooth snapped free, then put it into a bag at her waist. I tried again.

"Uh… what are you doing?" At the sound of my voice, Marta leaped away from the corpse, startled, and gave a piercing shriek.

"Aighh!" She caught her breath, then hissed angrily — at the corpse on the table. "If dead you were not, ye mights have said somethin' earlier, false corpse, nasty corpse, yes! Haves you no *shame?*"

"I am the one who spoke, not the corpse." Marta squinted and turned.

"Eh? How's you get over there so fastus?" She mumbled to herself. "Marta, how dids he do that? No glimmer, no glimmer."

"This gravebait's blind and near-deaf." Morte commented.

Marta was still mumbling to herself, something about *corpses* and *gratitude*, which I didn't quite catch.

"Who are you? " I asked her.

"Marta, dids this one asks whose I was? Aye, he did, he did…" She started humming. "Nobody but mine, I am Marta, Marta the Seamstress… hmnnnn… Mar-ta — the — Seam — Stress… Mar-ta — the — Seam — Stress…" She turned away, back to the corpse, singing her name to herself.

"What are you doing? " Marta turned back to the corpse with a huff.

"I'm trying ta gets this berk to give up his stitchies and his teethies, and he isn't recoop-erating, no, no…" She wagged her finger, as if lecturing a small child. "Stubborn as stone, isn't he, Marta?" She pouted. "Yes, yes, he is…"

"Stitchies… and teethies? What are you talking about?"

"Gotta pulls the stitchies out, the teethies… eh, Marta, perhaps you could gives me a hand… I *have* beens giving you a hand, old battie… no needs to take that tone with me… pulling out the stitchies and teethies, yes. And the thingies inside."

"I think she means organs. I hope she means organs." Morte said. Marta repeated, "Thingies." Morte glanced at Marta. "Yes, 'thingies.' " He then turned to me. "It's all semantics."

I asked her, "Marta, why are you pulling out the corpse's teeth and stitches?"

"Put 'em aside, Marta, that's what I does here." She scratched her head. "Aye, Marta, we do… stitchy-thread and teethies are precious, can be turned into jink-jink. 'Strip the corpses we bring ya,' they tell Marta: 'Pull out teethies, stitchies, thingies inside the corpse, strip 'em cold and then we'll

sell ‘em to the Dusties.’ “ A peculiar thought entered my mind, from behind that imagined wall which hid fragments of memory from past lives.

“You look for things inside the corpse? Can you dig around in my body for anything?” Marta squinted at me.

“Hmnnn.” Then she nodded. “Marta can do that, cancha Marta? Yes, you can.” Morte eyed me.

“I am *not* going to watch this.”

“Where? Where…” Marta was studying me, as if looking for the best place to crack me open. I had a premonition.

“Check the intestines… anything could be lodged in there.”

I lay down upon the table, and Marta stood over me, a rusty knife at the ready. There was a stabbing pain as she sliced into my abdomen, then cut brutally downwards in a saw-like motion, exposing my innards. Despite the pain, I watched in silent, morbid fascination as she plundered my organs, humming to herself…

“Ah!” There was a wrenching pain as Marta lifted up the ropy mass of my intestines, blood and other fluids streaming from it. “Look at this, Marta… look at this… I see, I see, cut there, cut there…” Marta made a small, deft incision in the side of one of the intestines, and I heard a *tnnng* as something small and metallic struck the floor.

Marta dumped the soupy mass back into my torso, then reached down, picking up the object… a ring, it appeared, and she flicked it to me.

“Pretty, pretty, eh, Marta?” She nodded. “Yes, Marta, one shouldn’t swallow such a thing, no, no…”

“Th — thanks… was… there… anything… else…?”

“Nothing more, more nothing, eh, Marta? Should we try someplace else, Marta?”

“Nuh — nuh — no, I had some other questions… Who tells you to remove these things?”

“Fat-faced gimme-pig Quint, n’ the other crutch-hobble, hobble-crutch Fair-odd Pharod, innit that right, Marta?” She gave a queer smile, and nodded. “Aye, it is, Marta…”

“Pharod? Where is he?” Marta shrugged.

“Where’s Pharod, this one asks? He’s heres, Marta, isn’t he…?” She nods. “Aye, Pharod is heres, Marta. One of the buildings here, he is…”

I left her to her charnel work, exiting the room I had found myself in. I discovered I was still underground, but in a mostly open area beneath Sigil. There were enough people about to

constitute a small village, and as I soon learned, that was close to what it was called. Buried Village.

I moved about the village, noting things as I walked. I nodded to myself when I saw only one building had guards in front of it. That must be Pharod's lair.

I boldly walked in, ignoring the guards. The interior, although much larger than any of the other buildings I had seen here, was as junk strewn as the village outside. There was only one person inside. Before me was an elderly man leaning heavily upon a crutch; his left leg was twisted, as if he tried to walk two directions at once and paid the price. His maggoty-colored skin was bunched heavily upon his skull and was flecked with liver spots. He was mumbling and smacking his lips as his eyes made a circuit of the room.

I called out to him.

"Aha!" The man's eyes lit up as he heard my voice. "Tisn't my steady crop of jink come to Pharod's waiting arms again! Greetings, corpse." He smiled a wicked grin. "Have you come to ask Pharod for another jaunt into the Mortuary walls?"

"Pharod, I've come for information. I've been told that you know something about me."

"Know somethin' 'bout you…?" The light in Pharod's eyes dimmed. He studied me, mumbling slightly as his eyes flickered up and down my frame. "Corpse…? No? Yes?" His eyes met mine. "Ah! No…"

"Look closely… do you know who I am?" Pharod studied me with a dead-even gaze.

"Tisn't a mummer's fair, corpse. No time for games, no time for Pharod to play the wheel… what are you asking such questions for?" I didn't trust this Pharod, and perhaps a lie would have been a better a strategy. But this was too important, and on the chance he would play me straight, I asked what I wanted straight out.

"I have forgotten myself, and I was told to seek you out. That you would know something of me."

"Eh…" Pharod licked his lips; they made a rasping sound, like dry parchment on sand. "Now who told you such a thing, corpse?"

"Well, no one *told* me, exactly. There were these tattoos on my back… they told me to seek you out, if I ever forgot myself."

"Ah… so little said, so much told…" Pharod fell silent, and suddenly, I had a feeling that Pharod was dissecting me, like a

corpse on a Mortuary slab. “I know much you would know. Much, yes. Much, indeed…” Pharod smiled slowly, the folds of flesh on his face peeling back like a curtain.

“What do you know of me?” Pharod licked his lips, then settled himself upon his crutch like a vulture.

“No, no… not free, the question you ask.” His pasty-white hands tapped the edge of his crutch. “Much I can tell you, but the telling has a cost.” Pharod tapped the flagstones with his crutch and sneered. “This village is not all that lies buried beneath Ragpicker’s Square.”

“Chambers, vaults, corridors… filled with the dead, all a-sleep in their coffins. Somewhere in those halls, somewhere there, lies something miss-placed. Something mine.”

“What is it? “ I asked resignedly.

“A small thing, a trinket, such a trifle…” As Pharod spoke, his words started echoing, as if two people were speaking… I knew I'd heard them before… from my own lips.

I finished his sentence, “…it’s a sphere. Made of bronze. Ugly. Feels like an egg to the touch, and it smells of rotten custard. Am I right?” Pharod fell deathly silent for a moment, then nodded.

“Yes… how much do you hide from me, corpse?” He chuckled. “Did you return to see if I remember what it is I want?”

“Why don’t you get one of your Collectors to search for it?”

“Because the corridors need no more dead from this village.” Pharod *tsked*. “Strong, fast, clever… these are qualities my villagers do not have. They go below — they do not return.” Pharod glanced at me. “Perhaps the dead will welcome their own, hmmm? That is what *I* think, corpse.”

“Do you know where this sphere is?”

“Ah…” Pharod’s sigh was like shifting sand. “And why do you suppose I ask you to look for it, corpse? I do not know *where* it is. I know it is buried deep, far deeper than any villager has ever gone.” Pharod *tsked*. “It may be in the catacombs where the waters run deep, deep…”

“Very well… I'll do it. But I want to know what I'm buying with this trinket.”

“There’s a lot of knowing rattlin’ around in my brain-box, corpse.” He held up a withered finger. “One of them is this bit of wisdom: everyone *wants* something, whether they know it or not. There is much I know about you… much that you would *want* to know…”

"Very well," I agreed, "I will see about finding this sphere for you… in exchange for what you know." I felt trapped. He knew something about me, and I could only hope he would tell it if I returned with his 'trifle.'

"Very well, a deal struck, a deal made…" Pharod *cracked* his crutch sharply against the flagstones. "A sphere for a peek inside my brain box. Now, corpse — there is no time to waste. Go to the gate at the south and east and tell those slumbering fools to open it for you — make haste, make haste." I still had questions, and ignored Pharod's sudden desire to get rid of me.

"I once heard a tale of a man named Pharod. A king of rags." Pharod's left eye widened, though I couldn't tell whether he was doing it, or whether the folds of skin just peeled back.

"That so? Sigil be a berg of tales, it is, but any tale involving Pharod can't be one these ears wouldn't want to hear." He looked at me with mock suspicion, then grinned. "Become a tale-teller have you, corpse?"

"The tale is a strange one. It tells of a man of position and wealth who had everything, then discovered he had nothing." Pharod's grin froze on his face, and his eyes took on a strange, fiery gleam.

"Are you certain you wish to tell this tale, corpse? May be you won't like how it ends, eh?" I ignored the implied threat.

"The man was such a liar, a cheat, that he twisted himself into a corner. He discovered that when death would come for him, it would take him to a terrible place."

Pharod's grin died, and he licked his lips. He looked… frightened as I continued.

"He was determined to avoid such a fate, so he desperately looked for a way out of it. He would cheat fate as he had cheated others."

Pharod's face twisted, as if he had swallowed something unpleasant.

"He found an answer… or he found a place to look for the answer. He was told to search the trash of Sigil for that which would let him escape his fate. Now, Pharod… perhaps you can tell me how the story ends." Pharod's face broke into a snarl.

"It has NO ending! Not for I!" I watched as blood filled his features. "Now a tale do I have for YOU, corpse!" Pharod's finger lashed out at me, bent like a herder's crook.

"A corpse comes to Pharod's Court, ripe with stench and promises, claiming he would FIND that which Pharod needed. But will he keep his word? Promises too easily broken, corpse!

Do you deny it?! Say that you do, for it means that you've lied to me, and I will *die* because of it!"

"I will search for it, Pharod. When I find it, I will bring it. No promises have been broken."

"Lies that lead to the death of another are the blackest thing…" Pharod tapped his crutch, wheezing slightly. "You'd best keep your word, corpse, else the Planes will grind you like a miller's wheel."

I had another question I wanted answered by Pharod before I left, although I suspected I already knew what he would say.

"I heard you have found a wealth of bodies, Pharod. Where do they come from?"

"Does a mage tell the secrets of his craft? So it is with the Collector…" Pharod frowned, studying me. "Perhaps I will tell you… but you must promise that it is for your ears only."

"What I hear is for my ears only." I vowed, with the silent proviso that it would only be while Pharod yet lived, which by his age did not look to be much longer.

"Very well…" Pharod tapped the flagstones with his crutch and sneered. "This village is not all that lies buried beneath Ragpicker's Square."

"Chambers, vaults, corridors…" Pharod gave the faintest of smiles, and his eyes gleamed like gold. "Places, black as pitch, filled with weeping stones and the precious dead, all a-sleep in their coffins. Sleeping…"

"Where do all these dead come from?"

Pharod affixed me with a lopsided stare.

"Corpse, corpse… everything dies. Life is so short, but death lasts for so very, very long. Many people, many deaths…" His stare traveled past me. "Such a waste for their deaths to be useless in a Dustie's arms, eh?" Pharod smiled, greedily.

"Not all the dead that goes to the Mortuary gate is fed to the furnace, corpse. The Dusties bury some of the dead in the city's bowels. Under the village… so near, so close… is such a place. I would have been a fool not to see opportunities…"

"So you rob the catacombs of the dead the Dustmen placed there, sell them back to the Dustmen and they bury them again?" Pharod nodded, then chuckled lightly — the sound was like shifting sand.

"These catacombs are as deep as a Dustie's pockets."

"And as deep as the greed of man."

"Oh, yes…" Pharod sneered. "And the greed of man is something that shall always be counted upon when naught else is left, eh?"

I still didn't know the dark on the Buried Village, and decided to ask Pharod while he was being so expansive on any subject that didn't concern me.

"Well, now, there's a story…" Pharod licked his lips again, then shrugged. "But to tell true, the story bores me. The short of it? It's a piece of the Hive that got bricked over one day, a piece-o-Sigil got penned in the dead book."

"What do you mean?"

"Y'know them floating goat-heads that serve the Lady, them dabuses? Well, no matter if you do or not — they go all 'round fixing, breaking, burying, building all the time. D'you follow?" I nodded, so he went on. "Well, as the chant goes… and a dusty chant it is too, being so old… them dabuses just damn well bricked over a section of the Hive one day and all bodies just forgot 'bout it. Dump a lot a trash onnit, and soon, nobody even knows it's here." Pharod smiled. "Wicked, no? A piece of Sigil all-forgotten?"

"How did you find it?"

Pharod *tsked*. "I still have my eyes, corpse, and I still have my ears, and when you have enough sense to tie the two together, then finding the dark of any matter is not as hard as some make it out to be."

Having satisfied my curiosity on all points except those that were of importance to me, I left Pharod in his shadowed hall. I decided to spend the night in the Buried Village, knowing that Marta would allow me to sleep in her hovel. Next day was soon enough to start on Pharod's quest. Besides, dying is not something one recovers from in an afternoon.

UNBROKEN CIRCLE OF ZERTHIMON, PART I

Before sleeping that night, I saw Dak'kon examining a small round stone. To my surprise, it seemed to be comprised of a number of interlocking circles, cunningly attached to one another so the user could fold them back into a compact shape when done. I wondered if this stone represented to Dak'kon what my spell book did to me, and allowed him to memorize githzerai magic. I asked him if he could teach me this magic.

"*Know,*" He replied, "that the way of the People is not the same as the Art you have come to *know*. It is not the energy that gives strength. It is *knowing* the self that gives strength. The teachings of Zerthimon speak of such things."

"Would you teach me the Way of Zerthimon, Dak'kon?"

"Do you *know* what you have asked?" The texture of Dak'kon's blade flowed, until it became as stone. "To walk the path of Zerthimon you must *know* of the People. The *knowing* of such things by one not of the People is a difficult matter. There are those not of the People who have heard the Way of Zerthimon, but they do not *know* the Way."

I was intrigued by my companion, and by this Zerthimon he had mentioned. I was anxious to learn more about his philosophy, and through it more about Dak'kon.

"Dak'kon, I want to *know* of the People and *know* Zerthimon's teachings. I believe there is wisdom to be learned in such things."

"*Know* that I have heard your words, and I shall test them. To learn, you must *know* the People. To *know* the People, you must *know* the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon." Dak'kon held up the stone disk in his possession and his spider-like fingers hooked into its sides. There was a *click*, and the plates of the Circle slid into a new configuration. He reversed the motion, sealing the stone. "*Know* the First Circle of Zerthimon is open to you. Study it, then I will hear your words."

I took the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon from Dak'kon. I mirrored the motions that Dak'kon made upon the Circle, and the plates gave way at my touch, the rings sliding into a new

configuration. Upon the rings were a series of symbols; the script was like no writing I had ever seen: it was a series of interlocking geometries, with circles pre-dominating. Just looking at it, I *knew* the symbols and *knew* I could read them. Once again I had used knowledge I possessed, but could not remember getting. I read the first circle.

"*Know* that we are the First People."

"Once all was chaos. The First People were thought drawn from chaos. When the First People came to *know* themselves, they were chaos no longer, and became flesh."

"With their thoughts and *knowing* of matter, the People shaped the First World and dwelled there with their *knowing* to sustain them."

"Yet the flesh was new to the People and with it, the People came not to *know* themselves. The flesh gave rise to new thoughts. Greed and hates, pains and joys, jealousies and doubts. All of these fed on each other and the minds of the People were divided. In their division, the People were punished."

"The emotions of the flesh were strong. The greed and hates, the pains and joys, the jealousies and doubts, all of these served as a guiding stone to enemies. In becoming flesh, the First People became enslaved to those who *knew* flesh only as tools for their will. *Know* these beasts were the *illithids.*"

"The *illithids* were a race that had come not to *know* themselves. They had learned how to make other races not *know* themselves."

"They were the tentacled ones. They lived in flesh and saw flesh as tools for their will. Their blood was as water and they shaped minds with their thoughts. When the *illithids* came upon the People, the People were a people no more. The People became slaves."

"The *illithids* took the People from the First World and brought them to the False Worlds. As the People labored upon the False Worlds, the *illithids* taught them the Way of the Flesh. Through them, the People came to *know* loss. They came to *know* suffering. They came to *know* death, both of the body and mind. They came to *know* what it is to be the herd of another and have their flesh consumed. They came to *know* the horror of being made to feel joy in such things."

"The Unbroken Circle is the *knowing* of how the People lost themselves. And how they came to *know* themselves again."

I talked to Dak'kon about what I had read. He asked what I had come to *know*. I knew he wasn't referring to the surface story of how the Illithids enslaved his people, but what lay behind it

"Strength lies in knowing oneself. I learned that once someone does not *know* themselves, they are lost. They become tools for others."

"You have come to *know* the First Circle of Zerthimon. You not only see the words of Zerthimon, you have come to *know* them." Dak'kon held up the Circle and hooked his fingers around the edges. There was a *click,* and the plates of the Circle slid into a new configuration. He reversed the motion, sealing the stone. "*Know* the Second Circle of Zerthimon is open to you. Study it, then I will hear your words." I read the second circle.

"*Know* that flesh cannot mark steel. *Know* that steel may mark flesh. In *knowing* this, Zerthimon became free."

"*Know* that the tentacled ones were of flesh. They relied on the flesh and used it as tools for their will. One of the places where flesh served their will was the Fields of Husks on the False Worlds of the *illithids.*"

"The Fields were where the bodies of the People were cast after the *illithids* had consumed their brains. When the brain had been devoured, the husks came to be fertilizer to grow the poison-stemmed grasses of the *illithids.* Zerthimon worked the Fields with no *knowing* of himself or what he had become. He was a tool of flesh, and the flesh was content."

"It was upon these Fields that Zerthimon came to *know* the scripture of steel. During one of the turnings, as Zerthimon tilled the Fields with his hands, he came across a husk whose brain remained within it. It had not been used as food. Yet it was dead."

"The thought that one of the husks had died a death without serving as food for the *illithids* was a thought Zerthimon had difficulty understanding. From that thought, came a desire to *know* what had happened to the husk."

"Embedded in the skull of the husk was a steel blade. It had pierced the bone. Zerthimon realized that was what had killed the husk. The steel had marked the flesh, but the flesh had not marked the steel."

"Zerthimon took the blade and studied its surface. In it, he saw his reflection. It was in the reflection of the steel that Zerthimon first *knew* himself. Its edge was sharp, its will the

wearer's. It was the blade that would come to be raised against Gith when Zerthimon made the Pronouncement of Two Skies."

"Zerthimon kept the blade for many turnings, and many were the thoughts he had about it. He used it in the fields to aid his work. In using it, he thought about how it was not used."

"The *illithids* were powerful. Zerthimon had believed that there was nothing that they did not *know*. Yet the *illithids* never carried tools of steel. They only used flesh as tools. Everything was done through flesh, for the tentacled ones were made of flesh and they *knew* flesh. Yet steel was superior to flesh. When the blade had killed the husk, it was the flesh that had been weaker than the steel."

"It was then that Zerthimon came to *know* that flesh yielded to steel. In *knowing* that, he came to *know* that steel was stronger than the *illithids*."

"Steel became the scripture of the People. *Know* that steel is the scripture by which the People came to *know* freedom."

Again, when I was done Dak'kon asked me what I had learned.

"I learned that not *knowing* something can be a tool, just like flesh and steel, if upon encountering it, you attempt to *know* its nature and how it came to be."

"You have seen the words and you have seen beyond them. You have come to *know* the Second Circle of Zerthimon." He took the Circle and with a deft motion, he twisted one of the links so one of the plates slid forth — but strangely enough, the stone still appeared intact. He handed the plate to me. "Meditate upon this teaching, and the *knowing* of it shall give you strength. When you have absorbed it, you shall *know* more." I realized he had given me the githzerai equivalent of a scroll, that I would be able to copy into my spell book. He also unlocked the third circle of Zerthimon for me. My fatigue forgotten, I settled down to study it.

"Zerthimon labored many turnings for the *illithid* Arlathii Twice-Deceased and his partnership in the cavernous heavens of the False Worlds. His duties would have broken the backs of many others, but Zerthimon labored on, suffering torment and exhaustion."

"It came to pass that the *illithid* Arlathii Twice-Deceased ordered Zerthimon before him in his many-veined galleria. He claimed that Zerthimon had committed slights of obstinance and cowardice against his partnership. The claim had no weight of truth, for Arlathii only wished to *know* if flames raged within

Zerthimon's heart. He wished to *know* if Zerthimon's heart was one of a slave or of a rebel."

"Zerthimon surrendered to the *illithid* punishment rather than reveal his new-found strength. He *knew* that were he to show the hatred in his heart, it would serve nothing, and it would harm others that felt as he. He chose to endure the punishment and was placed within the Pillars of Silence so he might suffer for a turning."

"Lashed upon the Pillars, Zerthimon moved his mind to a place where pain could not reach, leaving his body behind. He lasted a turning, and when he was brought before Arlathii Twice-Deceased, he gave gratitude for his punishment to the *illithid* as was custom. In so doing, he proved himself a slave in the *illithid* eyes while his heart remained free."

"By enduring and quenching the fires of his hatred, he allowed Arlathii Twice-Deceased to think him weak. When the time of the Rising came, Arlathii was the first of the *illithid* to *know* death by Zerthimon's hand and die a third death."

I considered the message of the third circle for a long while, and realized its essence could be summed up in a saying I had heard Dak'kon use. I told him I had come to *know* the third circle.

"Endure. In enduring, grow strong."

The words I spoke seemed to strike Dak'kon strangely… as I spoke them, his forehead creased, then resettled into its normal passive expression. He gave me another githzerai 'spell,' unlocked somehow from the circle. I wondered if there was more to learn.

"Very well… is there more you can teach me?"

As I asked the words, I suddenly noticed that Dak'kon wasn't looking at me. He was holding the Unbroken Circle in his hands, studying it. His blade had taken on the same texture as the Unbroken Circle… and Dak'kon suddenly seemed *older* somehow.

"Dak'kon?" I asked, concerned.

Dak'kon's black eyes rose from the Circle and looked at me.

"*Know* that I did not believe you would come to *know* the teachings of the Circle. It is… a difficult path you will walk in learning the Way of Zerthimon. Is your mind focused on this matter?"

When I assured him it was, he unlocked the fourth circle for me. I glanced at what was before me, which concerned a traitor to their people. But it was late, and I couldn't see what this

traitor's tale had to tell the githzerai. I decided to take up its study again, later.

WEEPING STONE CATACOMBS

The next day we entered the catacombs. Stone faces were inset into the walls. Flowing water had left tracks beneath the eyes of these faces, so it did indeed appear that they were weeping.

We started by examining tombs to the left of the entrance. We first ran into ghouls, nasty eaters of flesh of the dead. Then we found cranium rats. It really is true that with enough of them in one place they can cast spells. We also came across vargouilles, which are little more than two wings attached to a human-like head.

We found some treasure in the tombs, but nothing of any real interest. By mid-day we had seen almost everything to the left of the entrance, and I decided to try my luck on the other side.

We were walking down another of the damp stone corridors when one of the twisted stone faces on the walls called out to me in a creaking stone voice that sounded like the shifting of boulders.

"Immortal… regard me. I am… Glyve. I would have… words with you. " As shocking as being addressed by stone was, I was even more shocked at the knowledge displayed.

"How did you know I'm immortal?"

"I see… a burning purpose… within your shell. I see… many things in the falling… dust of these… tunnels. You lack… something essential… and that keeps you… from death's sweet embrace."

"What did you want to say to me?"

"Listen: This place holds… much danger for you. Treachery awaits you… on the surface… and your way is… long and winding. At the end… you will find… what you have sought… but you may not … want it then." I wondered how it could know this.

"Are you some sort of oracle?"

"Oracle? No… I observe. That is all."

"In that case, perhaps you can answer some questions I had…"

"What… did you want… to know?"

"Tell me of yourself. How did you come to be in this situation?"

"I was once… a respected leader… of my community… in the Lower Ward. A petty lord… sought to increase his power… at the expense of my people… my friends… my relatives… and friends and I spoke… against him."

"And then… he captured us… one by one… and bound our spirits and senses… into these screaming faces… under the Ditch… where all filth in Sigil… comes eventually. And then… he let the polluted waters above… flow through our mouths… and noses… and eyes." I felt sorry for Glyve. Forgotten, alone, doomed to unending existence. My offer came readily.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I am cursed to… remain here until… fresh water passes my lips… There is a … magical flask of water… in the … Drowned Nations. Bring it to me… and give me a taste of it… and I shall tell you… of someone… who can help you unlock… its full potential… and you shall never… lack for water… again."

"Through the Dead Nations… where the dead walk … and rule… or through the Warrens of Thought… where Many-as-One holds sway… Neither is without… its risks." I understood him to be referring to an area the undead ruled, like the ghouls we had already run into, or a region I took to be dominated by cranium rats.

"What can you tell me of the catacombs around us?"

"The catacombs were carved… eons ago… to house the dead of the city… who did not wish … the tender ministrations of the Dustmen. They have become… the refuse ground of the city… where dwell monsters barely seen… where humans prowl like… scavengers among the scavengers. Many-as-One patrols these tunnels… and has turned many against … their natures. The Dead Nations… prowl as well… guarding against… the depredations of … the humans … who come among them."

We left the stone face behind, continuing forward. The tomb at the end of this corridor contained little other than traps, so we backtracked, and tried another way. We found another tomb full of traps, but a surprise was awaiting me on the body of one of Pharod's scavengers.

It was an arm…a severed arm… as hard as a wooden club. It looked like it was severed cleanly at the shoulder (most likely

by a scythe blade), and even though it looked many decades old, it was more petrified than rotted. It had an unhealthy gray pallor and was covered with scars. Intricate tattoos decorated its surface, spiraling up from the wrist all the way to the remains of the shoulder.

Upon closer inspection, I knew for a fact that the arm was mine. How long it had been lying around waiting for me was anyone's guess.

I remembered Barkis, barkeep at the Smoldering Corpse, mentioning a tattoo parlor near the bar. He had said the proprietor dealt in special tattoos. He might know something about the tattoos on this arm. He might even have done them. I thought it was important enough to interrupt Pharod's search for a while.

The tattoo parlor wasn't too hard to find, practically next to the bar. I went inside alone. Memories stretching over only a few days, and already I had learned caution. I wasn't sure I trusted Morte, and if I was going to find out any more about my past, I wanted to decide what to tell my companions.

As I entered, I saw a tall creature with a shock of white hair. Its skin had a greenish cast, and a pair of goat horns protruded from its forehead. It was dressed in long flowing robes. I realized I was looking at a Dabus, although this was the first one I had seen which wasn't floating.

I greeted him. The dabus waited patiently, its hands tucked into its sleeves. A series of symbols materialized above its head, then dissipated and a question mark appeared. I realized it was talking in symbolic pictures, rebuses.

I asked the dabus several questions, trying to get a feel for the rebuses that appeared above its head. It was extremely patient throughout my 'discussion,' giving me easy sentences to translate. After a few minutes, I started to get the hang of it… it felt like I had done this before.

I was about to ask his name, but I suddenly realized I already knew the dabus' name — his name was 'Fell.' As if in response, the dabus inclined his head slightly, and a lone symbol appeared above its head. It was blurry at first, then resolved into a white oval with a black lightning bolt through it.

"I feel like I know you, Fell." Fell bowed reverently, and a stream of symbols swirled about his head, rotating clockwise, then counterclockwise. It took me a moment to translate.

(This is the first time and not the first time you have come to this place.)

I asked if he knew who I was. Another series of symbols materialized quickly and sharply into focus above Fell's head. The translation came to me just as quickly and sharply as the symbols themselves… as if I had translated the exact same string many times before.

(Yes. But I am not permitted to tell your story.)

Great. I asked why not. For a moment, there was no response from Fell, then a stream of rebuses appeared, as if trickling out of Fell's mind.

(My apologies, I cannot. I cannot change the nature of a man.) I couldn't explain why, but the last sentence sent a crawling sensation through my skull.

" 'Nature of a man?' What does that mean?" The symbols that appeared above Fell almost mirrored the previous stream.

(My apologies. I cannot say.) So much for that.

"What is this place?" A slow train of symbols materialized around Fell's head… the symbols took several moments to resolve, starting with simple lines, then fleshing themselves out into breath-taking colors.

(This is where I tattoo color and life upon flesh and bone.)

"Can you tell me anything about these tattoos on my body?" Fell studied my body for a moment, walking around me. He mirrored each symbol as he examined it, then returned to face me.

(I know them. None are by my hand.) I asked if he could tell me about any of them anyway. Fell nodded, symbols appearing around him like fireflies.

(The ones upon your back were scribed with a careful hand and are directions for a mind that forgets itself. The symbol that lies upon your left shoulder is the mark of torment.)

"Torment?" The symbol sharpened, gaining edges that were almost painful to my eyes.

(It is *torment.* It is that which draws all tormented souls to you.) Fell nodded at my left arm, at my shoulder. (The flesh knows it suffers even when the mind has forgotten. And so you wear the rune always.) Now for what I had brought with me.

"Did you do the tattoos on this dismembered arm I found, Fell?" Fell examined it for a moment, tracing the patterns with his finger. He then looked up, and a series of rebuses formed, hazy at first, then came sharply into focus.

(The arm is yours. The tattoos are mine. One tattoo speaks of a time when your path was shared by four others.)

"What four others?" Four strings of symbols swirled from Fell's head, matching the pattern upon the dismembered arm.

(They speak of four. Shall I tell you their hearts?) I motioned him to go on. The symbols swirled before me, and I pieced them together.

(One unloved who loves one who does not love.)

(One who does not see what others see and sees what others do not.)

(One who is familiar and bound with duty.)

(One who is a slave and his chains are words.)

As I finished translaking, the four strings seemed to form themselves into links, and they merged into a chain… the chain bent until it was a symbol I recognized, the symbol of torment on my arm.

"You mentioned that there were other tattoos on the arm? What others?" Fell examined the arm again, tracing the other faded tattoos upon its surface. As he did, they each appeared as a symbol above his head, hazy at first, then coming into focus sharply. He turned to face me.

(Ones forgotten, now remembered. You may wear them again if you wish.)

Fell's special talent allowed him to make magical tattoos, which could be worn or taken off at will. Besides his stock of ready made tattoos, I found he could make new tattoos based on my experiences, and from the dismembered arm I had brought. He showed me in his picture-language the tattoos he could create based on the arm, and explained them to me.

A tattoo which he termed the Tattoo of the Lost Incarnation told of the experiences of one of my past incarnations… the symbols and tales were unfamiliar to me, but it seemed to tell of a time when I was lost and abandoned on the streets of the Hive, barely able to make a living robbing and stealing from others I encountered. The crimes the lost incarnation committed eventually drove him to seek shelter in the Weeping Stone catacombs, where he survived for almost a year.

Another, the Tattoo of Wasting Darkness, from the same time, told of when I was seeking shelter beneath the streets and was forced to live as a shadow might, hiding from detection by the Sigil authorities and trying to conceal myself from the more dangerous inhabitants of the Weeping Stone catacombs.

The last which told of this time was the Tattoo of the Weeping Stones, when the catacombs beneath Sigil's streets were my second home. It told of my travelling down into the

tombs, living in darkness, and coming to learn the nature of why the stones beneath Sigil weep.

I examined his other tattoos for a while, and resolved to come back and make a purchase when I had more time and jink. Outside, I rejoined the others. Typically, Morte had to make a joke.

“I knew you'd be back, chief! Finally realized you needed me, huh?” I remained silent on what I had learned inside, little enough that it was.

DEAD NATIONS

After another night at the inn, we made our way back to the Buried Village and the catacombs. As we explored we began to run into zombie warriors, and the bodies of skeletal warriors, that is, skeletons who had become warriors only after they were dried bone. I thought we might be getting close to the 'Dead Nations' the stone face had told us about, and I pushed forward, knowing we were entering an area Pharod hadn't penetrated.

We pushed open one door, and stopped, surprised. A large gathering of the undead were waiting for us. One, a skeleton in robes with a fancy staff, spoke.

"Stop! Thou have come too far, traveler, and trespassed into the Dead Nations, realm of the Silent King! Will thou submit peacefully?"

"Submit to what?"

" 'Tis the will of the Silent King that all who pass the gates into our Nation become prisoners of his lands. Will thou submit?"

I wasn't at all sure of our chances against the numbers in front of us. Besides, as long as the undead were talking, it was possible I might learn something useful. I agreed to submit.

"Come, then… we shall show thee to the Chapel. Know this: thou shall be free to wander these halls, but not to leave the catacombs. Thou shall be a prisoner here until thy death; should thou later arise as we have, thou shall be free. Praise the Silent King; his will be done."

They took us through several passages, and an ancient chapel. From there, another passage led to a room. To my surprise, the room they left us in contained another living person. Someone I knew, who greeted me.

"Ah, another member of the living. Most are slain by the ghouls, this far into the catacombs; you are fortunate."

"You're Soego, from the Mortuary. What are you doing here?"

"Your memory serves you well. I am no longer stationed in the Mortuary… instead, I have become a missionary in these parts."

"Missionary?"

"Yes, I came to these catacombs after hearing rumors of undead that were *aware* in these parts. I hope to save them. Passion ties them to this false life. I hope I can teach them to forsake these passions and leave this false life behind and reach the True Death."

"You want them to die?"

"I wish them to transcend this plane of existence, divorce themselves from passion. It can save them." As I turned to find somewhere to rest in the room, he stopped me.

"A moment of your time before you go. Do not attack any of the undead here in the catacombs; they will not harm you so long as you remain peaceful. Should you prove hostile they will defend themselves, and there are… many of them."

There was little in the way of furniture in the room, only a metal table which I sat upon. I realized this must be were Soego slept. Looking at the side of the table where my feet dangled I saw a panel on the side which was slightly ajar. Wondering if Soego might be using it to store his things, I resolved to check in to it when he was not around. I remembered his suspicious actions in the Mortuary, and questioned if what he had told me of his reasons for being here were the full truth for his presence.

But enough of Soego for now. I left the room, looking for the skeleton who had talked to us when we entered.

I found the skeleton in the chapel we had passed through before. The skeleton wore what appeared to be ancient priest's robes, heavy and ornate. It carried a large, impressive stave, which was capped with intricately carved horns, dangling pendants, and a gilded skull.

I moved in front of it, to get its attention. The skeleton, its eyes aglow like two burning embers, looked me over… but made no reply. I asked if it was this Silent King in whose name we had been imprisoned.

It shook its head, turning with an eerie grace and pointing eastwards. It then turned to me once more.

I asked if I could speak to the Silent King.

It held up a bony palm. With a creaking groan and a puff of dust, its jaws opened to speak: "No." Its voice, deep and resonant, echoed for a long while in the vaulted chamber.

"But why not?" Its voice boomed throughout the chamber.

"No living creature may pass the doors that lead to his throne room; nor would I allow thee an audience even if such a thing were possible. Thou shall *not* see him."

Seeing that this line of questioning was going no where, I tried another tack, asking why I had been imprisoned. The skeleton replied in its resonant voice.

" 'Tis the will of the Silent King. The Living who are caught here are made to languish in his halls until they join the quiet ones."

"Could he be convinced to allow otherwise?" After a short silence, its jaws creaked open.

" 'Tis doubtful, but perhaps. Mysterious are the ways of Silent King."

"What can I do to convince you?"

"Firstly, I would know why thou are here." I answered honestly, since I had no reason to think the skeleton would care, that I was searching for a bronze sphere, to which it shook its head.

"I have seen no such thing. Why dost thou seek this object?" I explained it was for a man named Pharod, which caused a small problem.

The skeleton drew back. It looked up and away, as if peering at the surface.

"Blood still beats in his black, worm-ridden heart? That wheezing sack of flesh still sends his pack into our homes to raid and pillage." It faced me once more. "Thou were wrong to come here… we tolerate no such desecrators within our borders." I started to speak, reconsidered, then continued, not making any excuses.

"Just what do you intend to do, then?"

"We shall execute thee, as per the law of the Silent King. No tomb-raider is to be allowed to live, here." I replied with the first thought that came to mind, that indeed had been with me since we were told we would remain here until our deaths.

"But I cannot die." It stared into my eyes for a time before replying.

"This presents no problem. Thou shall remain here, beneath the Silent King's gaze, for all eternity. Perhaps one day thou shall see the folly of thy ways, and make an effort to be of use to our fair civilization."

I decided to look around more of this Dead Nations before continuing this conversation, or in fact before deciding how I was going to leave.

I found three types of undead within the halls.

First were the skeletons, which although the longest in their peculiar state, seemed to have best retained the faculties they

had when alive, if very few of the memories. One of the skeletons I questioned was talkative when I asked why I had been imprisoned. The skeleton touched its chin, tilting its skull slightly upwards.

"The ghouls are permitted to feast upon all those found robbing the catacombs. The Silent King felt it would be best to let other intruders — those caught wandering and made prisoners, such as thyself — languish here to lapse into our care, rather than be devoured by the ghouls. Thou may wish to ask Hargrimm, our high priest — it is he who speaks to the Silent King."

Ah, so Hargrimm must be the spokesman who had imprisoned us. At least now I had a name. I asked about Hargrimm and the Silent King.

"Hargrimm, our high priest. It is he who speaks to the Silent King, giving us our lord's word and law. He is here, in the antechamber of the Silent King's throne room."

"Our lord and master is called the Silent King because he speaks only in times of dire need." The skeleton gesticulated as it spoke, old joints creaking and popping as it did so. "Ask Hargrimm, our high priest, of him. He can tell thee more."

I asked about the types of undead in the halls. The skeleton nodded.

"We are the oldest of the undead here, the most free of flesh. We make an effort to serve as guides and mentors to the others, maintaining a healthy community here."

"The zombies. Strong, but slow of mind and body, they have retained more of their humanity — their emotions — than we. They serve our community as workers, laborers, under the guidance of Stale Mary, the most caring and intelligent of them."

"Stale Mary is slow, but caring, and wise. She acts as a mother of sorts to the other zombies. She may be found in a chamber west of where thou first entered the Dead Nations."

"The ghouls are strong, violent, and ravenous creatures led by their ghastly matriarch, Acaste. They serve the community — the Dead Nations — as guards… but are an unstable element. Fear of the other undead's numbers, and of the Silent King, keeps them in check. Without our great lord to command them, we… as well as our charges… might fall prey to them, one day."

I asked him what he meant by his charges.

"The silent ones… the dead who do naught but sleep. We protect them, watch over them as they rest."

"Who would disturb them?"

"Many." He ticked them off on yellowed, dust-covered finger-bones as he spoke. "Hungry, uncontrolled ghouls, rats, and most of all… the living. Those from the buried village — servants of a man named Pharod — often descend into the vaults of the Dead Nations, disturbing the silent ones. I do not know why, nor do I care… my only concern is that we stop their foul laboring."

The zombies I could barely understand; apparently they still tried to make their physical, rotting vocal apparatus work, not having learned the skeletons' trick of speech without palate or larynx.

I approached a ghoul with hesitation. The drooling, yellow-eyed ghoul reeked of blood and carrion. It picked at its crooked fangs with long, filthy talons, constantly snuffling the air around it. Its flesh had turned a sickly green color, and was covered in rot and weeping sores.

"Eh… " Morte commented as I got near, "don't know if you want to be talking to that… thing."

"Why not, Morte?"

"They were once humans… they, or their ancestors, feasted on corpses, and this is what they've become. Pretty nasty stuff, chief… they're little more than animals, really. *Dangerous* animals."

I tried to talk to the ghoul, but Morte was proved right. It would not answer, and seemed only barely capable of preventing itself attacking me.

I continued talking to skeletons we met, since they seemed to be the only ones who might be of help. I talked to one who actually seemed to be considering Soego's preaching on True Death. Here was an opportunity too good to waste.

I hurried back to tell Soego that I had met a skeleton who was considering the true death. Soego headed out to see him.

As soon as he left the room, I pried the panel off the side of the metal slab. Inside I found a book. The book proved to be Soego's journal. It detailed his being attacked by a wererat, his eventual regression into lycanthropy, and his flight from the Mortuary after unwittingly slaying and devouring a friend. Looking for a hiding place, he came upon the Warrens of Thought and agreed to serve Many-As-One, hive mind of the cranium rats gathered there. He was now here in the Dead

Nations in order to spy on the undead for Many-As-One, who hoped to one day control this part of the catacombs.

I replaced the journal and panel, and set out to find Hargrimm. I told him what I had learned of Soego, and that the proof was contained in a journal in his quarters.

THE FATE OF SOEGO

Hargrimm felt a stirring of fear. The stranger could be right about Soego. What if Soego had gotten some hint of their greatest secret, and passed it to their enemy? Quickly he gathered a number of followers, found Soego, and they all returned to Soego's quarters, where Hargrimm confronted Soego

"Soego, what is this I hear of thee being in league with Many-As-One?"

"What?! It is untrue! A cruel rumor! A lie!" he replied, but he had broken into a sweat.

"Dare thou lie to the high priest of the Silent King?"

"No! No, Hargrimm, I would never presume…" He started, but Hargrimm cut him off.

"Where is thy journal? Let me see it. Prove thy innocence before the eyes of the Silent King." Realizing he was caught, he started pleading.

"I… I… I beg for your mercy, Hargrimm…"

"The Dead Truce shall protect thee here, Soego, but thou shall never leave these catacombs. Thou shall continue thy pursuit of thy precious 'True Death' here, alone… for the rest of thy days. Farewell."

"But… you… can't… nnnnARAGH!" Soego, enraged, transformed into a man-like rat.

"Mark my words, Living; only the Truce protects thee. Do not cast aside thy only shield so thoughtlessly." But Soego was too far gone to listen.

The wererat cried, "I won't be caged! Die!" Hargrimm called forth a spell which killed the creature before it could take a step. Hargrimm looked silently at the corpse a moment.

"It is done, then. May the Silent King protect us from such filth in the future."

THE SILENT KING

I assumed after finding this spy for him, that Hargrimm might be more inclined to let the three of us go. However, I had no desire to follow him in his confrontation with Soego, and decided to do a little more exploration of the Dead Nations.

I found a puzzled skeleton, who was considering a riddle he had been posed by another of the skeletons. Although I thought the answer rather obvious, I forbore from telling him, figuring he had little else to do to while away the time.

A little while later I came upon the one who had posed the riddle. It did not have the emotionless demeanor of the other skeletons. The skeleton was shaking its head and giggling to itself. It guffawed and snorted occasionally, biting down on its bony hand to stop itself. It was old enough so that no meat was left on its bones… only a few colored rags. I greeted it.

"I understand you've got a difficult riddle." It nodded, giggling.

"Dost thou want to hear it?" I nodded in turn, and it continued, "Ahem! Now, think of words which end in '-GRY.' Angry and hungry are two of them. There are but three words in the Common Tongue… what is the third word? The word is something that one uses every day. If thou hast listened carefully, I have already told thee what it is." Obvious.

"Of course you have. It's 'tongue.' " Even with no flesh, I could tell the skeleton was upset.

"Gaaaah! How did thou know?!"

"The first two sentences are unrelated, only there to trick you. There are three words in 'the — Common — Tongue.' The third word is 'tongue.' "

"Aw, troll's leavings! Oh, well. Just don't tell anyone else the answer. Will thou promise me that, at least?" When I asked why should I, it replied, "Because I enjoy the idea of them standing about, trying to puzzle it out for all eternity."

I looked about, and commented casually, "I suppose you are not as good at answering riddles as posing them."

"What's this?" It cupped a bony hand to the side of its skull. "Do I hear… a challenge? Yes… yes… go ahead! But should

thou lose, or leave half-way through, I shan't speak to thee again!"

It waited for me to start. I realized that my confidence in answering its riddle didn't extend to telling ones based on only a few day's memories. I hastily made something up.

"Hmm. What is worth more? A pound of one-hundred-common, pure gold coins, or half a pound of two-hundred-common, pure gold coins?" It nodded eagerly.

"Easy, too easy! One pound of gold is *always* worth more than one half pound! Foolish, foolish!" It giggled. The skeleton crouched down and drew a simple face in the dust. Pointing to it, it spoke: "Uncles and brothers have I none, but that man's father is my father's son. Who is he, eh?"

"He is your son." I replied.

"Bah! Your turn." I stood silent a moment, then came up with another one.

"The maker doesn't want it, the buyer does not use it, the user does not see it. What is it?" The skeleton tittered childishly.

"Not true, not true! The answer is 'coffin,' and I certainly see mine!" It was ready with its own riddle. "What five letter word does even the greatest of mortal sages pronounce wrong?" Another obvious one.

"Hmm. 'Wrong.' " It shook its fist at me.

"Oooo, curses! Go."

"At night they come without being fetched, and by day they are lost without being stolen."

"Eh… hmm. Ah… stars! Stars, hee-hee!" I silently cursed, since it had been so long since the skeleton must have seen stars I thought it would have more trouble.

The skeleton cracked its knuckles. "I never was, am always to be, no one ever saw me, nor will ever see. And yet I am the confidence of all, to live and breath in this hallowed hall." This one was more trouble. What kind of specter? No, wrong path.

"The answer is… is… ah! 'Tomorrow.' "

"Waaah! Yes, tomorrow, indeed. Go, then."

"I shall. What is the beginning of eternity, the end of time and space, the beginning of every end, and the end of every place?" The skeleton began to giggle derisively, but suddenly stopped.

"Ah… er. Oh, dear." The skeleton hung its head. "I… don't know."

I smiled, since the riddle I had come up with was so similar to its own riddle it was troubling the other skeletons with. I asked if it wanted the answer to my riddle. It nodded.

"Very well. The letter 'E.' " I walked away.

I came to a corridor, and noticed only zombies were around. I asked one zombie for Stale Mary. I couldn't understand the reply, but he pointed down the corridor. The corridor was choked by rubble ahead. At the blockage was a group of zombies; from their stance, it was clear who Stale Mary must be. The musty-smelling female zombie looked exceptionally old, almost mummified. Her skin had the appearance of moldering, gray-green leather, and one of her eyes had fallen out, leaving a dark pit in her face. Her voice was slow and thick.

"Guh-guh-guhreeetingz." She indicated herself and spoke again. "Suh-suh-stuhl Muhhhry." It sounded as if her vocal cords were festering away in some soupy mess at the base of her throat. I wondered how she gave the other zombies orders.

"How is it that you speak to these other zombies? I cannot understand them as I can you…"

The corpse took a step towards me, reaching her arm out to touch me. I moved a little back.

"What are you doing?" She only moaned softly in reply, reaching out once more to touch my arm. Despite the ravages of time, there was still some vestige of humanity left in her gaze. I could see she meant me no harm.

I allowed her to touch me. Her nearly fleshless hand brushed gently against my forearm, and she spoke, "Luhhhssnnn." (Listen.)

"How is it that I can understand you?" She touched me once more.

"Spuhhhkkk tuuuh uhhh yuhhhh kuhnn. Buhuuhhh mhuuusssst duhh uhhht puhhhpuhhleee." (Speak to us you can. But you must do it properly.)

"Can you teach me?" She smiled, the hardened skin of her face creaking like thick leather.

"Yuhhh." (Yes.)

Some time passed. She finished teaching me the skills required to speak with the dead, a process she called 'Stories-Bones-Tell.' I asked if I could talk to any dead body.

"Suhmmm. Uhhhhers tuh duhhhud. Muhhht yuhhhh skuhhhh." (Some. Others too dead. Must use skill.) I was sure she would be more responsive than Hargrimm.

"Mary, I need to speak with the Silent King. Can you help me?" She stared at me, and I understood she needed to know why.

"I need to leave this place, Mary. I've so much to do… and to be imprisoned here, simply for stumbling upon the Dead Nations… it isn't right. Please… I ask only for a modicum of compassion. Can you help me?" Stale Mary was quiet for a time, then nodded. She pointed to the first of the three portals along the northern wall.

"C-c-cluuhh ayyysss. Thuuuh uh Suhhhlunnh Kuh-kuknnng. Wwhhhuuuhbh uuhhhnd nuuuheehhh ahhhlllk-ku-kuuuhh. Bhu-bhu-buhhh uhn suuuhhh lhuuung ayyye lhhhuuuv." (Close eyes. Think of Silent King. Walk through northwest alcove. But only so long as I live.)

I thanked her, and walked to the indicated alcove. I closed my eyes, thought of the Silent King, and stepped forward.

I opened my eyes, and found I had portaled to a large chamber. It was dominated by a circular dais, raised a man's height above the floor. A throne was placed at the center of the dais, a skeletal figure occupying it. I moved forward. I saw that Hargrimm was also in the room, and he cried out.

"Stop this heresy! Do not approach the Silent King!" I ignored him, and continued forward, climbing the dais to confront the Silent King. Hargrimm moved forward to confront me.

"So, thou have come." The skeleton turned to gaze upon the massive throne. "What thou see here is the end of our culture." The figure on the throne did not move. I pointed to the throne's occupant.

"Is that the Silent King?"

"Yes. None must know that the King speaks only silence." I asked another question, forcing Hargrimm to confirm what I suspected.

"Why does he not speak?"

"He is silent because he has left this place. He abandoned us for the True Death… and left only this husk in his place."

"How long has this gone on? " A new voice answered me. Stale Mary had entered the room.

"Luhnnngg." (Long.) Hargrimm stared off into the shadows.

"He stopped speaking to us long ago — he himself has left for the thrice-damned True Death." A trace of rage and despair trickled into his voice. "He has abandoned us here to suffer

amongst the Living! We have become… the prey… of all that lives."

"Then who really rules?"

"Mary and I speak to the Silent King. We rule in his stead. We interpret the wishes of the Silent King based on what he said many long years ago. It has not been easy…" Hargrimm sounded tired; he sagged beneath the weight of an invisible burden. "Many questions, many questions do I have for him."

"Why don't you tell your people the truth?"

"I wish to preserve what we have created. I do not wish to die." Stale Mary spoke, her voice ponderous.

"Nuh-nuh-nor I." (Nor I.) Hargrimm told me more of his reasons.

"If our own people were to learn of this… or Acaste, leader of the ghouls, were to discover this deception… or Many-As-One, the hive mind of the cranium rats… all that we have created here would be destroyed. This husk is all that keeps the inner and outer enemies at bay. If the truth were spoken, our small civilization would become dust. I cannot force thee to be silent. But I would ask thee to look beyond thyself, to consider what would happen if thou spoke of what thou have seen here."

I briefly considered the opportunity presented to me here. If I offered myself as an immortal king to sit in the throne before me, I was sure the two of them were desperate enough to accept. But the Dead Nations could only be a temporary camp on my journey, not the destination.

"I only wish to leave, Hargrimm. Grant me this, and you shall have my silence." Hargrimm was silent for a moment.

"Thou may leave this place. Go, now… and I beg of thee: honor thy word."

DROWNED NATIONS

Hargrimm showed me an exit that led to another part of the underground complex. Before I left I decided to check on Soego, to see what had been his fate.

On the way to his room, I tried out my new 'Stories Bones Tell' ability on a female zombie. The rotting, female corpse at first seemed completely unaware of me. As I approached, however, she turned and nodded slowly, as if greeting me. Morte stared and her, and chimed in.

"Wow, chief… what a beauty, eh? Not everywhere you can meet a sweet little chit like that, ya know."

"Well, perhaps if you can get past the entire 'stench-ridden, maggot-laden, rotting carcass' thing…"

"Yeah, see, that's what I'm… hey!" Morte spun to face me. "Are you getting sarcastic on me?"

That was the first time I had succeeded in putting anything over on Morte. I questioned the zombie, and found I could easily understand her, but her mind was as slow as her body, and I learned nothing new.

When I reached Soego's room, I found his corpse. I examined the body; however he had died, the corpse had been left mummified. I felt little sorrow for him, but I had the feeling the Dustmen would want to have the corpse, even though he had abandoned them. The corpse was too awkward a load to drag along, but perhaps just the head. In a moment it was bagged, and I was ready to go.

We came to the area Hargrimm had told me was known as the Drowned Nations. The ghouls, acting as scouts for the dead, were prowling this area for eventual use by the Dead Nations.

Besides ghouls, the area was infested with more vargouilles, and trocopotocas, large white lizards. In one section, after sloshing through ankle high water, and fighting off a pack of vargouilles, I found a flask on the floor, its stopper loosened. I turned it upside down, to allow the water to run out. Which ran, and ran. The water did not stop coming. This must have been the magical flask of water the stone face Glyve had mentioned.

Further along, after killing two trocopotocas, I was able to reach the body of one of Pharod's collectors. He must have had

a rare skill, for besides having penetrated so far I found the bronze sphere on his body! I examined it. The simple bronze sphere was about a foot across, but it was surprisingly light, as if hollow inside. Although its basic appearance was normal enough, the sphere somehow managed to offend the rest of my senses. The texture of the sphere, just the ‘feel’ of it gave me the impression it was an egg that was just about to burst open — just touching it made my skin crawl. To make matters worse, the faint smell of rotten custard emanated from it, and it made my eyes water.

THE TOMB

Nearby was a gate in the wall. As I opened the gate, a cold wind rushed forth. I began to shiver as I heard the sound of a voice whispering, although I could not make out what it said. In a second, it was gone and all was silent…. I realized that I had been here before, and I had a strong feeling that my companions must not follow me in.

The gate led into a long room. I had entered along one of the long sides, and the only exit was on the opposite wall. I wandered about the room, my only company a few corpses on the floor, long since rotted away to skeletons. On one wall was an inscription, which I read

At last I have you. Never again will you torment me, for no mortal man can escape these walls. Seek the keys and embrace death with each that you find. Only then shall you be free.

Apprehensive at what this could mean, I hurried back to the door I had entered by. It had closed itself and locked. When I turned around, I noticed something else. Inlaid in the floor was a symbol of torment, the same which adorned my arm. Wondering at this, I entered the only other exit from the room.

I walked forward, seeing ahead a square chamber with a sarcophagus at its center. As I made to enter the chamber, suddenly I was elsewhere. I was in a room, with its own sarcophagus. However, when I investigated, all I found in the sarcophagus was a key. The symbol of torment was inscribed on the floor of this room as well.

The only visible exit from the room led back toward the same square chamber. As I moved forward, suddenly I shifted. I was in the room I had just left. What was I to do now? As I thought I had begun to pace, and I stepped on the torment symbol. A bolt of lightning struck, and I knew no more.

I awoke from death in the room I had first entered when going into the tomb. Having no better plan, I made for the square chamber again. Once again I was transported. This time to a new room, but it still contained a sarcophagus, on the floor a symbol of torment and a passage to the central, square, chamber.

I had figured out the message in the original chamber by now, and knew these traps must be to prevent anyone apart from me learning what this tomb held. After dying two more times, I was able to finally reach the central chamber.

Around the central sarcophagus were inscriptions carved on stone panels. The panels gave slightly under my touch; for every one I pushed, a click came from the sarcophagus. The inscriptions interested me greatly, plainly messages to me. I started to read.

Fear names. Names have power in identity. Others can use names as weapons. Names are a hook that can be used to track you across the planes. Remain nameless, and you shall be safe.

I am the Nameless One.

Nameless one. An appropriate name for myself. The inscription, all the inscriptions, must have been written by an earlier incarnation. I moved to the next panel.

So they said — You have been divided. You are one of many men. You bear many names, and each has left their scars on your flesh.

LOST ONE... IMMORTAL ONE... INCARNATION'S END... MAN OF A THOUSAND DEATHS... THE ONE DOOMED TO LIFE... RESTLESS ONE... ONE OF MANY... THE ONE WHOM LIFE HOLDS PRISONER... THE BRINGER OF SHADOWS... THE WOUNDED ONE... MISERY-BRINGER... YEMETH...

I grow weary.

The carvings on the next panel were crude, although it almost might have been the same hand which carved them.

There is nothing that can be done. Memories are gone, perhaps never to return. With every death I lose a part of me.

How can one be immortal and still die?

He told me that my mind is weakening with every death. I asked him how this could be, but he could not answer. He was of no use. I butchered him so that no other incarnation would ever benefit from his uselessness.

Another panel told me I had an enemy, apparently one as immortal as myself.

I have lost lifetimes because of my killer. I cannot deceive him, so I must kill him. I tried to throw him off the scent. I left false bodies, tailored in such a way to placate him. I roamed the most outer planes, hoping to use distance as a shield. I built this tomb filled with traps to try and kill the killer. I hid.

All I bought was time. The attacks inevitably begin again, with more fury than before. Deceptions are useless. Somehow,

the killer always knows that I live. And no matter where on the planes I hide, he finds me… eventually.

The speculations on the next panel before me mirrored thoughts I had considered.

I suspect that we will continue to die and be reborn until we finally get our life *right.* I do not know what we have to do to bring that about, though. And therein lies the frustration.

Is it some sort of karmic cycle? As I gather, some incarnations have committed terrible crimes but also there have been a number of incarnations where we have labored to do nothing but good. Are these incarnations intended as punishment? I don't know. And that is the only real truth I can offer in these carvings: I do not know.

At what point does the *I* get separated from the *we?* At what point am I freed of the shackles of the actions of these other incarnations? At what point am I allowed to be *me,* without the weight of these past lives?

Moving on, the next panel commented on the importance of journals; the walls I was gazing upon represented a journal as well.

It is extremely important to record your journeys so that you might learn from them. The greater need, however, is that the sources of information you use to uncover this mystery need to be protected when they are found. If key figures, documents or oracles are somehow removed, either by death or destruction, then you will never know who or what you are or how you came to be this way.

The next panel looked like the directions on my back Morte read to me in the Mortuary.

I know you feel like you've been drinking a few kegs of Styx wash, but you need to CENTER yourself. Among your possessions is a JOURNAL that'll shed some light on the dark of the matter. PHAROD can fill you in on the rest of the chant, if he's not in the dead-book already.

Don't lose the journal or we'll be up the Styx again. And whatever you do, DO NOT tell anyone WHO you are or WHAT happens to you, or they'll put you on a quick pilgrimage to the crematorium. Do what I tell you: READ the journal, then FIND Pharod.

Don't trust the skull.

Morte hadn't read that last line to me. I read the last panel in the room.

What little life there is in the world is draining out this hole in my body. The world can burn, the planes can burn, just give me life! I will destroy this life so badly, break it, smash it, and stain it in blood and feces, so you cannot live it either! Let all creation burn for I cannot die!

Pushing the panels had unlocked the sarcophagus at the center of the room, which contained only another key. Having gotten four keys from the four sarcophagi I had encountered, I found myself in yet another chamber. A portal opened in one corner. Entering it, I appeared outside the tomb. I motioned Morte to one side, to talk to him. He floated over to me.

"What's eating you, chief?"

I asked him to read the inscription on my back again. He hesitated, but I insisted I wanted to hear all of it this time. He rattled off the same shortened version as in the Mortuary. I asked him to continue.

"Go on. What does it say after that?"

"What are you talking about, chief? There isn't any more."

"What about, 'Don't trust the skull?' "

"Oh… *that* bit at the end? Well, I figured it was wash, so I didn't read that line out loud."

"Oh, really? And what do you think it means? Do you think it refers to *you?*"

"I doubt it. I mean, you can trust *me,* right, chief?"

"Are you *lying* to me, Morte?"

"No! C'mon, what's your problem, chief? I haven't steered you wrong yet."

"*Yet.* I don't like the fact you didn't read me that line, and I'd like to know what *else* you've neglected to mention since we've been traveling together." Morte still maintained his usual, casual manner.

"Nothing! I've told you everything… well, ALMOST everything, but nothing, you know, *dangerous.*"

"If there's ANYTHING else, I suggest you tell me now."

"Chief, seriously, there's nothing else. I wouldn't hold out on you."

That was the last I could get him to say on the matter. I was sure he was lying, but I wasn't sure why.

PHAROD

We retraced our path, headed back to the Buried Village. On the way I stopped to talk to Glyve. The water from the enchanted flask we had found dissipated the dirty taint the ditch water had left, and it succeeded in freeing Glyve from his stony prison. Before he faded entirely, he told me to seek out a woman called Nemelle in Sigil's Clerk's Ward for the command word needed to unlock all of the flask's powers.

Back at the Buried Village I decided to rest for the night, seeing Pharod only when fresh the following morning. One more night waiting for his precious sphere wouldn't hurt him after all this time.

The next day we entered his hall.

"Ah, corpse…" Pharod turned as I approached, his crutch *clacking* on the cobbles of the Court. He licked his lips and smiled expectantly. "Have you brought me what I asked for?"

"The bronze sphere? Here it is." Pharod's eyes gleamed as I handed him the bronze sphere — he touched it gingerly, almost reverently.

"You…" He chuckled. "Ah, corpse, such a gamble you were, and paid off handsomely, you have…" Pharod studied his reflection in the sphere and *tsked*. "The years have been cruel to me, I see…"

"I did what you asked, Pharod. Now I want some answers." Pharod didn't even look at me as I spoke… his attention was swallowed by the sphere he held.

"Yes, yes, ask your questions…" Pharod turned the sphere in his hands. "Very important, your questions…"

"What do you know about me? Why was I told to seek you out?" Pharod studied me with a critical eye.

"Stay your weapons for what I'm about to say, corpse, for it could be your ears'll take offense…" Pharod smiled wickedly. "My ears no longer care, but yours are still fresh for the burning, it seems." I did not care about Pharod, only the information he held.

"You have my word that I'll stay my hand, Pharod. But I need to know what you know."

"The truth…" Pharod's tone softened, as if cajoling. "The truth was stretched a bit from my mind to my tongue when we first spoke, corpse — in all terrible honesty, I know little about you." He raised a withered finger. "Yet, hear me out…" I impatiently motioned him to go ahead.

"You're a cutter who plays at being dead, as I see." Pharod squinted at me. "Some time ago, you came to me, like you are now, but not, just strolled right into Ill-Wind Court and said you wanted an 'audience' with me." After pausing a moment, he continued. "Aye, an 'audience.' " Pharod chuckled, like whispering sand. "Like I was royalty…" He seemed amused, but there was an edge in his voice. "You knew the right things to say, you did, oh yes. You spoke the chant like a Guvner, born and true. And I listened."

"But you were royalty… at least a man of position, once, were you not?" I interjected.

"Once." Pharod hissed. "*Once.* Titles, only words, NOTHING in the end…" He lapsed into silence, then *tsked*. "Knew that, too, my history, I think you did…" Pharod gave a mock bow, his crutch creaking as he leaned against it. " 'Oh, Pharod, great Collector King,' you said. 'I have come before you to request a boon.' 'A boon?' I said. 'What could I offer a man of such obvious strength?' " Pharod wagged his crooked finger.

"And you asked for a strange thing: You says, 'Lord Pharod, I ask for *courtesy.* Your Collectors roam throughout the Hive. If they should find my body, I want it kept safe. That is all I ask.' " Pharod shrugged. "A simple boon."

I suddenly feel a prickling in my skull as Pharod spoke the word 'boon' and the smell of blood and fear rushed through my nostrils… Pharod was hiding something, something that happened in the past, involving me — and it scared him. The boon he granted me was no simple matter.

"So you granted my boon just like that? There's nothing to be gained from it, for you. Why did you even agree to do it?" Pharod fell silent for a moment.

"A dead man can keep no promises, and promises to a dead man are easy enough to make, corpse." I could tell he was prevaricating.

"You're a merchant, Pharod, not a Samaritan. There must have been another reason…"

"Aye…" Pharod's face suddenly peeled back in fury, his skin flushing red. "After you'd strung up a score of my blood on the Hive walls t' DIE, I had *enough* reason to promise you the

PLANES themselves. Then your butchering self comes to my HOME, my KIP, to DEMAND a 'boon' of me…" Pharod calmed himself, though his face was still flushed. "Aye, I agreed…"

I tried to tell myself that this other incarnation was another person, no relation to me at all. But I still felt shame at this other's actions.

"I'm sorry about your people, Pharod, for what that's worth." Pharod *tsked*.

"No matter, them bodies served me well enough. The Dusties pay the same for fresh deaders as for old…"

"Was that the only reason you agreed to my request?"

"You knew things about me… things only I knew. You knew I was greedy for somethin' beneath Sigil, and you put a name and picture to it: the bronze sphere, you said. I didn't think you would fetch it for me…" He chuckled. "Yet did you? Aye. The Planes turn in strange ways…"

"And that's *all* you know?"

"All I know? Nay… but it's all I know about you, corpse." Pharod replied.

"Fine. Next question… what did you take off my body after I died?"

"I?" Pharod licked his lips. "Why, *I* took nothing, corpse." His face split in a grin. "Then, I wasn't the one that found your body…"

"Who did?" Pharod's smile widened, pulling the pasty folds of flesh back from his face like a curtain.

"My daughter, the rose of my eye, the sweetest of my family, and the sharpest wit of them all…" He licked his dry lips and sighed in mock sadness. "Such a cruel tongue on her…"

"Your *daughter?* Who?"

"My darlin' girl, Annah. She found you, dead as deader can be, in a place where most Collectors wouldn't go for a *mountain* of coppers. Could be she plucked something off you, could be not…?" He leaned in, shaking his head. "You'll have t'ask her, for it's not her Da's place to say." He still was taking me for a fool.

"Don't lie to me, Pharod. You're a merchant, and you always take a cut from your workers. What did Annah give *you* from my body?"

"Ah… yes… my tribute…" Pharod folded his withered hands over his crutch, almost protectively. "There's no telling

what was from *you* or not, corpse. Most like, there was nothing." I had had it with his skirting of the truth.

"Pharod, my patience is at an end. If you don't hand over what was stolen from me, I will see to it the Dustmen know where to find you."

Pharod was silent for a moment. He tapped his fingers against his crutch… slowly. I waited, glaring at him.

"Where has the decency of man gone…" Pharod grumbled, shaking his head. "A courtesy I am doing for you, corpse… such a courtesy. Pharod *parting* with anything… it'd be the dead-book for me if anyone heard… wait here, move not a yard. I shall return."

After a long while, Pharod returned, his crutch *clacking* against the flagstones. In his hands, he held a number of items, which he passed off to me.

"You will be *silent* on this and accept the *blessing* that I even remembered…"

Absently, I catalogued what he had given to me out loud. "A few hundred coppers, a scrap of paper, bandages, and a ring? Very well… it was Annah who found me? Where is she?"

"Where's Annah?" Pharod shrugged. "She's hiding in the shadows here, I expect, listening to us trade the chant. I called for her after you went below… had to ask her if you were *really* in the dead book when she found you or not…" He chuckled dryly, then took a deep breath and called out to the darkness. "Annah! Stop mithering in those shadows and come greet our guest!"

I turned to see a striking red-haired girl dressed in leather armor… I hadn't even heard her enter the chamber. Her right arm was covered with a series of interlocking plates that looked as if they were taken from the skin of some creature, and a horned shoulder piece protected her left arm. Oddly enough, she had a tail… that was flicking back and forth as I watched. I instantly recognized the tiefling girl.

"You're Annah? I met you in the Hive — outside the Mortuary, correct?" The girl ignored me and turned to Pharod.

"What's this about, then? I'm not playing the leash-pull with this scarred dog, so I'm not. Get one of your other gullies to do it."

"Annah, rose of my eye — have I not taught you to *respect* the dead?" A thin smile wormed across Pharod's face, and he made a slight bow towards me. "This resourceful corpse needs to know where you found him."

"Eh? What are yeh on about?" She squinted at me. " 'Ee's not a deader."

"Ah! Yes, my mistake…" Pharod nodded, then his voice dropped dangerously. "Yet, my darlin' Annah, that still makes it YOUR mistake… for this one only had one foot in the dead book when you brought him to me." He tapped his crutch against the flagstones with a light tap. "He woke up, sought me out — MOST embarrassing."

"So?" Annah glanced at me, then shrugged. "He shouldn't be playing deader on the Hive while I'm about, or he'll wake up in a Dustie's arms, he will." I was still angry at Pharod, and took some of it out on the girl.

"Maybe you could have CHECKED to see if I was alive before dumping me off there."

"Oh, aye, and maybe YEH should have been more careful an' maybe yeh wouldn't have been lying face-down n' stone-still on the alley cobbles like a deader, aye?!" I calmed a bit, realizing the unreasonableness of my complaint.

"Enough of this — where did you find my body?"

"Show him where you found his body, Annah." Pharod tapped his crutch again for emphasis. "Take him to the haunted alley." Pharod studied Annah for a moment, then grinned and turned to me. "If yeh happen to lose my darlin' Annah on the way to the alley, corpse, you come back and see Pharod. I'll guide you…"

"Tchhhh…" Annah sneered at Pharod, then threw a glance at me. "C'mon, then. And keep yer steps quick, jig? I've little time tae waste on the likes of yeh." I indicated that I wasn't ready yet, there were still a few things I wanted to investigate here. Annah would have none of it.

"Oh, aye? Well, then, yeh can sniff out yer grave on yer own, eejit! I'm not wai—"

"Annah…" Pharod's voice was quiet, but it cut through the girl's speech like a knife. "Be his minder. See that he comes to no harm while in the village. Then guide him to where he wishes to go." Annah spat on the ground.

"Pox on yeh both…" However, she came with us docilely enough as we left the hall, where she stopped me.

"I got some things to say ta YEH, I do." I told her to go on.

"I seen the way yeh act, an' yeh need to be told some things if we're going to be travelin' together… first — don't go flapping yer bone-box and locking eyes with everyone yeh meet. That's a sure street to trouble, it is. An' don't be takin' no

one’s name in vain or yeh'll be attracting the worst sort of attention, and right quick, too.”

“An’ one last thing. Don’t be thinkin’ yeh can treat me like a cobblestone, neither — yeh start doin’ that, an’ I'll take these blades an’ carve yeh, I will.” I asked her about the blades she carried.

“Me blades? Aye, these dags are mine. I like these punch dags, I do — yeh can keep yer axes n’ hammers n’ clubs — these dags are more me style. Yeh jest behave yerself, an’ yeh won’t be wearing ‘em, aye?”

There were several items I wanted to check in the Hive before I went with Annah to where she had found me. We left the Buried Village, heading back to Ragpicker’s Square. Before we reached the square, I remembered the items Pharod had given me, especially the note. I pulled out the note, and read it.

- Beware SHADows
- Beware places where the night LIVEs.
- They wait
- There is no Natural Darknesss
- Only ShaDOWS

I wondered what it could mean.

* * *

Pharod stood and fingered his prize, the bronze sphere, the item that would save him from his fate. He had scarcely noticed when the others left, so intent was he on his find. A motion! He shook his head, it must only be a rat.

He returned to study of the sphere. After all these years, he finally had it. It would take study, but he was certain he could unlock whatever secret the sphere held, the secret that would protect him. Wait, someone was near him. But he had heard nothing. It must be Annah. He would flay her hide, disobeying him…

He froze, noticing what was actually nearby. It was as if the darkness hiding in the corners of his hall had flowed, taken shape as a dozen humanoid shadows surrounding him. He could not even make a sound as they closed in, claws rending, and he died.

XACHARIAH, PART I

We left the Buried Village, traversing the Hive once again. As we walked Annah made a comment to me.

"Wal, I grew up here. Not a pleasant childhood, mind yeh."

I told her we were heading for the Mortuary, and let her take the lead. I watched her tail; its twitching was almost hypnotic. And the swaying of her hips led my thoughts to other areas…

She glanced back, and noticing my interest, stated, "Yeh like my wee tail? I'll wag it at ya."

She had managed to make me feel foolish, again. I hurried forward, taking the lead without comment.

As we passed near the Hive market, I greeted Iron Nalls, still searching out nails from the timbers surrounding her. She straightened up and put her hands on her hips.

"Back again, eh? What need ye this —" She suddenly noticed Annah beside me. "Well, cutter… who's yer new friend?"

"Her name's Annah."

"I can speak for meself, yeh know! I'm Annah, as if it's any business of yers." Annah crossed her arms with a *hmph.* Nalls only smiled and turned her good eye back to me. I smiled in return, and took my leave.

I briefly looked at the stock of another merchant, which was tableware. As I began to move off, she tried to get me to stay.

"Oh, sir, but wait!" She put her hand on my forearm; her touch was light as a feather. "Are you *sure* there's nothing you need? Surely something for your own home, or a gift…" Annah spoke up.

"Aye, he's sure; didn't yeh hear the man?" Annah rolled her eyes. "Fer the love o' the Powers, why don't yeh pry yerself off the sod fer a bit? Yeh're embarrasin' yerself, yeh are." The merchant turned up her cute, button nose.

"Hmph! Are you so jealous that you'd rob a poor merchant of her sale? The good sir is a customer, o Plane-Touched, not some piece of meat to be owned or fought over." With that, she nodded at me. Annah looked horrified, then furious.

"*Jealous?!* Bar that! Watch yer tongue, woman, or I'll split it from yer bone-box an' bury it an' yer corpse on opposite ends

o' Sigil, I will!" The merchant, clearly frightened, stepped back a ways. "And yeh!" she turned to me, eyes flashing with rage, and made a disgusted sneer. "Not a *word!* Don't go gettin' any ideas from this addle-coved chit's blatherin', or yeh'll be good an' sorry!"

I quickly moved away before Annah had any reason to make good on her threat to the merchant. I had been busy considering Annah's effect on me. I hadn't considered my effect on her.

We reached the Mortuary, and entered with the excuse that we needed to speak to Dhall. What I really wanted to do was use my new ability to reach the spirit that once inhabited a corpse, and see if there were any of the walking dead who remembered anything about me. I might even encounter a previous companion who had gotten penned into the dead book. Unfortunately, most of the walking dead were so old their spirits were beyond my reach, while the recent dead from the Hive could be expected to know no more than the living I had questioned in the streets.

I found something of interest when I approached a male corpse with the number "331" chiseled into his skull. His eyes and lips were stitched closed, and there was a gaping hole torn in his throat. He smelled *foul.* I used the 'Stories Bones Tell' ability on the corpse.

"Wh-wh…" The zombie was awkwardly getting his voice back, and he sounded alarmed. "Who's there?! Answer me!"

"Can you not see me?" I asked.

"Blind I am, in death as I was in life… now answer me. Who are you?"

"Who are you?" I repeated the question back to him.

"I…" The zombie became silent. "…my name… has fled me. I… can no longer remember who I am."

I turned away in frustration, only to surprise a look of concern on Dak'kon's face. He quickly resumed his impassive expression as I glanced at Morte, but I could detect nothing unusual about the skull. Still, I had my suspicions, and devised a plan to test them.

I headed back to Fell's Tattoo Parlor, only this time I took my companions with me when I entered. Inside, Annah stiffened when she caught sight of Fell.

"We'll draw the Lady's gaze if we stay here, we will." I asked her what was wrong…

"Are yeh daft?!" Annah turned to me… and I suddenly realized she was *frightened*. "Are yeh so pig-eager to dance in the Lady's shadow yeh'll bandy words with this one?! Let's give this place the laugh before we get penned in the dead-book!" I was surprised to see her usual canny self-reliance so suddenly pierced, and asked again what was wrong.

"It's *Fell*." Annah threw a fearful glance at Fell. "Let's be away, aye? No good'll come of being here, so it won't!"

"He's a dabus who's not a dabus, aye? He walks on the ground…" Annah's voice dropped to a whisper, and she started trembling. "No more questions, let's give this place the laugh, aye?" When I didn't immediately move towards the door, she continued, "Fell's a dabus who angered *Her*. It's said he's a dabus who isn't a dabus, and the time's close when the Lady's gaze'll fall on him, so it will."

"You mean the Lady of Pain?" I realized what was the source of her fear.

"Aye… and heed yer tongue." Annah made a semicircle in the air in front of her as I mentioned the Lady's name. "The dabus work for the Lady, an' she protects them… 'cept Fell." She shuddered. "Let's be away, aye?"

It was important I speak to Fell; I couldn't stop just for Annah. I told her I just needed a few moments to talk to Fell.

Annah grabbed my arm. "Please, nay, nay! No good'll come of it — anyone speakin' ta Fell could draw the Lady's gaze. I donnae want t'die, I don't!" To my surprise, Annah looked close to tears.

I hesitated, wanting to hold her, but afraid I would be rebuffed. I settled for trying to comfort her using words.

"Annah, no harm will come to you while I'm here — I promise. I just want to speak to him for a moment." For a minute, Annah just looked at me. Then, something in my gaze seemed to calm her, for she steeled herself.

"I donnae why I…" She shook her head. "Go on, then, talk ta him! I donnae care!" There was an undercurrent of fear in her voice.

I pretended that the last time I was here I could barely understand Fell, and asked Dak'kon to translate for me. I asked Dak'kon to ask Fell if he had done the tattoos on the dismembered arm I had found.

Fell repeated what he had said before, that one tattoo spoke of a time when my path was shared by four others. Dak'kon, rather than translaking, remained silent. When I pressed

Dak'kon, all he would say was that Fell said the arm was mine, the tattoos his.

I pressed Dak'kon, asking if he had said anything else. Dak'kon was silent for a moment… and suddenly, instinctively, I knew Dak'kon was *lying* to me. He continued on with a dead-level tone.

"The rest of the symbols are not *known* to me."

For Dak'kon to lie to me hurt. I had thought I was getting to know something of him, of the honorable ways of the githzerai; more, I had trusted him. I saw this as a betrayal, and asked, bluntly, why he was lying to me. Dak'kon fell silent again; he did not turn to look at me — he seemed to be staring at something leagues away.

"The symbols… there is no good in *knowing* the answer to what you ask."

"Since when has *not* knowing the truth of something ever really helped anyone, Dak'kon? The counselor who councils ignorance betrays his station."

"There is truth in your words. That truth… should be *known* to me." Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then he turned to me, his eyes hardened. "The symbols speak of four you have traveled with in the past."

The symbols swirling about Fell formed a pattern I had seen before, describing the four who had travelled with me. Dak'kon, however, continued without looking at Fell.

"The tattoo speaks of four minds. One was a woman, who loved a man who *knew* her and *knew* not love. The other was a blind man, who saw things no mortal eye could see. Another was a familiar, a mage's pet, bought and bound. And the last was a slave."

"Why did you not want to tell me this?"

"The four are bound with a symbol that is *known* to me." A symbol of torment had appeared above Fell, which Dak'kon elaborated on, "The symbol is torment. He says that you have always worn it, for the flesh *knows* that it suffers, even when the mind does not."

Dak'kon refused to say any more about the four, at least not in front of those I hadn't chosen as companions.

I consulted with Fell to purchase some tattoos, but Annah was still very nervous, her eyes darting about as if expecting the Lady to break through a wall at any moment, so I cut my bargaining short.

DAK’KON, PART II

I headed back to the Mortuary, stopping to enter a mausoleum near there that appeared to have had no mourners, or other visitors beyond rats, for ages. When we entered, I turned to Dak'kon, to continue the discussion we had started in Fell’s Tattoo Parlor.

“When Fell was describing the tattoo on my arm, you said you knew the symbols, they spoke of four who traveled with me in the past. What can you tell me of the four?”

“The woman was young. She worshipped time, for in her blood, she *knew* of things to come. The archer was a blind man, and he could see things that no other one could see. The path of his arrows always led to the heart of an enemy. The familiar and the slave I *know* little of.”

“See things to come? The woman’s name wasn’t Deionarra, was it?”

“*Know* that Deionarra was the name she carried.”

“What do you know of the archer?”

“I *know* little of him. I *know* he was a soldier. I *know* that alcohol had taken a portion of his life. In blindness, he had come to *know* a different sight. In *knowing* this, he had become strong. Yet he did not *know* his own strength.”

I asked Dak'kon what his name was, but before Dak'kon could respond, I suddenly *knew* the answer. There was a crawling sensation in the back of my skull, and I felt the name surfacing, as if from beneath a great muddy ocean.

I said, softly to myself, “His name was *Xachariah*… he was blind, but in blindness, he had gained a second sight that allowed him to see things hidden to others. He was an archer, and where his arrows flew, they found the hearts of their targets.” Dak'kon, meanwhile, replied to my question.

“*Know* that Xachariah was the name he carried. And *know* that his name pierced the heart of many enemies.”

“Do you know why I was travelling with these four?”

“The tattoo speaks nothing of their path, only the symbol that bound them. *Know* that the path may have been *known* to only you.”

I thought back to the two of the four he had not mentioned, the familiar and the slave. I guessed Morte must be the familiar.

“And which of them was you, Dak'kon? Were you the slave?” Dak'kon was silent for a moment, and the surface of his blade swam, as if in turmoil.

“*Know* that this one owed you a service. In owing this to you, it became as slavery.”

“How did this come to be?”

“*Know* the tale is long. The matter is between me and the other that was once you. *Know* that if you hear it, *know* it shall be a long tale.”

“Upon the rolling Plane of Limbo, the People shape cities from the chaos with their thoughts. *Know* that there is no place for a divided mind.” Dak'kon raised the blade from his shoulder and held it before him. As he stared at it, it *sharpened* until it was almost as thin as a piece of paper.

“A divided mind is an unfocused mind. A divided mind fractures walls and weakens stone.” As Dak'kon spoke, the edges of the blade corroded slightly, the metal misting and melting along the edges. “Many divided minds may *destroy* a city.”

“Long have I *known* the words of Zerthimon. Through my voice, many have come to *know* the words of Zerthimon. The *zerth* protect the community from all threats, whether to the body or the mind. They are the guiding stones in the chaos. So it came to pass that I spoke the words of Zerthimon without *knowing* the words of Zerthimon. It came to pass that I no longer *knew* myself.”

“So… you doubted the words?”

“No.” Dak'kon’s voice was edged, and his blade *sharpened* in response. “I *knew* the words. Yet it came into my heart that perhaps others did not *know* the words as Zerthimon *knew* them. And so division formed. As my mind became as two, as my mind became divided, those that looked to me as a guiding stone became divided. Many scores of githzerai, many hundreds of scores of githzerai… doubted. Shra'kt'lor died that day.”

“The enemies of Zerthimon came. *Know* that their hatred of his words and the People lent their blades strength. *Know* that they sensed the weakened city, and they brought war with them. Many githzerai drowned in the chaos and beneath the blades of our enemies.” Small beads of metal appeared on the surface of the blade, as if it was blistering. “*Know* this happened long ago.”

"As I fell from the walls of Shra'kt'lor, *know* that my self was broken. My blade was mist, my mind divided. I was adrift upon Limbo's seas, and I wished to drown. I died for days, my mind awash in division, when death finally came to me. It wore your skin, and it had your voice."

"Me?" I asked, wondering how I had been there.

Dak'kon replied, "You asked that I hear you."

As Dak'kon said the words, my vision bled outwards, and a crawling sensation began to worm its way up through the back of my skull… I felt nauseous for a moment, and my vision was suddenly as chaos, smeared, twisted, and I was someplace else, someplace in the *past*… I surrendered to the memory.

Everything around me was in turmoil — my vision was hazy, swirling, dizzying, all at ONCE… there was mist, pockets of fire, islands of mud, stone, and ice-covered rocks swimming through the Plane like fish, impacting and dissolving, droplets of water arcing through the howling air, and lashing my skin like teeth — I choked back my nausea, and I steadied myself; this was the Plane of *Limbo*, all was chaos, nothing was stable… I focused on the dying man that lay before me. It was why I had come to this place.

I examined the *zerth*, saw if he still lived. The 'man' was a githzerai, his body embedded in an earthen pocket that swirled around him — unconsciously, he had formed a grave from the elements, and though bits of fire and water licked at his face, he did not respond. His hands were ashen, his coal-black eyes focusing on nothing — his emaciated frame spoke of starvation, but I knew it was the least of his wounds. It was faith that dealt him the mortal blow.

I looked for the blade he carried. In his limp left hand was a twisted mass of metal, its surface having melted around his hand like a gauntlet. As I watched, it steamed and hissed, like a diseased snake. The githzerai did not seem to be aware of it… but it was that weapon that had brought me here.

"Dak'kon, *zerth* of Shra'kt'lor-Drowning, last wielder of the *karach* blade, know that I have come to you with the words of Zerthimon, carved not in chaos, but in stone, carved by the will in an Unbroken Circle."

At the word 'Zerthimon,' Dak'kon's eyes rolled in their sockets, and they attempted to focus upon me. With effort, he cracked his mouth to speak, but only a dry hiss emerged. I brought forth the stone from my pack and held it before him so he could see.

“Know that the words of Zerthimon inscribed upon this stone are true, and know that your divided mind need be divided no longer. All you must do is take the stone and you shall *know* yourself again.”

Dak'kon’s eyes flickered over the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon, and for a moment, I thought he might be too close to death to recognize it. Then the right hand twitched, and he pulled it slowly from its earthen prison, the clumps of earth streaming off it becoming water in Limbo’s chaotic winds. His skeletal hands clutched the stone, like a drowning man, and his eyes flashed.

“Know that I have saved your life, Dak'kon, *zerth* of Shra'kt'lor.”

Dak'kon’s eyes turned from the stone and flickered over me, and he hissed again, too dry for a moment to muster the words. He blinked, slowly, then spoke, his voice barely above a whisper, but the words were what I wanted to hear.

“My… life is yours… until yours is no more…” I closed my eyes, and returned to the present.

“So you got the Circle from me?”

“Yes. In *knowing* its words, I *knew* myself.”

“Tell me about that other ‘me'… the incarnation you knew. What was he like?”

Dak'kon’s gaze travelled through me, and he fell silent.

“Dak'kon? “ I prompted.

“*Know* that he was different. *Know* that the differences were not marked on the skin, nor in the Way of the weapon, nor in the attire that cloaked him. *Know* that he was different in the way of thought and the means he acted upon his thoughts. His WILL became substance. *Know* that he saw others and did NOT see them. He *knew* only how they could serve him. His heart was treacherous, and it was cold, and never did its coldness burn him.”

“Did it ever touch you, Dak'kon? Did he betray you?” Dak'kon’s blade began bleeding into a dull, flat black, and I watched as edges, like teeth, began sprouting from the edge of the blade. His face clenched, and he spoke through his teeth.

“It is not my *will* you *know* of this.”

“*Tell* me, Dak'kon. Did he ever *betray* you?”

“I surrendered my WORD to him. I surrendered my SELF.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The People do not allow themselves to be enslaved to another in deed or chains. If we find ourselves in such a cage,

we ACT to free ourselves, even if it means we must endure another cage for a time. You performed a great service for me. In so doing, you enslaved me. I acted to free myself. *Know* that I surrendered my word and my self to *act* in your name until your death." I felt a sense of horror.

"But… I can't die."

"That was not *known* to this one. I surrendered my *word* to him. I surrendered my *self*. *Know* that there is now nothing left that I may surrender except my life. *Know* now that I follow you only so I might die." Now I knew why he had been so reluctant to speak of this. I felt compassion for the tormented one in front of me, searched for some way to ease his pain.

"Dak'kon, it doesn't have to be that way… I can release you. I no longer wish you to be a slave — consider the debt paid."

"No…" Dak'kon's forehead creased in pain, and his eyes stared through me. "It is not your word that carries the weight, and your word will not free me. The word that chains me is mine. The torment is mine. I *know* in my heart that the chains remain. Words will not free them."

"Is there any way you can be freed?"

"You must die a final death. Yet your path is not death's path. There is *no* resolution to this matter." I couldn't accept that.

"I swear I will find one, Dak'kon. I will find one that sets you free." Dak'kon's voice became ragged, as if he had suddenly become sick.

"*Know* you have added other words to my words." His expression was pained, and his gaze met mine. "Now you have chained us both."

I was sorry to have caused him more pain, but I still meant to find a way to set him free.

XACHARIAH, PART II

I left the mausoleum, and re-entered the Mortuary, seeking out the blind zombie again. I used my 'Stories Bones Tell' ability, and asked if he was Xachariah.

"Wha… you!" The zombie seemed shocked, but gladdened. "By the Lady's Gaze…" His tone took on a sense of wonder. "Aren't you *dead*, cutter?" I asked who he really was.

"So, it's hard to peel away this filthy shroudskin an see ol' Xachariah the Fool beneath? It is I, cutter. Blessed be the Powers, I thought never to see you again… but you've changed too, as far as my ears can tell… have you been making poor choices again?" Xachariah wheezed from his throat hole. "Be you dead, too?"

"It's a long tale… but no, I'm not dead."

"Well, cutter, I suppose being dead's not something one would doubt, though how can you talk to me? Your voice is as clear as a knife…"

"What are your doing here?"

"I am a stable hand in the most lifeless place of all. Be it that I could pass beyond the Eternal Boundary and have a Plane to call my home, but much of my soul was squandered, and now I am here."

"What's it like being a zombie?"

"It's honest work…" The stitching came undone from Xachariah's mouth and the flesh around his lips peeled back in a smile. "…I care little for it."

"What led you to this state?"

His voice dropped, as if ashamed. "It's a hard path following in your footsteps, cutter, and many terrible things did I see. I took to drink, and became half-sodden with the stuff. Once, when I was sodding drunk, I signed my body off to the Dusties. Fate decided ta kick me when I was down, and I died shortly afterward."

"What can you tell me about my previous life?"

"Why? Have you forgotten yourself?"

"In a manner of speaking… yes."

"Well… you were a strange one, always suspicious and watching for something… reckon somebody like you had got

enough enemies in yer lifetimes. And there was no denying that anybody who messed with you ended up in the black chapters of the dead book."

"Anything else? Any specifics…"

"You could be damnably ruthless, too… like when you made me sign that contract, or abandoned that one mewling chit on Avernus. We had a Balor of a time, as well. None of us ever even entertained the notion to jump ship on your watch, son."

"At your core, you looked at what happened to you like taking territory in a war; everything was like a battle to you, and you were the most ruthless bastard I ever near met. Naught else mattered except for solving that goal. Poor Deionarra with her sobbing and pleading with you didn't sway you none, the gith warning you about your strategies, and poor Xachariah just trying to hold on when we hit the Planes. You were tough like you couldn't die, but we were only human. Now I guess we're all in the dead book… or in and out of it, so to speak."

"You left something when you left us, cutter… you left Dak'kon without a master, and the skull without a friend. Me? You stabbed something so deep inside me, it never came out when I was alive. Caused my blood to run cold, it did, that thing sitting like a lump of lead in my chest." I asked him to tell me about Deionarra.

"That feisty chit-who-would-be-a-soldier swore she'd follow you to Baator and back, and by the Powers, she was so addled by the thought of you without her she did just that. Cared little for me or the gith, and a bare little it was. She was wild with heart poison for you, she was, proof she was barmy. I don't understand what the womenfolk saw in yer scarred mug, but it set their blood a-boil. She was some rich scut from the Clerk's Ward, and you needed something from her, and the only price was that she came with you."

"What did I want from her?"

"One of the darks I never did bring to light, cutter. Perhaps you tell me?"

"What can you tell me of the gith?" After the discussion I just had with Dak'kon, I didn't fear that anything Xachariah said would hurt him further.

"Grim-lookin' gith… unfriendly and silent, like all their kind. Didn't trust that gith a lick, I didn't. See, cutter, them spindly giths care only about two things: keeping out of slavery and killing them squid-headed illithids. Everything else is just lower down the slope, and he didn't give a damn about any of

us other than you." I also asked about Morte, interested in his perspective to see if he shared my suspicions.

"That filthy-talking skull was hankering for a bruising, so it was! Always smarting off, it was, and making fun of my condition!"

"You… you were a… blind archer?"

"That I was. You truly have forgotten, haven't you? All men see with more than their eyes, cutter… some of them better than others. I sensed the hearts of my foes — *your* foes — and my arrows always struck true. Ah, those were some times…"

"Do you know what happened to my journal?"

"That scrapbook that you'd stitched together outta yer own flesh and had more pages than I had years in my life?! Good fortune indeed if you've lost that ghoulish book! Always scribbling in it, you were, and it smelled a fright. It was like you were afraid that at any moment someone would take it away… you wrote in it 'til skin tore from your fingers and I wondered if you were trying to spill out your brain box through your pen. Sometimes we would hold up for days while you wrote. I hated that infernal book. It seemed to hold you by the heart, and not in a kind way. The last I saw of it, cutter, it was in your possession. If you don't carry it, I don't know where on the Planes it could be." Before I left, Xachariah asked for a favor. His voice dropped, as if ashamed.

"I made some mistakes, some damned bad ones to be sure, and one of my biggest was signing that Dustman contract. If I hadn't been so sodden with bub, I never woulda done it. I regret it, and I was hoping you could set it aright."

"Way I reckon, this body's gonna last a long time… and every day's too long to me. Couldja maybe gut me again, cutter… for old time's sake? The thought of spending another batch of years here in the Mortuary with these whitefaces is a mighty cold one. Can you see fit to put me back in the Dead Book where I belong?"

"If that is your wish…" I gutted him, and Xachariah fell to the floor with a heavy thud. There was a faint hiss from the body, and I saw the chest heave once, then with a faint rattle, the corpse went silent.

"Rest in peace, Xachariah."

ANNAH, PART I

We headed back to the Buried Village. I wanted to see if I could convince Pharod to remember anything else about myself, and we could rest the night there.

Once more we entered Pharod's hall. At the far end we found Pharod, lying on the floor, dead, worth now only a few coppers to a Dustman.

"Da! What happened? Who *did* this to yeh?!" Annah cried out upon seeing the body.

I took her aside, and asked her, "Annah, do you know how Pharod died?"

"I…" She shook her head. "I *donnae.* No one with half-a-mind would — Pharod got a long shadow, he does. Yeh cross him, an' yeh end up getting th' stick, yeh will."

"You don't have to accompany me anymore, Annah. If you need to stay with the Buried Village, I —"

"Nay…" Annah interrupted me. "I don't need tae be in the Village — an' I was wonderin' what I'd do if Pharod got penned in the dead-book, I was." She snorted. "Oh, well; he's probably mounting someone's wall in the hells, he is."

"But… he's your father. Don't y—"

"Not me *real* Da, he wasn't." Her eyes took on a hard look. "He was greedy, an' he was stupid, an' he was selfish, an' he was weak." She frowned. "An' now 'ee's dead. And that's all." I asked about something else that had puzzled me.

"Annah, when Pharod went to return the tribute he took from my body, he vanished for a while, then came back — but he never left Ill-Wind Court. Do you know where he went?"

"Oh, aye — tae hear tell, ol' stutter-crutch had got a stash pit somewhere close tae him. It's the only reason I can see why he'd set up kip in that filthy, drafty hall, it is. Nothing but stink and shadows."

"Really? And that's where he puts the tribute he gets? But where would he keep it all? If he's been at the Village for as long as he says, he would have amassed quite a collection."

"Well…" Annah was silent for a moment. "I know he's never left his hall to get his tribute when he needed it."

"He wouldn't want to walk far with that lame leg of his, though."

"Aye, that's true — but only if yeh don't watch him careful. He isn't lame, though he puts on a fair show about bein' weak in the leg."

"So why does he carry that crutch?"

"I donnae." She nodded at me. "Yeh might as well ask why yeh have bones running around your waist, yeh do."

"So that crutch of his… could be a portal key?" Annah frowned in thought for a moment, then slowly nodded her head.

"Aye… there's a thought." She shrugged. "I wouldn't know how yeh'd use it, though. Maybe yeh just need tae *have* it."

Pharod was dead, but there might be information concerning me in his stash. I went to Pharod's body. He still had the bronze sphere, which I took. I also grabbed his crutch, and began walking about the hall.

In one corner the crutch triggered a portal. We passed through, into Pharod's vault.

I was staggered by what we saw. The vault was huge. There were not just a few books. There were shelf upon shelf of volumes, in an order which Pharod had taken with him to his grave. Piles of rubbish, assorted junk. Pharod must have had help creating this storage space… I thought I knew what had been the fate of his helpers when he was done.

We searched until late in the night, although we could cover only a tiny portion of what was there. We found mundane treasures, it is true, but nothing that shed light on my past.

While Morte and Dak'kon were searching elsewhere, I took the opportunity to talk to Annah some more. She looked at me questioningly when I indicated I wanted to speak to her.

"Aye? What is it yeh want then?" I asked her to tell me about herself.

"Aye, now what yeh be wanting to know about me for? Are yeh jest bored? It's not some grand tale, it isn't, so if yeh're expecting some epic, yeh'd best go rattle yer bone-box at someone else, jig?" I encouraged her to tell me about her background, which she took to mean her tail.

"I seen the way yeh look at me tail — if it'll keep yer eyes to yerself, then I'll tell yeh where it came from: it's a blessing from me Grand Da… or me Grand Ma, whichever o' them was the fiend. I'm a tiefling, so I am, with just enough of the demon blood in me to sprout this tail outta me back. That blood trickled its way from me Grand Ma n' Grand Da to me… after passing

through me own Ma an Da, whoever they were." I asked her to tell me more of Pharod.

"Ol' stutter-crutch? He's me Da… well, not me *real* Da. He found me when I was a wee girl…" Annah shrugged. " 'Ee needed a Collector to crawl inta places the rest of his fat gullies couldn't squirm, so he took me under his crutch."

"Don't get him wrong by thinkin' he had a kind bone in his body… he wasn't shedding no tear for me bein' an orphan — he just needed someone to help him scarp deaders off the streets of the Hive, an' I'm small enough so I can get inta places his other boys can't. Plus, most of the gullies in his pack are wee boys with the fear in 'em, so I end up finding most of the deaders in places they're too a-scared to look. The Dusties pay a nice bit of copper for the deaders I bring 'em, and Pharod don't take so much off the top that it leaves me a beggar, so he's not so bad, I s'pose."

"Been at the Village longer than I. Came there a stone's age ago, maybe even *found* the place, some o' the villagers say." Annah frowned. "Pharod's a shrewd one, he is. Has a way of squeezin' more outta copper than most, an' he never was at a lack for jink."

"Was he searching for that bronze sphere all that time?"

"I s'pose." Annah shrugged again. "I don't know why he was all a-fire tae get it, I don't. I could smell it as soon as yeh brought it to him." She wrinkled her nose. "Foul custard smell it had. Still… it must have been something right valuable for him tae carry on about it like he did — almost a half-score o' Collectors got penned in the dead-book tryin' tae fetch it." I knew the reason why he searched for it.

"I think he was searching for it because he thought it would save his life." She blinked, asking what I meant. "Pharod didn't lead a good life, I gather — he was once a 'Guvner' in one of the Upper Wards. He apparently used his position to lie, cheat, and hurt others in the process — so much so he was destined to go to the hells when he died. He thought the bronze sphere would save him somehow — so much so he threw away his title, his wealth, and his position to try and find it."

"Really?" She went silent for a moment, then shook her head. "No accountin' for Pharod's foolishness, there isn't. A trinket won't save yeh from fate's hand. If the stains on yer soul are black enough, no amount o' washing will get 'em out." She paused. "Still, if he thought it could save him, maybe it *was*

important somehow… or at least worth a bit o' jink." I considered her, and murmured half to myself an observation.

"I didn't think you and him looked much alike, anyway." Annah's eyes narrowed, and her tail began to lash back and forth.

"And what do yeh mean by *that,* then?" I stumbled in replying.

"I meant that he doesn't look much like a tiefling."

"Aye, he *doesn't*… and if yeh knew one thing about tieflings other than what yeh'd heard from any half-grinnin' Hiver on the street, yeh'd have the sense to know that none of us tieflings look a-like, jig?" She shook her head. "No hope for yeh, that's for dead-sure."

"I didn't mean that as an *insult.* You both look so different. I mean Pharod's… so… *Pharod,* and you're not."

"Oh, now what coulda tipped yeh off to that? My hair? My skin? I can't think of anything else…" Annah slapped herself lightly on the forehead, then sneered sarcastically. "Maybe it was the *tail?* Oh, aye, that might have been it! Yer so much sharper than I am, yeh are. A real gem."

"I meant it's hard to see any resemblance between that ugly, stooped, greedy, smelly gutter-troll and you." Annah's face flushed a deep red.

"Oh, is that *so?* And how do yeh see that?" I could not lie to her; I told her the full truth, which I only knew as true as I said it.

"I mean, have you ever *looked* at yourself? Aside from the way you carry yourself, you're confident, sensible, and graceful. And that doesn't even take into account your obvious good looks: you have that rich, fire-red hair, those sharp green eyes, and that striking profile."

Annah just stared at me. I wondered what her reaction indicated.

"So that's all I meant when I said you and Pharod look nothing alike."

Annah nodded, still staring at me. She didn't even blink.

"Are you listening to me?"

Annah suddenly leaned in, and she bit me sharply on the neck, giving a soft hiss. Rather than pulling back, she pressed closely into me and whispered into my ear.

"D'yeh fancy yer chances?" Her tail began to lash slowly back and forth, but the rhythm was more hypnotic than angry. I could feel Annah's heart beating fast in her chest, and the color

rising into her cheeks. I suddenly became conscious of the fact that Annah's skin was smooth, soft. "I want tae tell yeh something, an' yeh can't poke fun at me."

"All right…" I replied.

"Do yeh know I like the way yeh *smell?* Oh, aye — it drives me barmier than a Chaosman, it does." She sniffed up the side of my cheek, and she gave a low, eager hiss. "I see the way yeh look at me, and I *like* it. Yeh've got hungry *eyes*, yeh do. It makes me a-fire."

"I want tae bite yeh, soft-like around the neck…" She teased the side of my neck with her teeth, never breaking skin, and with every whisper, I could feel her breath along my ear. Her hand slid up around the back of my neck, and tightened, and I could feel her nails digging into my skin. "I want ta drag me nails along the back of yer neck, and force yeh to kiss me."

"Do yeh know I can *smell* yeh from fifty paces, that smell of fermaldyhe pouring offa yeh like one of them dustie shamblers. Maybe if yeh cleaned yerself up some, yeh'd be a right prize." Her eyes flashed. "I'd make passion with yeh so hard yeh'd be knocked off the spire." She stepped back, her tail flicking lightly against my leg, then gave me a hard stare. "So… d'yeh fancy me?"

I didn't reply, but grabbed Annah, and before she could squirm free, I bit her lightly on the neck. As my teeth touched the skin, Annah hissed loudly, clawing like a cat, and tore away from me.

"I was only *teasin'* yeh, yeh scarred vampire! L-l-leave off!" Despite her protestations, however, her face was flushed, and she was breathing heavily. "An' watch yer mitts next time!" She crossed her arms. "Yeh makin' me red, yeh are!"

I stepped back a little as well. Now that I had a moment to think, I worried that I might be taking advantage of her. I wondered how much of her reaction was due to Pharod's death, who despite her words I could tell she had cared for very much.

Unnoticed by us Morte had returned, and for once I was grateful for his barbed wit, which got me out of what had suddenly turned awkward. Morte made one of his usual mordant observations.

"I'd just like to interject here and point out that I'm not going to say anything to spoil the mood, chief. I'll just float here and watch. Don't mind me — just sitting here, floating and watching, that's me."

Annah said, “Stop starin’ at me, yeh pikin’ skull.” I just announced that it was late and we needed to rest. It might take a month to see if there was anything of real worth to me in Pharod’s vault, and I didn’t want to waste the time. We needed to move on.

CHAOS DOGS BARKING

The next day I was ready to see where Annah had found my body. As we moved through Ragpicker's Square, I thought of my promise to tell Sharegrave where Pharod's bodies came from. But he would no doubt continue exactly where Pharod had left off. Even if I didn't tell Sharegrave, some berk would soon take control of the Buried Village, and organize more expeditions into the catacombs, looting the dead.

I considered this as we walked through the Hive, and came up with a solution. I stopped at the Gathering Dust bar, a Dustman hangout, and talked to several inside. The Dustmen evidently already suspected where Pharod must be getting his bodies, and I described to one individual what he had been doing, and where his bodies were coming from. I felt better, since now Hargrimm's and Stale Mary's charges would be protected.

As we walked through the Hive I saw coming towards us a githzerai inhabitant of Sigil. I moved to intercept him. The gith turned to face me as I approached. Like Dak'kon, he had a yellow cast to his skin and a gaunt frame. His clothing was a curious blend of sharp colors and dull, mud-stained browns. The gith's dead-black eyes flickered over Dak'kon, then me. I had learned something of polite githzerai talk from Dak'kon, and knew a proper greeting.

"Hail, sword-ringer." The githzerai ignored me and turned to Dak'kon instead. He spoke several clipped words in a strange, low tongue — I thought I understood the inflections correctly, so I could translate what he had said.

"All beholden, *zerth*." Dak'kon replied in the same tongue. The sentence structure was odd, but I thought I understood what Dak'kon said.

"This one is numbered among the faithful." I asked Dak'kon what he was saying, to try and confirm my translation. The githzerai turned to me as I spoke, then turned back to Dak'kon and spoke again, this time at great length. I still had some difficulty, but thought it was getting easier.

"There is one by Dak'kon's name who is not one of the People. It is said that his mind is divided. It is said that he is a

zerth that does not *know* the words of Zerthimon." Dak'kon made the same reply as before; the tone had changed slightly, but the meaning seemed to be intact.

"This one is numbered among the faithful." Dak'kon fell silent, as if to give the words time to sink in. "The one beside me speaks. Will you hear him?" The gith's response was so quick it almost had the force of an attack behind it. I was not certain if I got the entire meaning, but it seemed as if the gith just issued some sort of challenge to Dak'kon in the form of a question.

"*Zerth*, do you *obey* the words of this human?"

I was tempted to defend Dak'kon, but wasn't sure I wanted this gith to know how much I understood of what he said. Besides, Dak'kon was capable of defending himself. Dak'kon's reply was a short one, but his speech was slowed, as if he had to drag the words from his throat.

"T'cha's choice has become mine." The gith fell silent for a time before continuing.

"This matter carries the stink of the illithid about it." His eyes flickered across Dak'kon's face. "I see no chains upon you. You speak your mind. How did this blasphemy come to be?"

"The chains are my own." His skin seemed to take on an ashen shade as he spoke… it sounded like every word was slowly killing him. "Anarch of a hundred years, there is no hourglass that can measure the tale. The matter is as twisted as Fri'hi's roots. Its resolution is one of impossibility and may never come." Dak'kon frowned, then his voice strengthened. "The one beside me speaks. Will you hear him?"

The gith did not look at me. His attention was focused on Dak'kon. "He may speak. I will hear him."

"He will hear you," Dak'kon said as he turned to me.

"Very well. I had some questions…" The gith replied with a metaphor.

"Ach'ali-Drowning."

I struggled to remember what this particular metaphor meant. Ach'ali-Drowning: Essentially, "A question whose answer would serve no purpose." This was usually a request to the speaker to make a vague or 'useless' question more specific.

I recalled the story Dak'kon had told. The githzerai make their home on the Outer Plane of Limbo, a plane of chaos. Stability can only be achieved by shaping the chaotic matter of the plane with the mind; focus and discipline are necessary for this to occur. "Ach'ali" was a foolish githzerai of myth who was

lost on Limbo, and she was barely able to form an island around herself. While adrift in the chaos matter, she met a planewalker who offered to help. Ach'ali asked so many useless and unfocused questions on how to return home, however, that the isle of matter dissolved around her, and she drowned in Limbo. I was more specific with my next question.

"Can you tell me about Dak'kon?"

"He walks with you." His forehead creased. "How is it he is not *known* to you?"

"I was hoping you could tell me something about him." Actually, I was hoping to gain more insight into what other githzerai thought of Dak'kon.

"He is not speechless. If you would *know* him, put the questions to him. Do not insult us both by treating one as a statue."

The gith would not answer any other questions about Dak'kon or the githzerai, and I learned nothing new about the city from his clipped answers.

I resolved, again, to somehow free Dak'kon of his vow. Failing that, I could at least try to learn more about the githzerai.

Annah led us to what appeared to be an abandoned tenement. We approached an entry in the side of the building, a door framed by an arch. What I first took to be a door in the archway was actually a painting. The artist had made use of the shadows of the overhanging arch and some subtle texturing effects to give the door the illusion of substance.

"Are you sure this is the door, Annah?" I asked.

"Aye… it's been smeared with barmy paints from the Starved Dogs, it has — it's a real door until yeh look at it, then it turns into a painting."

"How did they do that?" Annah shrugged.

"There's stranger things in th' Planes." She suddenly frowned. "You might as well ask how yeh got yerself out of the dead book after I was SURE yeh were dead."

"So, this door… I just don't look at it? And *then* open it?" Annah glanced at the door, then nodded.

"That's the dark of it, if chant be true."

"All right, then… I'll do what you say. You just —"

"Houl' on!" Annah stopped me before I reached for the door. "This is the only path I know ta reach the place I found yer corpse, but it's not the safest road, aye? Yeh sure you're ready? I'm not here to play yer minder, no matter what ol' stutter-crutch said."

"What's beyond this door that's so dangerous?"

"Chaosmen," Annah whispered. "Barmy as they come. Barking wild into th' day and night, ready to either paint yeh with colors or crack yer brain-box yeh with a chamber pot. Dangerous bloods, they are."

"If they're so dangerous, then how did you get through?"

"I crept in nice and quiet-like. Can't paint yeh or kill yeh when they can't SEE yeh." She looked me up and down with a frown. "Doubt I can pull that twice with yeh around. Yeh look right clumsy, yeh do."

I closed my eyes, reached for the door and fumbled around… to my surprise, I found a handle. With a slight tug, the door opened. A narrow passage led into the building, and from within, I could hear distant howling.

We entered a small room. I saw a slender tiefling girl standing with her back to me. I noticed that both her hands and the upended table in front of her were smeared with a fresh coat of what appeared to be pink paint. She seemed oblivious to my approach.

I greeted her. At the sound of my voice, the girl turned her head to regard me. Her face, though somewhat dirty and spattered with drops of pink, was strikingly beautiful. She flashed me a wide, mischievous smile, then returned her attention to the makeshift canvas.

I tried to talk to her, but the tiefling girl seemed totally immersed in her artwork. She ignored me entirely.

From this room a short hall opened, with doors on both sides. There was another inhabitant in the hall, and I figured his reaction was likely to prove more typical, as he attacked. He was quickly dispatched, being so foolish as to face four to one odds.

Taking the left hand door, we ended up in another hallway which stretched across most of the tenement. Glancing in a room off the right side of the hallway, I heard a whispered voice, apparently trying to get my attention. Looking around, I saw a figure hidden amid the shadows in the corner of the room. As I drew near, a young woman stepped out to reveal herself. She was dressed in a loose-fitting tunic, which, together with her short-cropped hair and slender frame, gave her a rather boyish appearance.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you." She nodded in the direction of the door in the opposite wall. When I asked why, she winced at the sound of my voice, putting a finger to her lips

to indicate silence. She paused for a moment, then answered in a hushed voice. “A whole mess of them howling lunatics, that’s what. Looks like they’re having some sort of gathering. Won’t be able to get through to the alley until they clear out.”

I asked who she was. “My name’s Sybil.” She whispered quietly, then spat into her palm and reached out to clasp my hand. I then asked what she was doing there.

“What does it look like I'm doing? I'm hiding. I came in here looking for… food.” I noticed that as she spoke, her right hand moved instinctively to the pouch at her waist. “Only the barking idiots in the next room showed up and decided to throw a party on the front doorstep. Now I'm trapped in here and can’t get out.”

Getting back to the matter at hand, I asked how many were in the next room.

“I counted about a dozen of them. Of course, I was peeking through a crack in the door, so I could be off by a handful or so.” I pondered for a moment, then asked another question.

“Is there another way to get through to the alley?”

“There may be another way to get past those animals without a fight. There is another door that leads in there. From what I was able to see, there are stacks of wooden crates along the same wall as the other door. It may be possible to sneak from *that* door to the exit on the other side of the room. There’s only one problem…”

“The door’s locked… I tried it. My guess is that key is on one of the thugs upstairs. I'm not addle-coved enough to go up there looking for it, though.” She folded her arms across her chest and stared at me expectantly.

“If the key is up there… I'll find it. Farewell.”

Before I left, she added, “If you do manage to live long enough to find the key, the door is in a room to the southeast. I'll be watching from the shadows. If you can unlock the door and make it out to the Alley in one piece, I'll be right behind you.”

I asked Annah to lead the way, since she had been here before. We went back to the hallway, and continued down it. It ended in a door which led to another room, and steps leading upward. Annah motioned us to stop. She had found a trap, and proceeded to disarm it. Morte floated up to her to stare at what she was doing. I could tell from the tightness of her shoulders as she worked on the trap that she didn’t like the audience. When she was done, she turned to Morte.

“If yeh keep bobbin’ about, skull, I'm goin’ ta mount yeh on the end of a pike!” Morte quickly floated back to me, but his exaggerated bobbing as he did so contained its own message.

We went up the steps, ending in another hallway. On this floor we were forced to kill two more of the chaos thugs, but found nothing of interest. The other end of the hallway led to more steps, which we followed upwards.

This proved to be the top floor. We encountered a small group of the chaosmen, including a mageling. The mageling proved no match for me in magical ability, as the chaosmen proved no match in fighting ability. At the end of the fight I found a key on the mageling.

We went back down to the bottom floor, exiting through another door of the room at the base of the steps. We were actually on another side of the room the main group of thugs occupied, and a little searching revealed the secret panel Sybil had mentioned.

I doubted whether all of us could sneak past the group in the next room, besides we might need to come back this way. I wasn’t sure how well we would do fighting against a large group, either. But I had a solution. I gave Annah a magical artifact we had found in the catacombs, a pipe that could call forth a poisonous cloud. I carefully explained to her how it worked, and what cautions to take to see she did not inhale any of the gas. Then I sent her to sneak into the next room and unleash the gas on the occupants. I was apprehensive for her safety, but felt I must show that I trusted her abilities.

I need not have worried. She was able to sneak in, and without anyone noticing her she unleashed the gas, killing them all. It was unfortunate they all died, but likely it would have come to that any way if we tried to all enter the room. We passed through another door, which led outside, into an alley. As we stood outside, trying to get our bearings, Sybil came through the same door.

“I must say, cutter… I'm impressed. I thought for sure those animals would chew you up good. Well, I guess I should thank you.” She paused for a moment, then reached into her pouch and pulled forth a small, green gem. “Here… this one’s on the Dogs. See you around, cutter.”

ALLEY OF LINGERING SIGHS

We were in what Annah had referred to as the alley of lingering sighs, although in reality it was more a series of interconnected alleys, stretching among dilapidated buildings and piles of rubbish.

I heard hammering up ahead. When we advanced far enough to see the source, I realized it was a dabus. No one else was around; even Sybil had disappeared somewhere. I poked inside one building out of curiosity, and to my surprise found a corpse inside.

I saw the dead body of a Dabus. The stench of its decay was overpowering and, from the looks of its rigid, unnatural posture, extreme rigormortis had long since set in. Yet, somehow, I was inexplicably aroused by the scene.

I used my Stories-Bones-Tell power on the corpse. As I reached out with my power, there was a faint stirring in the air, and the dabus' body blurred for a moment. I felt a strange, wrenching pain in my skull, as if someone was hammering on it, sharply, desperately.

My vision went black for a moment, and the hammering pain faded, until it sounded like it was coming from outside my skull — the darkness cleared, and I heard the hammering coming from outside the building. The entire building seemed hazy somehow, confused, as if I were seeing it through a mist.

The hammering died, and I suddenly saw a spectral version of the dabus entering the building. As it did, the windows and the doors became like water, suddenly sealing over the entrance the dabus came through. The dabus turned, paused, and then began a slow circuit of the room, examining the walls and hammering on each one once, as if testing it.

The dabus completed its circuit of the room, then paused by the "door" it once entered. It began hammering, chipping away the stone, but with every blow, the wall repaired itself. The vision faded to black, and the hammering continued, first at a steady pace, then slower, then slower…

My vision cleared as the hammering ended, and I was once again standing beside the corpse of the dabus… it looked as if it withered away here, trapped in the building.

We exited the building, and continued following Annah to the spot where she found my body. We went down a short flight of steps, and entered a cul-de-sec. She pointed to a spot on the ground.

"This is the place. I found yeh lyin' right where we stand."

I glanced at the ground where she pointed, then looked up to stare in awe at the bizarre spectacle before me. What had appeared to be an ordinary, unremarkable bricked wall now throbbed and pulsated with movement. The wall expanded with curious elasticity, heaving outward as if some unseen force were trying to push its way through the barrier from the other side. Slowly, the undulating mass began to settle, its curves becoming more and more pronounced, and I found myself at eye-level with the stony caricature of a human face.

"What is that? " I wondered out loud.

I donnae know." Annah stared at the face in disbelief, her hands nervously fingering her daggers. "But I'm fer leavin' 'fore we find out, aye?"

I hesitated, there was something… Suddenly, a strong breeze began to blow around me and the air was filled with an eerie sighing. The rushing wind grew stronger and I could make out other sounds as well: the creaking of boards, the rustling of leaves, and the grinding of stone upon stone. After a few moments, the clamor ceased to be a cacophony of individual noises and began to blend into one articulate sound. I could make out a voice, a voice that spoke softly, yet seemed to come from all around me at once.

"YOU? IT CANNOT BE YOU."

"Do you know me? " I replied. The wind around me had stopped, but the voice was still somehow present.

"YOU ARE RESTORED AGAIN? I SAW YOU DESTROYED."

"Destroyed? Where?"

"I SAW YOU DESTROYED HERE, IN FRONT OF ME. I SEE ALL WITHIN ME."

"Do you know what happened to me?"

"THINGS THAT CAST NO SHADOW… WERE SHADOW. THEY ROSE AROUND YOU. TORE YOU DOWN. DO YOU NOT REMEMBER?" I concentrated on the strange voice composed of sounds around me. Somewhere, in the deepest recesses of my mind, there was a brief glimmer of recollection. I felt as though there was something vaguely familiar about the sounds.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember. I was able to bring back a fragment, a memory of me standing there, surrounded by

humanoid-shaped shadows. They closed in, attacked. I must have died, and Annah found my corpse.

"YES… YOU REMEMBER." The voice of the Alley rang in my ears, scattering the images from my mind and returning me back to the present. " DESTROYED. AS SOON I SHALL BE. I CANNOT DELAY DIVISION MUCH LONGER. PRESSURE BUILDS. SOON STONES WILL CRUMBLE AND THE FLOATING ONES WILL REPAIR ME TO DESTRUCTION."

"You're dying?"

"PRESSURE IS TOO MUCH. TOO MANY PLACES FOLDED INSIDE. NOT ENOUGH SPACE. MUST DIVIDE."

Annah interposed, "Uh, it must be in the 'way.' "

"What are you talking about?"

"I think it's pregnant," Annah replied.

Morte joined in, "Freaky. So where are we technically standing right now?"

"I really don't want to know the answer to that, Morte." The voice continued speaking, ignoring my companions.

"HELP ME TO DIVIDE. BRANCH OUT. EXPAND. NEW APERTURES WILL OPEN. YOU MAY USE THEM TO TRAVEL TO THE LOWER WARD."

"What do you need to divide?"

"THE FLOATING ONE IS UPON ME. REPAIRING. IT PREVENTS ME FROM DIVIDING. I UNDO ITS REPAIRS. BUT IT RETURNS AGAIN AND AGAIN. REPAIRS ANEW. MUST REMOVE FLOATING ONE." I wasn't sure I liked the implication of its words.

"You want me to *kill* the dabus in the Alley?"

"REMOVE IT. ONLY THEN CAN I DIVIDE."

I knew from Iron Nalls the way to the other wards from the Hive was currently blocked. I felt I must get to other areas of the city. If helping this… thing would do it, so be it.

I found the dabus close to where I had left it. I was sure there was little chance I could convince it to just leave the area, and even if I could get it to leave, it would doubtless quickly return.

However, there was a way. I went up to it, and told it I had just discovered the body of another dabus in the alley. As I thought, it was interested in what I had to say, and soon was hurrying to enter the house where I had found the dead dabus.

For a moment, I gloried in my power. I realized I could easily bend those around me to my will, forcing them to my bidding regardless of the effect on their insignificant lives. But only for a moment.

I had sent the dabus to its death, as surely as if I had cut off its head. One could argue it was to save another's life, but it was

doing nothing wrong, not by any scale of right and wrong I would wish to live by.

I thought of the incarnation that Dak'kon and Morte had known, and knew if I followed the path that had tempted me for a moment, that is where I would end up. I considered the temptation, and saw it held no real attraction for me. Time to move on.

When we returned to the being, it claimed the work the dabus had already done had weakened it enough that it could not go forward, either 'birthing' or undoing the repairs. It described what the dabus had done, and we agreed to undo its work.

Fortunately, I had a prybar which I picked up originally in the Mortuary, and with an improvised hammer the dabus' work was soon undone.

We returned to the being. It spoke again, using the ambient sounds of the alley.

"YES. ALL IS IN ORDER. I AM GRATEFUL." Again the wind began to blow around me, this time with fierce intensity. The omnipresent sounds of the Alley began to increase in volume until the soft murmur of the voice was nearly drown out by the ensuing racket. "NOW YOU MUST GO. DIVISION BEGINS. THE WAY IS NOW OPEN TO YOU."

The stone face before me began to transform once again, its mass shifting and roiling as I looked on. The entire wall seemed to melt before my eyes, exposing a narrow passageway beyond. The ground underfoot suddenly began to rock violently and the soft sighing of the wind intensified to a more urgent, almost human-like moaning. I could hear the sounds of crashing stones and snapping boards all around me as we dashed into the passageway.

We rushed forward, until we were beyond the area of buildings rearranging themselves. Looking back, the layout of the alleys and buildings behind us had completely changed.

MASTER OF THE BONES

Looking forward, I saw we had entered a new area of Sigil, not as run down as the Hive, although it had its own, acrid, stench. I was distracted by a street vendor, and did not notice Morte wandering off. Not, that is, until I heard his cries. Two wererats had grabbed him, and were running off with the skull.

We gave chase, but they knew the area, and lost us. I returned to where we had started.

I walked up to a man in armor, evidently one of the Harmonium guards Ebb Creakknees had talked about. He introduced himself as Measure Three Vorten, but claimed to be on duty and refused to help. Perhaps kidnapping wasn't part of his duty?

I looked around, and saw a middle-aged basher wearing dusty clothes. He proved more helpful, telling me that if it was a skull I was missing, I should seek out Lothar, the Master of the Bones. He didn't know exactly where this Lothar was located, but told me to seek out a gutted building in the ward.

I wandered around a while, until I came across a dilapidated building, the only one I had seen in such poor repair in the ward. I entered, and saw a well-like opening in the floor, and a ladder of bone leading down into it. This must be the place.

Below were half a dozen racks of skulls. I recognized the racks from my dream-like memories before awakening in the Mortuary. A familiar voiced addressed me from one rack; Morte was one of the skulls.

"Thank the Powers you're here, chief. Get me outta here."

"What are you doing up there? " I asked.

"Those wererat vermin nicked me and brought me here! Come on, boss… we got to get out of here! This place is bad news!"

"Why don't you just float down?"

"I can't! I've tried! Come on, get me down before…"

A flash of light and smoke blinded me for a moment, and a withered old man stood before me.

"Have we visitors, skull?" the man who must be Lothar asked.

"Oh… no." Morte whispered furiously to me. "Do NOT offend this blood, boss… he'll dead-book you faster than you can spit." The old man ignored Morte.

"Greetings, traveler. Who might you be to enter Lothar's humble salon without invitation?" No harm in being polite.

"My pardon, sir, but you seem to have something that belongs to me."

"Ah yes? What might that be?"

"My friend Morte wound up on your shelf."

"You want the chattering skull with half the grace and manners of any ordinary creature? Give me a greater skull in return if you wish it back," Lothar replied. "I do not need to bargain for something that is already mine."

"He was never yours… or anyone's… to begin with."

"Your ignorance is astonishing. You truly know very little about very little. Now: Fetch me another skull to replace him or say goodbye to your friend."

When I asked where to find another skull, he told me to search the catacombs beneath this area. He told me in particular of one that lay interred in a crypt beyond the Drowned Nations. I realized the necromancer wasn't as all-knowing as he thought. He was referring to the trapped tomb one of my previous incarnations had left for my 'enemy.' I told him the tomb was empty.

"What is the meaning of this?" he said, his voice rising in anger. "The tomb was so well trapped, so well defended from scrying magicks, that it was a challenge even for me! There must be some explanation for this, and," he drew out his words angrily and slowly, " YOU will provide it to me. Go through the portal in the chambers below and seek the answer."

I, too, was becoming angry. It was time he knew he was dealing with no ordinary individual. I told him I knew the answer because it was my own tomb.

"Your tomb? YOUR tomb?" He eyed me carefully. "We shall investigate this more carefully. Fetch me another skull, then, as you seem attached to yours, and we shall see what answers I can provide. Our agreement shall be as before. Do not try to deceive me with just any bone, either — I am something of a connoisseur. Return when you have something of value to me."

I remembered something I was carrying with me. Something, unless a person had undergone the experiences I had in the last few days, an observer would have found hard to

credit I could have forgotten. I drew forth a mummified head from among my belongings.

"I have the skull of Soego, the wererat Dustman missionary." Lothar took the head of Soego from me and examined it carefully, checking the teeth.

"A Dustman missionary and spy, eh? This will be satisfactory." His fingers twisted through an arcane gesture. "Your friend will be waiting for you above ground, where you came in. Have your answers from me."

Lothar unbent slightly, and agreed to answer a few questions. I asked him first why I was immortal.

"Your mortality — your soul, if you will, that which allows you to live and die — is gone from you. It was stripped from you by magical means, by the night hag Ravel Puzzlewell. Your mortality is the key to your existence — when you find it, you will find your answers."

Obviously he had known much more about me than he had let on earlier. I asked him to tell me about this Ravel.

"Ravel Puzzlewell is an enigma, even among the night hags. Some would call her barmy; others say she plays a deeper game than any can see through. She is evil, through and through, making the fiends you'll see in the area seem positively divine when compared to her. She is out of the reach of men now, thank the powers, for she was mazed by the Lady of Pain."

Mazed! I remembered the description I had received, of how those who displeased the Lady might find themselves trapped in a separate reality, although there was rumored to always be an exit, even if almost impossible to find. I asked how I might reach her.

"Mazes are like pocket dimensions… small places between places. To reach one, you need to find a portal and a key. I do not know where the door or the key are. Perhaps you should seek some of your old acquaintances — you have certainly left a trail of them behind. They will find you, no doubt — pray they mean you well. Perhaps you should visit the Civic Festhall — they have many answers there."

I asked what Ravel had done. "She was a maker of toys and puzzles, a solver of problems that didn't need solving. She decided that Sigil, the Cage, was the largest puzzlebox of all, and set herself to undo it — to let in the armies of fiends at her disposal, no doubt, to upset the balance of the city and turn the entire burg into a charnel house. Pray to any power you hold dear with thanks she did not succeed."

Lothar left the room with his new possession, leaving us. I knew better than to try and take anything while he was gone, but I decided to examine the racks. I walked along, looking at skull after skull, until one spoke to me. This skull's voice was low and raspy, the sound of flint and steel.

"I… I think I've seen you before, stranger."

"Where have you seen me?"

"Curst. Gate town to Carceri." At my bewildered look, it continued. "What are you, clueless? It's a gate town, on the rim of the Outlands, the doorway to the prison plane of Carceri. It's a place of backstabbers and traitors, and it's full of schemes as a baatezu's undergarments. Being right next door to Carceri's apt to change a burg's nature; I wouldn't be surprised if the town were about to slide over."

I knew from Cambion's lecture in the Smoldering Corpse that a gate town was always in danger of sliding over to its adjacent plane, in this case Carceri. I asked the skull what I was doing there.

"What were you doing there? You were babbling something about some berk trying to kill you and wandering into all the wrong places. Well, you were obviously barmy and all, so me and some of my friends rolled you. Stuck a shiv in you and divvied up your stuff. It was right after that that I was betrayed, but not before I hid some of that stuff." When I asked where the 'stuff' was, it quickly replied with disdain.

"I ain't telling. Maybe someday I'll get a body back and go for it myself, and maybe I won't, but right now it gives me great joy to see you wondering. Good luck finding it." The skull fell silent, and no amount of cajoling could convince it to speak again.

Another skull, which told me it was once known as Ocean-before-the-Storm, had been a Sensate, that is a member of the society of Sensation, which was headquartered at the Civic Festhall. It told me it had ended up here due to Ravel Puzzlewell. I asked it to explain.

"Very well. I was working in the Civic Festhall — the headquarters of the Sensates — in the sensoriums. Ravel Puzzlewell, may the powers curse her black soul, had been coming there to find answers to riddles she had encountered. She was a masterful solver of puzzles — those that left our best minds baffled were but gauze to the force of her reason — yet she had found difficulties that required outside answers. I heard that she was there to unlock the secrets of Sigil itself."

"Horribly ugly, she was, taking no pains to use her magic to disguise her form — as I've heard she does, or rather DID, from time to time — and that fiendish exterior frightened off many a potential factioneer. Still, I had to ask her what she was about, and whether she could teach me what she knew."

I interjected, "That sounds like it could have been a mistake."

"It was. She offered me a bargain, for she dwelt and dealt in riddles. If she were to answer my question, I must agree to answer one of hers. If I missed the answer, my life was hers. I agreed. She told me she intended to unlock the puzzle of the Cage, to open it to all who wished to enter — powers, fiends, celestials, modrons, and slaadi, not to mention any inner-planar beings who chose to come along. The most important part to her was that all should know that the mystery that had baffled them for so long was unraveled by Ravel."

"She asked her question. I could not answer it, though she assured me the answer was plain as the nose on her face. My fellow Sensates found me screaming in the sensorium when they arrived the next morning. I begged them to kill me, and they complied. None even suggested that I relish the new experience, so horrible was it. And… here I am. Now I must rest." I wasn't ready to let it go quite yet.

"What was the question?"

"It was: How does one change the nature of a man? I thought hard on her answer, and said, 'With love.' She said all people love themselves too much to be changed by something as simple as love. And then she… she… I must rest now."

In the back of my mind, I seemed to see a hook-nosed figure with ebon skin asking me a similar question… but I could not remember my answer.

Most of the skulls were too old to respond to my abilities, and it was time to rejoin Morte anyway. We exited Lothar's lair, finding Morte impatiently awaiting us when we exited into the Lower Ward.

Once we were all together, I asked my companion's if they knew anything of Ravel Puzzlewell. At the mention of the name, Annah spat three times and made a semi-circle over her heart.

"Hssst! Are yeh *daft?!* Don't be mentioning *her* name, if yeh value yer life! She's the evilest o' the Gray Ladies, she is." Annah's voice dropped to almost a whisper, as if afraid of being overheard. "Filthy mean, an' with more power tae toss around

than some Powers. It's said she's all a-brambles through and through — even her *heart.* It's said yeh can NEVER kill her, 'cause her body's like a tree — yeh lop off one limb, an' there's always another still growing somewhere *else* across the Planes."

"You speak as if she is still alive."

"A-course she is. She *has* t'be." Annah's voice dropped again. "How would yeh *kill* a thing such as her? That's why the Lady had to MAZE her, so it's said." I asked Morte if had anything to add about Ravel.

"Well, she's a night hag — and she was definitely barmy enough to make YOU immortal, of all people. I mean, she could have chosen me." Morte rolled his eyes. "Still, anyone addled enough to lock blades with the Lady of Pain isn't someone we really want to find."

UNBROKEN CIRCLE OF ZERTHIMON, PART II

We moved towards a market area. I stopped by one vendor, seeing a florid, boisterous man. He was shouting and carrying on like there was a war that was about to come through, like he had got something lodged in his intestines, like… well, like he was too excited about something to talk in a normal tone of voice. Morte glanced around at the crowd, than at the speaker.

"Ooh, an auction! Maybe we can sell Annah here."

"I'd gut yeh if yeh had somethin' t' gut, skull." Annah replied.

"It must be love. It's love, right, boss?" Morte rolled his eyes at me.

The auctioneer tried to interest us in something, but not until he mentioned rooms did he get a response. I quickly agreed, and we went off to rooms nearby for the night.

I resolved to try reading Dak'kon's Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon again. I opened up the fourth circle, and began to read.

"*Know* that the Rising of the People against the *illithid* was a thing built upon many ten-turnings of labor. Many of the People were gathered and taught in secret the ways of defeating their *illithid* masters. They were taught to shield their minds, and use them as weapons. They were taught the scripture of steel, and most importantly, they were given the *knowing* of freedom."

"Some of the People learned the nature of freedom and took it into their hearts. The *knowing* gave them strength. Others feared freedom and kept silent. But there were those that *knew* freedom and *knew* slavery, and it was their choice that the People remain chained. One of these was Vilquar."

"Vilquar saw no *freedom* in the Rising, but opportunity. He saw that the *illithid* had spawned across many of the False Worlds. Their Worlds numbered so many that their vision was turned only outwards, to all they did not already touch. Vilquar's eye saw that much took place that the *illithid* did not see. To the Rising, the *illithid* were blinded."

"Vilquar came before his master, the *illithid* Zhijitaris, with the *knowing* of the Rising. Vilquar added to his chains and offered to be their eyes against the Rising. In exchange, Vilquar asked that he be rewarded for his service. The *illithid* agreed to his contract."

"At the bonding of the contract, a dark time occurred. Many were betrayals Vilquar committed and many were the People that the *illithids* fed upon to stem the Rising. It seemed that the Rising would die before it could occur, and the *illithid* were pleased with Vilquar's eye."

"It was near the end of this dark time when Zerthimon came to *know* Vilquar's treacheries. In *knowing* Vilquar's eye, Zerthimon forced the Rising to silence itself, so that Vilquar might think at last his treacheries had succeeded, and the Rising had fallen. He *knew* that Vilquar eye was filled only with the reward he had been promised. He would see what he wished to see."

"With greed beating in his heart, Vilquar came upon the *illithid* Zhijitaris and spoke to his master of his success. He said that the Rising had fallen, and the *illithids* were safe to turn their eyes outwards once more. He praised their wisdom in using Vilquar's eye, and he asked them for his reward."

"In his greed-blindness, Vilquar had forgotten the *knowing* of why the People had sought freedom. He had lost the *knowing* of what slavery meant. He had forgotten what his *illithid* masters saw when they looked upon him. And so Vilquar's betrayal of the People was ended with another betrayal. Vilquar came to *know* that when Vilquar's eye has nothing left to see, Vilquar's eye is useless."

"The *illithid* gave to Vilquar his reward, opening the cavity of his skull and devouring his brain. Vilquar's corpse was cast upon the Fields of Husks so its blood might water the poison-stemmed grasses."

The meaning behind the fourth circle seemed much clearer than it had before. I told Dak'kon of what I had read.

"When one chooses to see only what is before them, they see only a part of the whole. They are blind. And just as Vilquar was blinded by his promised reward, so were the *illithids* blinded to the true Rising. For when they heard Vilquar's words, they turned their sight outwards again, didn't they? And the Rising was free to strike?"

"*Know* that you speak truly. Vilquar's Eye blinded both Vilquar and the *illithids.* The tentacled ones thought the Rising

to be no more. When the Rising occurred, the ground drank deep of *illithid* blood. So was victory born from treachery."

"It is a curious lesson. Why would it be part of the teachings of Zerthimon?" Dak'kon's blade bled into a dead, night-black, and his voice deepened — for a moment, I thought he was angry, but I was not so sure.

"There is much about the Way of Zerthimon and his path that is difficult to *know*."

"Do *you* know why Vilquar's Eye is part of the Way of Zerthimon?"

"It is part of the telling of how our People came to *know* freedom. It lets us *know* that there are those, even among the People, who are not of the People. And that even in the greatest treachery, a greater *knowing* may be achieved."

I accepted that, and Dak'kon passed to me another githzerai 'spell.' He also unlocked the fifth circle of Zerthimon at my request.

I began to read the fifth circle.

"Zerthimon was the first to *know* the way of freedom. Yet it was not he that first came to *know* the way of rebellion."

"The *knowing* of rebellion came to the warrior-queen Gith, one of the People. She had served the *illithids* upon many of the False Worlds as a soldier, and she had come to *know* war and carried it in her heart. She had come to *know* how others might be organized to subjugate others. She *knew* the paths of power, and she *knew* the art of taking from the conquerors the weapons by which they could be defeated. Her mind was focused, and both her will and her blade were as one."

"The turning in which Zerthimon came to *know* Gith, Zerthimon ceased to *know* himself. Her words were as fires lit in the hearts of all who heard her. In hearing her words, he wished to *know* war. He *knew* not what afflicted him, but he *knew* he wished to join his blade to Gith. He wished to give his hate expression and share his pain with the *illithid*."

"Gith was one of the People, but her *knowing* of herself was greater than any Zerthimon had ever encountered. She *knew* the ways of flesh, she *knew* the *illithids* and in *knowing* herself, she was to *know* how to defeat them in battle. The strength of her *knowing* was so great, that all those that walked her path came to *know* themselves."

"Gith was but one. Her strength was such that it caused others to *know* their strength. And Zerthimon laid his steel at her feet."

I told Dak'kon what I had learned.

"There is great strength in numbers, but there is great power in one, for the strength of the will of one may gather numbers to it. There is strength not only in *knowing* the self, but *knowing* how to bring it forth in others."

Dak'kon proceeded to unlock the sixth circle, so that I might study it. I began to read the sixth circle.

"Upon the Blasted Plains, Zerthimon told Gith there cannot be two skies. In the wake of his words, came war."

"Upon the Blasted Plains, the People had achieved victory over their *illithid* masters. They *knew* freedom."

"Yet before the green fires had died from the battlefield, Gith spoke of continuing the war. Many, still filled with the bloodlust in their hearts, agreed with her. She spoke of not merely defeating the *illithids*, but destroying all *illithids* across the Planes. After the *illithids* had been exterminated, they would bring war to all other races they encountered."

"In Gith's heart, fires raged. She lived in war, and in war, she *knew* herself. All that her eyes saw, she wanted to conquer."

"Zerthimon spoke the beginnings of that which was against Gith's will. He spoke that the People already *knew* freedom. Now they should *know* themselves again and mend the damage that had been done to the People. Behind his words were many other hearts of the People who were weary of the war against the *illithid*."

"*Know* that Gith's heart was not Zerthimon's heart on this matter. She said that the war would continue. The *illithid* would be destroyed. Their flesh would be no more. Then the People would claim the False Worlds as their own. Gith told Zerthimon that they would be under the same sky in this matter. The words were like bared steel."

"From Zerthimon came the Pronouncement of Two Skies. In the wake of his words came war."

I told Dak'kon what I had come to *know*.

"I know that Zerthimon's devotion to the People was such that he was willing to protect them from themselves. He knew the *illithids* had come not to *know* themselves in their obsession with control and domination. So he chose to stop Gith before she carried the People to their deaths. There must be balance in all things, or else the self will not hold."

He twisted the circle of Zerthimon, but this time there were two plates with gith spells, not one. I switched my gaze from the plates he was holding to him.

"Dak'kon… is that second plate for you?"

Dak'kon fell silent. His blade had ceased shimmering, the film freezing upon its surface. He was staring at the second plate, paralyzed.

"Do *you* know the Sixth Circle?" Dak'kon looked up, but his coal-black eyes did not meet my gaze.

"*Know* there is nothing more I may teach you. You *know* the Way as the People *know* it, and it shall give you the direction by which you may *know* yourself."

"That's *not* what I asked. Do you *know* the Sixth Circle or not?" Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then spoke, his voice slow and careful.

"It has come to pass that I do not *know* the Sixth Circle of Zerthimon. Once, I *knew* it, but I *know* now I only saw the words." Dak'kon's eyes stared through me. "That is all. It is my path that I no longer *know* the Way of Zerthimon."

"Dak'kon… there is one other thing I would *know*. Why is Vilquar's Eye in the Circle of Zerthimon? It seems strange. It tells of how the People benefited from a treachery from their own. It seems… " Dak'kon's eyes flashed.

"I have told you it is part of the telling of how the People came to *know* freedom. Do you not listen?" His voice flattened, as if he was reciting a passage from memory. "It tells the People that even in the greatest treachery, a greater *knowing* may be achieved."

"It doesn't sound to me like you believe that. I think there's another reason Vilquar's Eye is in the Circle of Zerthimon. It is set there because of the Sixth Circle and the Pronouncement of Two Skies. It's there to justify Zerthimon's treachery to the People upon the Blasted Plains."

Dak'kon was silent, and his blade bled into a dead-black, teeth rippling along the edge.

"He divided the People upon the Blasted Plains, Dak'kon. He divided your race, when they were on the path of victory. I would *like* to believe that it was because he wished to save the People from themselves — but I don't think *you* believe that."

Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then he spoke, slowly. "I… do not *know* the Sixth Circle as it is *known* to others. I fear that the Third Circle, the Fourth Circle and the Sixth Circle are more closely linked than many *know*. It is in that *knowing* that I have lost myself."

"In the Third Circle, Zerthimon submerged his will to deceive the *illithids*, then in the Fourth Circle, it speaks of the

benefits of *treachery.* Then in the Sixth Circle, Zerthimon divides his people before they exterminate the *illithids.* Do you think Zerthimon's words may not have been his own?"

"*Know* my words, and *know* the wound that lies upon my heart: I fear that when Zerthimon was upon the Pillars of Silence, he did not submerge his will. I fear his will was taken from him by the *illithids.* And when he spoke upon the Blasted Plains, it was their words he spoke. I fear that what he did was not for the People's sake, but for our former masters."

"It's possible, but *know* it doesn't necessarily mean that h…"

"Then *know* this and speak of it NO MORE." Dak'kon voice was like a knife. "*Know* that I shall never *know* the TRUTH. There is NO resolution to this matter, for I shall NEVER *KNOW* Zerthimon's heart upon the Blasted Plains." His coal black eyes glared at the stone circle in his hand. "And so I do not *know* myself because of the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon."

I could find nothing to say. I was sorry to once again have forced Dak'kon to reveal his inner anguish, and I did not know what to do. I settled down to sleep, but lay long awake.

LOWER WARD

The next morning, I wandered about the Lower Ward. I came to a coffin maker's shop (this was obvious, since the shop was shaped like a coffin). The motto 'Engineered for Eternity' was above the door. Something familiar about that motto prompted me to enter.

I saw a rugged looking, square jawed man. He turned to me with a wide smile.

"How are you, cutter, good day to you, good day indeed." He squinted at me for a second, then jutted his hand out to shake mine. Another man who stood there, who I took to be a customer, did not say a word, only silently looked at me. As I shook his hand, he continued speaking.

"Hamrys at your service, member of the Harmonium and the fashioner of fine coffins for the recently departed. I think I know you, do I not…? Let me see if I can place it…" He paused to think a moment. "Sharp with names I was in the Harmonium, let me tell you. Knew everyone on the entire Ward…" My all purpose lie slipped out without my consciously considering what I would tell him.

"My name is Adahn."

He snapped his fingers. "Of course! Adahn! I knew I recognized you. Anyway, you require my services?" He studied me, then smiled, seeing the opportunity for a joke at my expense. "It seems to me, sir, that you are one in desperate need of a coffin, and soon." He seemed pleased with his wit.

I had trouble getting Hamrys to listen to anything I said. He seemed to enjoy hearing his own voice, and I eventually just silently stood, letting him ramble, experiencing a new feeling, that of boredom. After covering several topics in excruciating detail, he began to talk about his journal.

"I like to keep notes and reflections on record, and it makes fascinating reading, looking back on one's thoughts a month to a half-month later." He nodded at me, as if I understood exactly what he was talking about, then he continued droning on.

"I've talked to several of the printers in the Clerk's Ward about possibly getting them printed. I've been told that they are quite insightful about various aspects of city life that I have

observed in my tour of duty with the Harmonium. Even with no formal training, many have agreed that my writing style is quite striking… but enough about that. It would be far easier to let you listen for yourself: I could read for you some of my more insightful passages…"

Hamrys read several passages in his monotonous journals to me, all of them boring to some degree. I was finally about to find some way to escape, when he mentioned something about the disappearance of his father that I didn't quite catch. For some reason, it tugged at me. I tried to stop him.

"Wait, you said your father disappeared?" Hamrys held up his hand to stop my interruption until he finished the next paragraph in one of his dull journals.

"So what do you think so far? Surprisingly more insightful than one might expect from a simple member of the Harmonium, no?" He smiled. He seemed to have ignored my interruption. I tried again with my question.

"Yes, very insightful. Did you say your father disappeared?" He nodded.

"Oh, yes. Many, many years ago. My father was a talented stonemason, and he did not only construct sarcophagi, but he was also quite skilled in tomb design. People from across Sigil…"

The room began to fade around me as a memory tugged at my consciousness…

I found myself standing in this very shop, talking with an older man while a child sat in the corner and played. On the counter between me and the shopkeeper was a set of plans. He seemed to be explaining some intricacies with the construction of a tomb. My vision faded as I tried to examine the details of the plans.

When my sight returned I was standing in a cavern in front of a tomb. Above the entry I saw the slogan: Engineered for Eternity, clearly carved in the stone. The shopkeeper was standing next to me, a broad smile on his face. He gestured to me and began to walk into the tomb. I quickly matched his pace from behind and drew my blade…

I found myself back in Hamrys' shop. I now knew who had built the tomb I found in the Drowned Nations catacombs, and that I, or at least a previous incarnation, had murdered the builder to keep its secrets. Hamrys apparently hadn't noticed I wasn't paying attention. The next time he stopped to take a breath, I asked another question.

"Tell me what happened to your father."

"He simply vanished one day, leaving most of his commissions unfinished. Most embarrassing; took a long while to get out of the debt caused by his disappearance, and to an extent, I am still settling various accounts. Still, I have a certain aptitude for the work, and…" He sighed lightly and got a far-away look in his eyes.

He shrugged. "Sorry, I was just thinking… My father's disappearance was the reason I joined the Harmonium, and left it later on. At first I had a burning desire to find out what happened to him, later I felt a certain obligation to continue his life's work." He sighed. "I never found the answers I sought. It was quite the mystery as to what happened…" His voice faded to silence. I took advantage of this break to quickly exit his shop.

After leaving the shop, we continued walking. I saw a githzerai in the crowd, and curious, approached her. The woman had a yellow cast to her skin and severe features. Tattoos covered her body, and she wore a long blade at her side. Her eyes were like two small black pearls. As I approached her, they followed Dak'kon's movements. Before I reached her, Dak'kon broke in.

"I would have you hear me."

"What is it, Dak'kon?"

"It is my will that we not speak to this woman."

"Why not?"

"She is a *zerth*. Our wills are crossed blades. We have no common ground."

I was more interested than ever to speak to her. Besides, a zerth if anyone should be able to understand what Dak'kon was going through. I temporized in my reply.

"Then do not speak to her." The githzerai, who had watched our approach, chose this moment to speak.

"Why do you insult the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon by continuing to wear it against your heart? You are not numbered among the People, betrayer of Shra'kt'lor! The Anarchs and the *zerths* have spoken and their words shall be obeyed. You are not to speak your mind to me… or to any *zerth*." Dak'kon replied to her.

"Will you hear this human when he speaks?"

"His words carry the weight of yours and have the shape of Limbo's form. I will not hear you, Dak'kon."

"He travels with me, Kii'na, disciple of Zerthimon. He comes to you to hear the words of Zerthimon which you as a *zerth* must impart. Will you hear him?" Dak'kon continued.

"The words of Zerthimon are not for the ears of a hu-man to be heard. Their minds are not as one, and they bring division wherever they travel. This one wears a shirt of scars and blood, and he travels with a traitor. Vilquar's heart beats within your chest if you ask if I will hear him." Dak'kon tried to reach her again.

"Will you close your mind to his words? *Know* your words before you speak your mind, Kii'na, *zerth* of Zerthimon."

"I will not hear him. He will hear me," she replied.

"That is sufficient." Dak'kon turned to me, and spoke in my language. "She will teach you."

The gith woman turned to me. Her black pearl eyes glinted dangerously.

"You are not *known* to me, but your trappings speak ill of you, human. Your body is a book written in scars and blood, and you walk in the shadow of a pariah that claims to speak for Zerthimon himself. Speak your mind!"

"Greetings, sword-ringer." I had decided to show I at least knew the proper greeting, but she only hissed in irritation.

"Your pleasantries are as dust. The sign of mourning draws near — time is short, human. I would *know* your questions, then it is my will you leave." Very well, I would forgo politeness.

"Can you teach me of the difference between githzerai and githyanki?" She looked at Dak'kon *hard* for a moment.

"Gith was a great warrior who freed our people from captivity under the *illithid* slavelords. Zerthimon was her lieutenant. When the two had freed our people, Gith turned upon Zerthimon on the Blasted Plains. Words were spoken, steel was bared — and one people became two. Those who remained with the bitch-queen took the name Githyanki. Those of us who traveled Zerthimon's path remained true to the People took the name Githzerai. Our rage lies in Gith's betrayal."

"And that's why you hate each other so much?"

"Both our people are like the mule of Penansk — stubborn, blind, and bothersome. The githyanki add cruelty to that list. They hate us for our growth into realms they cannot understand." I decided to move on to a new topic.

"Can you teach me the Way of Zerthimon?" Her eyes hardened at my words.

"You travel with one who calls himself a *zerth* and lectures me on my morality, and yet you ask if I can teach you the Way? Ask *him* to teach you, for I will not!"

So much for my idea of learning more of Zerthimon by talking to a different zerth. I decided to address the animosity between her and Dak'kon.

"What did you mean when you said I walk in the shadow of a pariah?"

"You walk with a pariah and you *know* not his history? He is quick to speak other words, but of his history he has remained silent? Ask him of Shra'kt'lor, of the fall of a mighty fortress to the githyanki, and see what his divided mind reveals to you. Ask him how he speaks with Zerthimon's words, but his *karach* is as mist." Dak'kon broke in.

"It is not Zerthimon's words that lack conviction. It is their echoes that have been distorted."

"There is no doubt," Kii'na replied, "in how Zerthimon's mind is spoken. Generations of *zerth* are as Rrakma's Jewel, of one mind on this matter. Your stance carries with it a divided mind. The doubt is yours, an echo cast from your own faithlessness." Dak'kon calmly rebutted her assertion.

"Your words speak not the mind of Zerthimon. They are shaped of angles and hate, as if molded from Gith's mind itself. " This enraged Kii'na.

"You shall lie with the dead of Shra'kt'lor in shifting chaos, for you see all with Vilquar's Eye. Your mind is divided, your *karach* weak!"

I started to move to place myself between them. As if sensing my intent, Dak'kon spoke to me without breaking the gaze he held with Kii'na.

"Hold fast, and do not stand in the way of our blades." I *knew* Dak'kon, while Kii'na obviously did not. I was not sure whether Dak'kon sought his own death, or merely was about to make another mistake. In any case, I would not have it.

"Dak'kon, I order you to stop this." Dak'kon reluctantly lowered his blade. Kii'na stared at him incredulously for a moment, and then a sharp grin split her features.

"The truth at last. Your mind is not divided. You are… a *slave* to this human. He speaks with an Anarch's authority to you, and you *listen*." Dak'kon, still calm, replied.

"Your mind is cast in Gith's mold, Kii'na."

"Let's go, Dak'kon."

I questioned several passerbys about the Lower Ward, but learned little, until chancing on someone watching the passers-by. I saw an older man in elegant robes. He had bright eyes and a warm smile. He gave me a slight bow as I approached.

"Good day, cutter. I am Sebastion, how may I serve you?" I greeted him, to which he responded, "Greetings to you as well, cutter…" He stopped in mid sentence as he noticed my scars. I saw his eyes travel along them and his eyebrows arched in surprise. He returned his gaze to me. "I was about to ask what I could do for you, but there is no need. I think I see why you came to see me, cutter." I then asked who he was.

"I am Sebastion, a… mage of sorts. I do contract work for those who can meet my price." I followed up on his implied offer.

"What… are you trying to say you can help me with these scars?" He smiled at me and shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps, cutter, perhaps." He leaned forward and began to examine my scars carefully. He ran a finger along several of them, mumbling to himself. Finally he looked up at me. "Yes, cutter, I can help you. I cannot cure you, but I can alleviate the worst of your… condition."

"And your price?"

"Ah, yes… the price." He began stroking his chin and stared at me. I got the impression I was being weighed somehow. He seemed to come to some sort of a decision. "I have a job that I think you could perform."

"I have signed a contract with a certain creature. I am no longer able to fulfill the contract; it is… beyond my abilities. However, the creature will not release me from the contract. Instead it has threatened me with death unless I fulfill the contract."

"Let me guess: You want me to solve this problem for you." He sighed.

"Yes. I cannot do it myself. My reputation demands that I fulfill the contract or face the consequences. I am at your mercy in this regard. Will you help me?"

"What kind of creature are we talking about?"

"An abishai named Grosuk, cutter." He paused to gauge my reaction. "I know this is a difficult task, but one I think you can handle. Also, the reward I offer you is great." He gestured at my scars.

"What were you contracted to do?" He shook his head.

"I cannot reveal that information, cutter. I am magically bound not to. That is why people come to me. They know that if I accept a contract, it will be handled with discretion."

A fiend. It didn't help my opinion of Sebastion that he dealt with such a creature, but I couldn't see letting him die because of it. I agreed to help. He gave me the details.

"Thank you, cutter. You will need a magic weapon to cause it any harm, so check with some of the shops if you do not own one. A spell caster can harm it as well. Grosuk can be found to the east, beyond the siege tower."

"Siege tower?"

"Yes, over beyond the market. Damned thing just appeared one day, several years back. No one knows why and no one seems able to get inside it to find out."

I asked him about the market area we were in.

"This is a common market, cutter. There are many things for sale here. Spells, potions, information, women, men… Just about anything, if you can afford the price."

I then asked about the ward itself.

"This is the Lower Ward, cutter, home of the common people and the industrial side of Sigil. It's not the slums of the Hive, yet it holds no splendor such as the Lady's Ward."

I asked, "Why is it called the Lower Ward?" He let out a short laugh and shrugged his shoulders.

"That depends on your point of view, cutter. The rich say it's because this is the home of the common or *lower* classes. If you ask those who live here it's because of the portals… and the incident."

"The incident?" I echoed.

"Yes…" He frowned as he paused to think. "A long time ago this was known as the Prime Ward. People new to the city were placed here and not allowed access to all of Sigil. There were many other restrictions placed upon them as well… Some berk took offense to that and decided to form a rebellion. It went nowhere, of course, until he made a fascinating discovery…"

"You see, there are a lot of portals in this area of the city and most of them open onto the Lower Planes. Well, that barmy berk found a way to open them all at once. He allowed *anything* that wanted to come through the portals into the city. It became quite bloody; a terrible war ensued. Anyway, that's why this is known as the *lower* ward. Because of the portals."

"Sebastion, how did this person open all the gates?"

"He used an item that he either had commissioned or made himself. What was it called…" He paused to think for a moment. "Ah, I remember, the Shadow-Sorcelled Key…" At the mention of the key I began to feel dizzy, the world around me froze, and everything turned gray. I sensed a past memory trying to force it's way into my consciousness. I relaxed, and let it come.

The world around me faded and I found myself in the darkened streets of Sigil. My heart was pounding, trying to break free from my chest; my breath came in ragged gasps. I had been running for hours it seemed, and yet I could not stop…

I turned a corner and entered an alley, finally slowing my flight. I felt my strength fade as I leaned against a nearby wall and tried to catch my breath. I became aware of something hard pressed into the palm of my hand. Glancing down I opened my clenched fist to stare at the gem embedded in the flesh.

My body sagged toward the wall until my forehead touched its cold, damp surface. My eyes closed and I forced myself to take slow deep breaths. Just as I felt my strength returning I heard a faint noise and instantly snapped to full awareness. I turned to look toward the alley mouth.

At first I saw nothing, just ghost visions caused by the shadows of the night. I was about to turn away when a slight movement caught my eye. Slowly, a female form glided around the corner, paused, and then turned to face me. My eyes travelled from her slender waist toward her full bosom, and then her blade-enshrouded face. Even in the darkness I could see her cold, emotionless eyes…

The memory faded and my normal vision returned. I was standing before Sebastion in the market. He was looking at me with some concern, but this passed when he saw that I was all right. "Thought I lost you for a moment there, cutter."

"What became of this Shadow-Sorcelled Key?"

"No one knows. The key has been lost for some time now. Many believe the Lady of Pain took the key to prevent it ever being used again."

"So, what was the outcome of the rebellion?" He thought for a moment.

"Well… Everyone, except the leader, was given pages in the dead-book. The leader and the creatures just up and vanished one day, surely the Lady's work. The survivors fled the ward. The fumes of the Lower Planes had polluted the air,

you see. Anyway, the ward remained deserted until the Foundry was eventually built."

"What can you tell me about the Foundry?" He frowned.

"It is the home of the Godsmen, cutter. If you have any questions regarding them, I suggest you go to the Foundry to ask them."

I decided to see if I could track down Sebastion's fiend, while also seeing some more of the ward.

Part of the market area was indoors, inside a long, open building with a ninety degree bend half way down its length. We walked among the different merchants, and I stopped to talk to a young boy.

He had pale, yellow skin. His clothes were dirty and in need of mending. Currently he was tending a furnace.

"Greetings." He turned and gave a half-smile as he set down his work.

"Hail… do ya need some help?" I replied that I did.

"Aye, aye, I'd be pleased ta help ya if I could…" The boy looked grateful not to be toiling over the furnace. "What is it I can answer fer ye?"

"What is this place?"

"This place?" He glanced around. "It's the Open-Air Market. Lotta buyers and sellers come here ta set up their kip fer the day. I been here fer a good time, I been workin' here fer a while under the eye of me Da." He looked a little distant. "One day I could be runnin' his stall, I could."

"Can you tell me about this ward?" He nodded.

"Oh, aye, this here's the Lower Ward. Common folk live here, like me an me Da." His eyes widened a bit and he looked excited. "Do ya know why it's called the Lower Ward?"

Since he seemed eager to explain, I encouraged him to go on.

"Well, as it's reckoned, the ward's got a mess of portals ta the Lower Planes all riddled through it like cheese, so it does, so I s'pose that that's why the name stuck." He smiled proudly.

"Do any creatures ever come out of these portals?" His eyes grew a little wider.

"Aye, they do. Most of 'em jest stoppin' through…" He swallowed nervously and looked worried.

"You look nervous, you've seen this yourself?"

"Aye, I've seen it…" He paused and swallowed again. "T'was just last week or so, I saw a couple abishai come through

a portal. They talked a good bit an' then one of em went back through. The one tha' stayed is still there…" He frowned.

"What were they talking about?"

"I dunno for sure, ta me it was just hissin' an such, but I think they was talkin' about the Tower." He shrugged.

"The Tower?"

"Aye, tha's one of the strangest sights ta be in the Ward. No one really knows how long that scarred old tower has been around… ye can't get into it, y'know. Bolted up tighter than a chastity belt. I'd be curious ta know what's in there…" He thought for a moment. "The abishai was gesturin' at the Tower an the portal. They was lookin' for the key, I bet."

"What key?"

"The key ta the portal tha' leads ta the Tower. Every portal has a key tha opens it ta somewhere. The key can be a gesture, an item, or even a thought… many 'ave tried hard ta get inta the Tower. No matter how hard ya try, ya fail." I considered, and mumbled a thought.

"Maybe the secret to getting in is to not want to get in…" He shrugged.

"I dunno, cutter. May be…"

"Tell me where this portal is located." He stopped to think for a moment.

"There's a drawbridge like contraption back o' the Tower, east o' the market. Tha's where it is…" He got a far away look.

I left him to his daydreams, and continued on, looking at the other merchants' wares.

We left the Open Air market, and were leaving the market area entirely when we passed a fenced in building belching smoke. This must be the great foundry Sebastion had mentioned.

Among the crowds ahead I saw a figure. He looked like a githzerai, but his clothing was much brighter. Even the way he walked was subtly different. If this was who I thought it was, I had better leave Dak'kon behind. I asked the others to go back indoors to the market, that I would follow in a short while.

The figure had rough, leathery skin with a pale yellow cast and gaunt features. His face was angular, his nose was small and highly placed, and his ears tapered to points. A tracery of tattoos and scars covered his body. He was dressed in strange, gaudy leathers that looked more ornamental than combat-ready. His eyes were like two small black stones and they tracked me as I approached.

"You are the human seeking memories," he said, flatly. "I can help you."

"You're a githyanki, aren't you?" I asked.

"I have the pleasure to be of that people." His voice was flat. "Do you wish my aid in recovering your memories?"

"Who and what are you?"

"I am Yi'minn. I am a githyanki angler. My people are the undisputed masters of the Astral Plane, where the gods go to die and the memories of the dead float like leaves in a pool. My duty is in retrieving the memory cores of the dead and gleaning them for information. I can locate your memories. You have only to pay the price."

"What price would that be?"

"It is a matter of a mere few coins. The price is negotiable. I ask for one hundred. You will determine the value of the memories I find and pay accordingly." This githyanki thought me a fool, but I decided to pretend agreement, seeing where he would lead.

"Sounds good. What do I have to do?"

"If I am to bait my hook for your memories, I will need some of the memories you currently possess. I also require a place of concentration and quiet. If you will follow me, we will journey to one such place and I will make you whole once again. We go alone, with no companions."

"Agreed. Let's go."

We walked off, entering an alley. Half a dozen more githyanki surrounded me. Yi'minn's mood had turned into something much more ugly than its previous arrogance.

"Now, human, drop your painted shield and tell us what you have said and done for the githzerai dogs within Sigil's walls."

"Weren't we going to go look for my memories?" I asked, ironically, although I doubt the githyanki understood my tone of voice.

"The only way you shall travel to the Astral Plane is in chains, human. You have one more chance to tell me what you have said and done for the githzerai within Sigil's walls."

"I will not tell you." I said simply.

"Then you shall die." He drew his weapon to attack! I just stood there, and let them kill me. Yi'minn's blade slashed across my throat and I fell to the ground bleeding. They stood over me and began to speak again.

"Did he truly know nothing, Al-midil?" Another voice replied.

"His words were those of an enemy of the people. Even were that not true, we have cauterized his ignorance with death's iron. Let us leave him here for the Collectors to scavenge. We have gathered enough information on the githzerai dogs for this trip. They shall lose another fortress before the sevenday is out. The walls of Vristigor shall fall."

"If you believe our knowledge is sufficient," Yi'minn said, "then we shall go. Gather our warriors and let us join our war party in Limbo."

I could no longer stay the effect of the grievous wounds I had suffered by force of will, and slipped into death.

I awoke a while later in the same alley. Quickly checking, all of my items were present. Evidently the githyanki believed in deceit and murder, but perhaps looting a corpse was beneath their 'honor.'

I returned to the indoor market. My companions understandably wondered what had taken me so long. Morte expressed his impatience in typical fashion.

"Ah, c'mon, lets shake a leg. I mean… you shake a leg."

I didn't inform them what I had done, only asking that they accompany me back to the zerth, Kii'na. We needed to search around a bit, but finally found her. The zerth stared blackly at Dak'kon as he returned with me. She turned her back to me, as if daring Dak'kon to strike the target.

"Cut it out, Kii'na. Are you familiar with the fortress Vristigor?" She looked at me — hard.

"How did you, who walks in the shadow of a pariah, come to *know* that name?"

"A group of githyanki are planning a raid on the fortress within the sevenday. They are on their way there even now."

"*Know*… *know* you have my gratitude… you and this *zerth. Know* this shall not be forgotten." She turned to Dak'kon. "*Know* that this will NOT atone for the fall of Shra'kt'lor. The Anarchs' verdict stands still."

What had Kii'in said of the githzerai earlier? Stubborn, blind and bothersome. I stalked off, neither Kii'na or Dak'kon offering a word.

We returned to searching out the fiend. Fewer and fewer people were walking the streets, and I realized why as I saw what loomed ahead. A gigantic siege tower thrust itself up among the surrounding buildings, blocking the way. Its walls were scarred and pitted; it had seen many a battle in its lifetime. A drawbridge on the upper portion of the tower, when lowered,

would give attackers access from the siege tower to the walls of a city or keep.

In the shadow of the tower I saw a reptilian creature with a snake like-body, four clawed feet, leathery wings, and a draconian head. The scales covering its body were a vile shade of green. The creature stood upright on its hind legs, balancing with its prehensile tale. As I approached its eyes narrowed to slits and it began to hiss.

The air around the creature began to radiate heat and its scales took on a pale sheen. It gave me a hungry look and appeared ready to strike. Suddenly it released a flurry of hisses and relaxed its stance a bit.

"Sssssss! Go. Grossssuk no talk, told wait… Sssssssss…" It glared at me as its tail lashed back and forth.

"Sebastion sent me. " The creature relaxed quite a bit and the air grew cooler. It held out a clawed hand to me.

"Ssssss. Give Grosssuk information."

"What information?" It was hard to read facial expressions on a reptilian fiend, but I was certain that Grosuk was rather annoyed with me. His tail began to lash furiously and the air grew warm again.

"No quesssstion. Give Grosssuk information or die. Grosssuk then take information from body."

"I need to know which piece of information is for you. I run errands intended for several people, you understand." He glared at me for a moment while he thought. Finally he gestured at the nearby tower.

"Sssiege tower. Ssssss. How get inssside. Sssebastion say he divine way…" Grosuk took a step toward me and held out his hand. "Now give!"

"Actually," I replied, "Sebastion sent us here to kill you."

The creature immediately attacked, but the four of us were able to deal with it without too much trouble.

The end of the day was drawing closer, and I needed to recover from another 'death.' I decided to rest the night, and talk to Sebastion in the morning.

COAXMETAL

Next day, I talked to Sebastion, who made good on his promise. He was able to do something about the scarring, at least cosmetically. From what I could see of my body, he hadn't been able to alter the corpse-like features of my appearance, but the scarring *was* less noticeable.

I was curious about the siege tower, and why the fiend Grosuk had been so interested in it. After all, such weapons must be quite common in their 'Blood Wars,' and much easier to construct on the spot than attempt to haul from Sigil.

I remembered what the boy Lazlo had said, and approached an area near the tower where he had said a portal allowing entry to the tower lay. I approached what should be the location of the portal, and tried my idea of the form of the key. I suppressed any desire to enter the tower. A portal appeared, which we entered.

We were inside the tower. Dominating the interior, I saw an iron… creature. Its size was staggering; if it stood full height, it would shatter the roof of the siege tower. Thundering echoes rattled the walkway as the creature hammered away on its forge, and the smell of soot and ash filled the air.

The creature had not yet noticed us. I hesitated, weighing the consequences of drawing its attention, but my curiosity, which apparently multiple lifetimes had failed to quench, swung the balance. Besides, I told myself, perhaps it would know something about me. "Greetings."

There was the screaming of metal on metal as the giant turned to face me. I suddenly realized the golem was built into the siege tower itself; girders, pipes, and huge bracers ran through its lower torso and into the walls, and the bottom portion of its body made up the forge itself.

"What *are* you?"

I AM IRON GIVEN PURPOSE. I FORGE THE IMPLEMENTS BY WHICH THE MULTIVERSE WILL BE UNMADE.

"You mean forging weapons? That's your purpose?"

METAL IS LIKE FLESH. BOTH CARRY POTENTIAL IN THEIR VEINS. WHEN TEMPERED WITH HEAT AND PRESSURE, THE POTENTIAL SURFACES. MY PURPOSE IS TO BRING FORTH THIS POTENTIAL. ALLOW IT EXPRESSION.

"Who do you make these weapons for?"

I FORGE THEM FOR THE SAKE OF ENTROPY. THEY ARE PAIN SEEKING EXPRESSION.

"What does entropy need weapons for?"

BEYOND THIS TOWER, ORDER RALLIES ITS LEGIONS. THE MULTIVERSE HEALS ITS WOUNDS. IN TIME, ITS STRENGTH MAY EQUAL ENTROPY.

"The multiverse is your enemy? Why?"

THE MULTIVERSE BREATHES. IT GROWS. IT STAGNATES. IT FORGES ITS CHAINS AROUND THE PLAINS LINK BY LINK. IN TIME, EVEN ENTROPY MAY BE CHAINED.

"And you're opposed to chaining entropy?"

WHEN A THING SEALS ITSELF AGAINST ITS OWN DESTRUCTION, IT MERELY DIES A DIFFERENT DEATH.

"So you're saying immortality is just a different kind of death?"

IMMORTALITY IS ONLY A WORD. ALL THAT EXISTS CAN DIE. EVERY LIVING THING HAS A WEAPON AGAINST WHICH IT HAS NO DEFENSE. TIME. DISEASE. IRON. GUILT.

"How do you know what weapon to use?"

ONE MUST KNOW THE ENEMY TO FORGE SUCH A WEAPON. START WITH A FRAGMENT OF THE ENEMY. A DROP OF BLOOD. A CRYSTALLIZED THOUGHT. ONE OF ITS HOPES. ALL OF THESE THINGS TELL THE WAY IT CAN DIE.

"What if your enemy strikes from a distance, from shadows, and never shows himself?"

THEN THAT IS THE FRAGMENT OF THE ENEMY YOU MUST USE. THE ACTIONS OF YOUR ENEMY HAVE TOLD YOU MUCH. YOUR ENEMY DOES NOT WISH TO ENGAGE YOU DIRECTLY. THAT IS A WEAKNESS.

"Or… for some reason, it *cannot* engage me directly."

THAT IS AN EQUAL POSSIBILITY. EITHER POSSIBILITY REVEALS WEAKNESS.

"How do I exploit that?"

IF THE ENEMY DOES NOT WISH TO CONFRONT YOU DIRECTLY, DENY ITS WISH. TAKE THE BATTLE TO THE ENEMY. IF IT IS NOT ALLOWED TO CONFRONT YOU DIRECTLY, FIND THE REASON. THE REASON WILL REVEAL A WEAKNESS.

"Hmmmm. Could you forge a weapon that would kill me?"

YES. I wasn't really certain I wanted to know, but continued.

"Really? How?"

I WOULD NEED A DROP OF YOUR BLOOD. THAT IS ALL.

Such a weapon might prove useful. I wondered if my enemy was really interested in permanently killing me, after all there

must have been times when I was weak, bereft of memory. I provided the blood, and told the golem to continue.

THE TOOL OF YOUR DESTRUCTION HAS BEEN FORGED AND EDUCATED. IT IS NOT ENOUGH. THE MAGICKS THAT KEEP YOUR HEART BEATING AND MEND YOUR FLESH ARE STRONG. YOU MUST SINK THE BLADE INTO YOUR BODY ONLY WITHIN A SHELL WHERE YOU ARE CUT OFF FROM THE PLANES.

"Why?"

THE REASON IS NOT KNOWN TO ME. YET BOTH THE WEAPON AND THE PLACE ARE NECESSARY FOR YOUR DESTRUCTION.

"Where would I find such a shell that separated me from the Planes?"

THAT IS NOT KNOWN TO ME.

"Earlier you said that if the multiverse sealed itself against its own death, it would die a different death. What makes that death any worse than another?"

ALL THINGS HAVE A COMMON GROUND IN DECAY. WAR IS NECESSARY. DEATH IS NECESSARY. DECAY IS NECESSARY.

"And how much of this is too much?"

THERE ARE NO LIMITS. LIMITS ARE ONE OF THE LINKS IN THE CHAIN OF ORDER. LIMITS MUST BE SHATTERED.

"Even if death is the result?"

ALL MUST FALL UPON ENTROPY'S BLADE. THE TIME NEARS WHEN IT WILL BE NECESSARY TO BREACH THE WALLS OF CREATION. ORDER WILL BE PUT TO THE SWORD. ITS CHAINS WILL BE BROKEN. THE MULTIVERSE WILL BE UNMADE.

Interesting philosophy, although I wondered if even the balmy Xaositects would willingly embrace chaos this completely. I asked about something else.

"What is this place?"

THIS TOWER IS A SIEGE ENGINE. IT EXISTS TO BREACH THE WALLS BETWEEN PLANES.

"Breach planes? How?"

THE TOWER ANCHORS ITSELF UPON A PLANE. A WOUND IS TORN IN THE MULTIVERSE WHEN THE BRIDGE OF THE TOWER OPENS. LEGIONS MAY PASS FROM ONE PLANE TO THE OTHER THROUGH THE TOWER. WHEN THE PLANE HAS SERVED ENTROPY'S PURPOSE, THE TOWER ANCHORS ITSELF AGAIN.

"What happened to the legions that have used the tower?"

ENTROPY HAS UNMADE THEM.

"And what happened to the Planes the siege tower invaded?"

ENTROPY HAS UNMADE THEM.

"If this siege tower can travel the planes, why do you remain here?"

THE TOWER IS TRAPPED IN THIS CITY. THIS CITY IS A CAGE THAT IT CANNOT BREACH. AT ONE TIME THE TOWER LAID SIEGE TO THE PLANES. HOW I WAS BROUGHT HERE IS NOT KNOWN TO ME. HOW I MAY ESCAPE IS NOT KNOWN TO ME.

"Why do you make weapons?"

THE IRON OF MY BODY ONCE EXISTED ONLY AS MINOR EXPRESSIONS OF PAIN. BLADES. SPEARS. AXES. ARROWHEADS. RIVETS IN CATAPULTS. FROM THESE IMPLEMENTS OF WAR WAS I WROUGHT. THESE MINOR EXPRESSIONS OF PAIN WERE MELTED TO FORGE THIS BODY. MY POTENTIAL WAS ALLOWED TO SURFACE. NOW MY PURPOSE IS TO BRING OUT THE POTENTIAL IN OTHER METALS.

"You said that someone melted those weapons and forged your body. Who?"

ENTROPY RAISED ME FROM THE PLANAR BATTLEFIELDS.

"Have you heard of a night hag named Ravel?"

THE NIGHT HAG SOUGHT TO SUNDER THIS CITY. HER GREATEST WORKS WERE THOSE OF UNMAKING. SHE WALKED THE PATH OF ENTROPY.

"Do you know what happened to her?"

ORDER SET CHAINS ABOUT HER. SHE WAS CAST WITHIN A CAGE.

"Do you know where this cage is?"

HER PRISON IS UNKNOWN TO ME.

The golem I later learned was referred to as 'coaxmetal' in certain ancient texts. I accepted the blade from the golem, the weapon, it claimed, which could kill me. Examining it, this strange blade was an ugly looking weapon, shaped so that it resembled the symbol of torment on my left arm. Black veins wormed their way across the surface of the metal, and the edge looked so dull that it couldn't even cut warm butter. It felt slightly warm to the touch.

Having no more to say to the golem, I left the tower.

CLERKS' WARD

We moved on, to another ward of the city, known as the Upper or Clerk's Ward. I noticed a woman walking towards us, followed by a member of the Harmonium, almost as if he were a bodyguard.

She was an older, stern-looking woman, clearly on her way somewhere. When she noticed my approach, she studied me with a disapproving, tight-lipped frown. Although she plainly didn't approve of something about me, I stubbornly plowed on.

"Greetings…" The woman nodded curtly, speaking in a tone cold as ice.

"Yes? What is it? And watch your words, for I am Diligence, Fourth Magistrate of the Ward." I briefly wondered whether people in Sigil changed their names to match their profession, or if their given name determined their path in life.

"Something troubling about my appearance?"

"I should most certainly think so! Should the Apparel Regulation Act be passed, people of your sort won't be permitted to traipse about in such a manner, half-naked and filthy as you are…" I could have been insulting, confirming her opinion. But I decided to follow a more diplomatic approach.

"I'm quite clean, begging your pardon, and… meaning no disrespect, madam… some cultures might find *your* clothes offensive." She examined me skeptically for a moment, then nodded.

"Your point is well-taken… sir. Still, though, you cannot deny you are a rather rough-looking sort of fellow."

"My appearance is merely the product of my environment, madam, and a difficult life. I shouldn't be held accountable for that."

"Oh, but you should! How easy it is for one to blame one's life, one's surroundings for their every failing! I can see by your manner you are well-educated, sir, yet you appear to insist upon a lifestyle of wandering and senseless violence. Why not settle in Sigil, become a contributing citizen, rather than some bloody-handed nomad in its streets?"

"The choice is out of my hands, I assure you."

"Oh? How so?" Her coldness melted away into a look of curiosity.

My lips quirked in a smile. I had the time. I told her my story… or what I knew of it. At the end, Diligence looked shocked.

"That… that is quite a tale, sir."

"Were it only a tale, madam. It is my life, and I've the scars to prove it — as you noted when we first met, I believe."

"Yes, yes… quite so." She smiled slightly… I had begun to wonder if she was even capable of such a thing. "I wish you luck, sir, in your undertakings. May you find yourself once more."

She claimed the time I had already taken was more than she could spare from her busy schedule, so she left without answering any more questions.

I moved on to an outdoor café, circulating among the patrons standing near the bar.

I talked to a young, finely attired woman relaxing there, enjoying the outside air while sipping at a beverage. Her eyes widened slightly as she took my appearance in. She smiled uneasily.

"Ah… greetings to—" Suddenly, her eyes alighted on Morte. "Oh! What a cute little mimir!" I decided to have a little fun with Morte, for a change.

"Isn't he? He likes to have the top of his skull scratched."

"Truly?" She remained smiling, but looked suspicious. "Surely you jest, sir! 'Tis only a mimir…"

"What do you mean? Don't they all enjoy that?" I asked innocently.

She shook her head. "No, none that I've seen. They're merely objects, aren't—" Morte interrupted her:

"Well, you see, chief, it's all about differences in the *quality* of your mimir. Some — like me — are more enchanted than others, that's all. More… uh… 'self-aware,' is the term." The woman shrugged.

"That could certainly be."

I questioned her about the Clerk's Ward. From her and several other patrons, I learned most of the ward was filled with record halls and administration buildings. The part of the ward where I was now was different. It contained the Civic Festhall of the Sensates, a faction. There were several other buildings of interest as well. The Art and Curio Gallery, the advocate's

home, the apothecary, the Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts, the tailor and an odd little curiosity shop.

Questioning her revealed a bit more about some of the locations. The advocate was Iannis, a lawyer. The brothel existed to pleasure the mind and senses, certainly a type of brothel with which I was unfamiliar. It was run by a sensate, said to be a succubus, which I thought to be some sort of a fiend. The Civic Festhall was most renowned for its sensoriums, where one could experience the experiences of others captured in special stones. Some areas of the festhall were resolved for members of the Sensate faction only.

I overheard another, older, patron expounding on obscure regulations to a younger companion who was looking somewhat dazed. The older man looked somewhat bookish. His clothing and accessories were extremely clean, neat and well cared for, and he often paused to brush some fleck of dust or lint off of them. A symbol resembling a stylized dagger, piercing upwards through a flame, was embroidered upon his tunic.

I interrupted him to get his attention. The man's eyes passed over me, gleaming as they fixed on Morte.

"Oh, I say! Would you look at that! A floating skull!"

Morte turned and looked behind him. "Where?! Where?!" The man gasped as Morte spoke.

"By the unjust laws of Tueny the Merciless!" He suddenly covered his mouth and looked at Annah apologetically.

"Sorry, sorry… the man was a horrible tyrant, now long dead. His name should never be spoken so; 'tis rather vulgar. My deepest apologies, m'lady. I did not mean to offend." Annah shrugged, rolling her eyes.

"Talk as yeh like, cutter; I care not a whit fer what yeh say… unless ye're rattlin' yer bone-box about *me*, that is." He turned back to Morte.

"But behold! A skull, buoyant, levitating off the ground, cognitive of its environment, and possessing hearing, speaking and seeing capabilities." He turned to me, as if I was suddenly a confidant.

"This is truly one of the reasons that the Planes shall never become dull to me, sir — just when you think you have seen everything, the Planes show you yet another corner to peer around, and…" He raised his hands gloriously. "…suddenly whole new, wondrous vistas are open to you."

"I'm not sure if Morte qualifies as a 'wonderous vista.' " I said sourly, aware it was probably a mistake to ever have

attempted to begin this conversation. The man ignored me, looking to Morte instead.

"I say, skull…" he began when Morte gasped.

"Look, behind you — another floating skull!"

I resignedly let matters take their course. The man seemed to have forgotten me entirely, instead turning in shock to look for this 'other' floating skull.

"No! Where? Where!"

"Right where I'm pointing! There!" The poor fellow didn't even stop to think that Morte had nothing to point with, he was so busy looking attempting to see what Morte saw.

"Where? I cannot see it!" Morte replied with mock exasperation.

"You just missed it! A whole *parade* of them! Probably never happen again in a million revolutions of the Great Ring!"

"I sense you also possess a peculiar degree of mockery," he harumphed, having finally caught on.

"I prefer to refer to it as keen insights into human nature." Morte bobbed slightly, as if shrugging.

I attempted to get the man's attention again. He suddenly seemed to see me for the first time… The man's eyes widened.

"By the unjust laws of Tueny the…!" He caught himself, looking apologetic. "I say, are you all right? You look…" He fumbled for the words. "…hurt." I replied I was all right. Annah interjected herself into the conversation as well.

"Aye, it hurts ta look at 'im, it does."

"Very funny, Annah. I had some questions, such as who you are."

"Why, my name is Able Ponder-Thought. I passed my Administrator exam just recently, and have achieved the status of an 'A9,' a research consultant in the Hall of Records, one of the many aides specializing in Sigil's physical laws and history. I research topics and laws of interest to others. It is quite fascinating, really…"

I quickly cut him off, asking about the symbol embroidered on his tunic.

"Why, 'tis the symbol of the Fraternity of Order. We are responsible for much of the law-making and running the courts here in Sigil. Many judges, advocates and clerks are members of our Order, and we are pleased to be able to help enforce Sigil's laws and keep things orderly. We make a strident effort to learn all laws, whether they pertain to Sigil, the Planes or the multiverse itself."

"The Fraternity of Order believes that the multiverse is governed by laws. When one knows all the laws, one will understand the multiverse. That is our goal. By understanding the laws, their limits, we learn to avoid certain laws."

Perhaps he would be of some use, after all. I asked about the Lady of Pain.

"The Lady of Pain, yes, yes… she is the force behind Sigil, you know. Very impressive figure, but little is known about her."

He began ticking off the points which were known on his fingers: "One: She is not just a symbol of Sigil, as some claim. She is very real and very dangerous. Two: She is believed to be the one that keeps the Powers… deities… out of Sigil. As long as she is present, the Powers cannot enter Sigil… Three: She also prevents unauthorized teleporting and gating into and out of Sigil. It prevents the outer planes creatures from bringing even more of their kind to Sigil outside of the conventional routes. Four: She has never spoken. To anyone. Five: She usurped control of Sigil from Aoskar, a Power now believed dead. Six: Anyone who threatens Sigil… or her… is punished, either by falling beneath her shadow, which results in a series of invisible stab wounds that can kill even greater baatezu, or by being sent to the mazes, from whence few ever escape. Seven: She does not like to be worshipped. Those that do are often found with their skin missing. And lastly: The sight of her is believed to drive others mad."

I asked about several other topics, but found either his knowledge to be lacking, or explanations so long-winded he never came to the point. He failed to note my attempts to excuse myself, so I just walked away.

I moved to another patron, a tall, slender woman, sipping wine from a small ceramic cup. She appeared to be looking for someone. Her facial features were elegantly exotic and the woman's ears, though partially covered by her long hair, could be seen to come to sharp points.

I greeted her. The woman turned to face me, violet eyes flashing like flawless chips of amethyst. Her speech was as music; I could hear a faint, musical tinkling, a hundred tiny crystal bells, as she spoke. Each word lingered in my ears, as if they were unwilling to relinquish the exquisite sound.

"Nemelle turned to face the scarred, dour stranger. She asked what he wished of her."

"Wow, " Morte commented.

"Pah!" Annah sneered at Morte. "Stop yer droolin', yeh leerin' skull."

"My," Morte replied, "what a hot-blooded little chit! Starved for attention? I could drool over you, too, if you're just jealous…" Morte started floating towards Annah, making wet slavering noises…

Annah stated, "Get a hair's breadth closer, skull, an I'll see to it that not one o' yer chatterin' teeth lies within a hundred paces of another!"

Morte stopped abruptly, turning away while muttering unintelligibly. I tried to ignore their byplay.

"You're Nemelle? I was told you know the command word for this decanter."

The woman made no move to touch or examine the decanter, but only spoke. "Nemelle took it from the stranger, turning it in her hands. Had she seen its like before, she thought? Perhaps… yes, she remembered now. She returned the decanter, whispering into his ear as she did so…" I realized I knew the word, now — 'Nildenosaj' — though I was certain the woman never whispered to me, but merely said she did. She blinked at me.

"Would the stranger leave her, now, satisfied with what she had told him?"

"Not just yet. Are you looking for someone?"

" 'Where could she be?' Nemelle wondered. Her companion, Aelwyn, was supposed to have met her here days ago." The woman sighed miserably; the air around her grew chill with her sadness. "How long must she search this vast, foreign city before she finds her dearest friend?"

I nearly started at the name Aelwyn. When I first left the Mortuary, a citizen of the Hive recognized me, and accused me of an awful crime to someone of that name. But it couldn't be the same person.

"I could help you find your friend. What does she look like?" Nemelle clasped her hands together and bowed her head to me.

"She would be so pleased to hear news of her friend! She told the kind stranger what Aelwyn looked like, so that he would know her should he come across her." An image formed in my mind — a woman who resembled Nemelle, but with golden eyes and hair of fiery crimson.

Now that I knew the command word for the Decanter of Endless Water I carried, I thought back to the Smoldering Bar and the twisting corpse which gave it its name.

IGNUS

We travelled back across the wards, to the Hive, and entered the Smoldering Corpse bar. As we entered, a man almost ran forward to meet me.

The man in front of me had large eyes and a thin frame. He seemed confused and frightened by the rest of the bar patrons, but he looked incredibly relieved to see me.

“Greetings?” He seemed familiar, yet I was sure I had never seen him before. He chuckled lightly and rolled his eyes in a ‘you wouldn’t believe what happened to me’ look that I found strangely familiar.

“ ‘Bout time, friend! I thought I might be here all day waiting for you.”

“Uh… do I know you?”

“Why, yes.” He gave me a peery eye. “At least, I think. I… uh… well… can’t recall everything about you, but…” He frowned in thought, then shrugged. “…anyway, it’s good to see you. I'm Adahn. We’re friends, I take it. Excellent! I could use more friends like you, it seems…” He looked around in confusion. “Since I don’t appear to know anyone in these parts, much less how I got here.” Adahn! I certainly recognized that name.

“Where are you from?” Adahn seemed surprised, and his confusion resurfaced.

“I… hmmnnn.” He frowned. “Well, not from around here, I don’t believe… or do I? I think I would have recalled such a place. Don’t really right recall where I'm from, or where I'm bound…”

“Do you know who I am?”

“An… old friend?” He sounded like he was testing the water. “Aren’t you?”

I was sure now. Belief had power on the outer planes. Now I was creating beings, drawing them into my tormented circle, as if enough strays weren’t finding their way to me on their own. I was careful to say nothing that might further roil his inner confusion.

“Yes, yes I am. Say, I had some questions for you…”

“Oh, and I had some for you, too…” He frowned. “Except I can’t seem to get a handle on ‘em.” He shrugged. “Questions — who needs ‘em? All that matters is the answers anyway. I think.”

I reconsidered, and thought it would be better for him if he had as little contact as possible with me. “Well, it’s been interesting, Adahn, but I have to leave. Farewell.”

“Hey… uh…” He frowned. “Look, before you up and fly away to wherever abouts you’re going, I've something for you… at least I think so…”

“What is it?”

“I'm not sure.” He dug in his pockets, and frowned. “Pockets too damned small to keep anything in…” He scratched his head. “Maybe…” He pulled back his sleeves, first the left one, then the right one, looked angry, then let both sleeves fall back to full length. I had a peculiar thought, as though we were acting out pre-written lines.

“Why don’t you check the left sleeve again? I think it might be there.”

“Really?” He pulled back the left sleeve again, and this time, I saw a package tied to his wrist. He smiled in relief, untied it from his arm, then handed it to me. “For you, friend. From me, for you… a thanks of sorts!” He nodded as I took the item. I studied it… it looked like a ring of some sort. I could almost see the script as I asked another question.

“Wasn’t there some money to go along with this?” He snapped his fingers.

“Yes, there was, yes there was.” He looked down at his belt, where there was now a belt pouch. He untied it and passed it to me. “It’s all there. All hundred coppers.” I took the bag, and opened it. It all looked to be there.

“What about that enchanted item you wanted to give me?” He looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled, as if remembering.

“Why, yes, there was one, wasn’t there?” He reached into his right sleeve and pulled forth a long, slender dagger. “Here you are.”

As I looked up from my gift to thank Adahn, I suddenly noticed he had vanished. I didn’t even hear him leave. I wasn’t sure whether I should be glad he had been spared the bittersweet pains of existence, or saddened he had so little time to live and perhaps find his own way to happiness.

I examined the dagger and ring Adahn had given me. The metal they were made of looked extremely thick and heavy, but was almost weightless. It shifted coloration as I watched, changing from silver, to bronze, to gold.

I shook my head, and continued forward to fulfill my reason for coming here, the crackling, billowing creature, who must be Ignus, twisting slowly before my eyes above an iron grill upon the floor of the bar. It may have once been human, but now its skin was charred beyond recognition. Streams of fire formed a wreath around the creature's body, and the flames licked at the few remaining pockets of flesh, causing them to bubble and run like wax down the creature's skeletal frame.

The heat surrounding this… creature… was incredible. To my surprise, the iron grill the creature floated above had sagged and bent from the heat. At first, I thought the heat came from the grill… but now I realized it emanated from the creature. As I watched, flecks of ash drifted from the writhing corpse and floated slowly to the ceiling.

I tilted the Decanter of Endless Water over the grill and began to pour. A small stream of ice-blue water poured from the decanter, and touched the flames of the grill with a violent hissing and a rush of steam… as if in response to this challenge, the decanter seemed to *lunge* forward, falling onto the grill and shattering!

Hissing billows of steam and a furious crackling noise rushed from the grill, spilling over me and forcing me to cover my ears and turn away… there was a scream, a cackling, a terrible sound like a hundred buildings burning, people screaming, their screams being cut short by the roar of flame and melting flesh…

As I put my hands over my ears to block out the sound, I felt a stickiness on my hands, like hot cheese or candle wax… my ears were bleeding from the sound! I drew my hands back, and saw them covered with chunks of melted flesh filled with bloody swirls…

I was about to run from the bar, anything to get away from the sound, when suddenly all fell silent, except for a jagged crackling coming from the grill. I turned — on the grill lay the Decanter of Endless Water, now nothing but shards and steam. Above it was the creature, flames still trailing from its body, floating over the bar's floor. It was staring at me, its eyes flickering like two torches…

Suddenly realization struck. I said, "I *know* you…"

The creature's face split, charred flesh peeling away from its jaw so that it might speak. "*Yessss…"* Its voice crackled, burned, roared through the creature's chest, and with every word, flakes of cinder and ash spit from its mouth and drifted into the air. I could barely stand to look at the thing — the blazing radiance surrounding it was terrible to behold.

"Ignus…"

"*Yesssss…*" The creature floated towards me, the air bending from the thermals surrounding it.*"Long have I ssslept… dreamssss of flamesss…"* As if in response, flames curled within Ignus' throat, and a tongue of flame streamed from behind his blackened teeth.*"I am yourssss… 'til death comessss for ussss both…*"

Ignus' lover, Drusilla, had approached us. Ignus' eyes flared up as he saw her, and before I could stop him, he embraced her. She returned his embrace, losing herself in his flames. She did not cry out. My last glimpse of her was burned into my memory: Her eyes were full of fiery passion and all-engulfing love. Nothing was left of her — not even ashes.

I was repelled by Ignus' act, even though I knew I had done much worse things. I decided I had better talk to him right away, try to lay down a few rules.

"Ignus, what happened to you to make you this way?"

"*Thissss way…*" A small pocket of flesh on Ignus' cheek *popped,* and ran in a steaming trickle down his jaw. "*Thissss way… Ignussss alwayssss wasss…*"

"But… you look human. Or at least, you look like you were human once."

Ignus twisted, hunching his head forward as his body spun slowly above the ground… the effect was much like a fiery whirlwind, thermals streaming off his body and distorting the air around him. "*Ssssstill Ignusss… alwayssss Ignusss…*"

"I had some other questions for you…"

" *hssss' sssss! "* My heart jumped as Ignus soared several feet into the air, and his jaw tore open, fiery trails spilling forth like a nest of snakes. *" no more talk and quesssstionsss! Ssssilence…!"* I hastily backtracked.

"But I wish to speak of flames, Ignus, and of burning…" My words were like oil… and I watched them fill Ignus' eyes, fanning the flames I saw there.

"*Flamessss? "* Ignus drifted down slightly, the heat around him rising, as if in interest. "*Sssss'peak… Ignusss will lisssten…"*

I asked if it was true, whether he burned down the Alley of Dangerous Angles.

Ignus' face split, the flesh around the corner of his mouth cracking, then re-melting into charred, sneering red-and-black pieces. "*Yessss… a dream sssshall Ignussss ssshare…*" A torrent of flames poured from Ignus, and I took a step back, the air *bending* from the heat.

"*Ssstreetsss at night… ssssso cold… Ignussss burnnn the buildingssss, the dwellersss… all ran from Ignussss, the flamessss, and the buildingssss were as flamesssssss… screamssss as the dwellerssss became TORCHESSssss…*"

"*Buildingssss as skeletonssss… Anglessss, bodiessss as skeletonssss… redsss and orangessss and blackssss, the flamessss ssspreading, caresssing… sssuch lightssss…*"

"*Sss…*" Ignus' fury died, the wreaths of flames surrounding him ebbing somewhat. He seemed to be lost in thought — perhaps lost in memory. "*Ssss… and Ignussss wassss pleasssed…*" Once again, I was disgusted with him. I decided to switch to another topic.

"Ignus, your mastery of the Art… can you teach me any of your powers?"

"*Ssss… Ignussss once knew much… no longer… Ignussss burnnssss… in sssuffering, Ignusssss learnssss…*" A tiny flame gusted from his mouth, like laughter, and a stream of embers spat forth. "*Ssssuffer… learn…*"

I knew he meant to hurt me as part of his teaching. And I knew I didn't trust him, that my body was unconsciously tensing, ready to attack him if he moved any closer. I couldn't understand why, but it might have something to do with the growing feeling of familiarity with Ignus.

"Ignus, I spoke with a storyteller in the Hive, and he mentioned that someone *taught* you these things… who? "

"*Of learningssss and teachingsss you know…*" Gouts of flame erupted from Ignus' mouth, in a horrid semblance of laughter. "*You have alwayssss taught Ignussss… Ignusss massss' ter, you were. "*

"Me? Are you *sure*…?" Ignus' voice *dropped*, and the crackling of the flames died.

"*Yessss… it issss the only reassssson… Ignussss… obeysss you* " Flames rose around him in a crackling spiral. "'*til death comessss for ussss both… your wordssssss to me… to your sssstudent ignussss… Ignusss hassss not forgotten… Massssster…*"

"Ignus, if I was your 'Master'… can you remember anything about me?"

Ignus hissed… and for a moment, his *features* flickered — at first, I thought it was the flames, but it was not… it was the flickering of *memory*… I surrendered to the memory.

The crackling of Ignus' flames subsided, lessening as the charred bones of Ignus' body folded up, twisting into itself until his limbs lay motionless, becoming a stack of wood within a huge iron fireplace… I was staring into a fire, burning brightly within a vaulted room. The fire crackled and spat embers onto the stone floor, motes rising from the fireplace. Faintly, from the darkness behind me, I could hear the rasp of someone breathing.

In the memory, I spoke, "I can *hear* you… step into the light."

There was the shuffling of sandals, and a frail youth stepped into the edges of the firelight. His wide, black eyes caught the flames and mirrored them. He was nervous — I could hear his muscles shaking, his voice trembling — just enough to increase my irritation. "Forgive my intrusion, master. I—"

"You have *already* intruded, supplicant. You did so with intention. I will hear it now, then you will leave me to my thoughts."

The boy took a deep breath, and glanced at the fire. "Master, I… dreamed of flames again, last night… they felt real, and you said that we were to come to you if —"

"It was a *dream*, nothing more. Now leave."

The boy did not move — his brows drew together, and slowly, he displayed his hands. The flesh around the fingers… blackened, burned.

"How did your hands come to be burned, supplicant?"

"I awoke and my hands were as ash." The boy met my gaze; he was still trembling, faintly, but there was an eagerness in his voice which angered me. "I dreamed I soared above the earth and the ground and sky were as fire. The world itself was so bright that it… hurt to look at it, master. And when I awoke, my hands… they were burned, as if I had held a flame within my hands."

"You lie, supplicant. You have come to me with a story, and now you are in danger of *angering* me."

"No, master…" The boy's face glistened with a sweaty sheen of fear. "No, upon my life, I do not!"

"You burned yourself with a candle, supplicant. Or thrust your hand within one of the pyres in the Vault of Currents. Now you come to me and tell me a dream burned you. I tire of your lies."

The boy fell silent, and to my surprise, his face clenched in anger. "No. I do not lie. It was the *dream* that burned me, master, as you said it might if we felt the power stirring. They were *your* words, and I came to *repeat* them to you and tell you they are *true*." He held up his hands. "Look, master…"

Before the boy could react, my hand — huge in comparison — lashed out, crushing his burned hands in its grip, and the boy screamed, echoing in the vault. With a snarl, I hurled him to the ground in front of the fireplace, and there was a sharp *crack* as his knees struck the flagstones.

"Look into those flames, supplicant! Raise your head, look!"

The boy was shuddering from the pain from his knees… I watched tears blur his eyes as he raised his head to look into the fireplace. The flames cast his face in a red, gaunt glow…

"Is *that* what you wish to hold, supplicant? Is the shaping of flames what stirs your heart? Know that flames can burn, and if you would learn their power, you must suffer their touch."

The boy was silent, staring into the flames. He seemed mesmerized. His tears had dried in the heat, and the shaking was gone. The flames were his focus. He was not LISTENING to me, and I felt fury washing over me.

"If that is what consumes you, enough for you to *intrude* upon my meditations, then I shall teach you of the shaping of flames, supplicant."

My hand lashed out and clamped onto the boy's wrist. He howled as I dragged him closer to the fireplace, then thrust his hands into the coals — there was a crackling, a hissing of burning flesh, and his *screams* — such terrible, yet —

"To learn, you must *suffer*, supplicant. You must allow yourself to be burned by the power of that which you wield. Know its torment, and you shall know how to use it against your enemies."

My vision cleared, the memory streaming away like smoke. Ignus was hovering above me, his head cocked to one side, and an insane, blackened grin smeared across his face…

"*Masssster… Ignusssss hasss not forgotten your teachingsss…*" I tried to move on to another topic, but Ignus

balked again. The anger from my memory was still with me as I gave him an order.

"You WILL answer my questions, Ignus. I set you free, and I may send you back to your hell again."

"*Think you could ch'ain Ignussss…?"* The flames around Ignus swirled like a cloak, then fanned outwards, as if seeking to caress me. " *kill you, turn you to asssshessss Ignussss can… for now, Ignussssss followssssss… but threatssssss… threatsss anger Ignussssss…*"

"Actually, Ignus, you couldn't stop me — you could burn me, but I'd keep coming at you until you were kindling. So *enough* with the threats…"

There was a crackling in the air, and Ignus cocked his head slightly, as if studying me, then hissed. "*flamesssss will burnnnn the immmortality from you… you are not sssafe from my flamesssss…*"

"Maybe you don't understand what immortality MEANS, Ignus…"

"*You are not immmortal… Ignusssss can kill you… ssscatter your asssshesss to the windssss…*" I watched as he flung his arms wide, and a HEAT poured from him, so powerful I was forced to shield my eyes — there was a great ROARING, as the air fled past me being drawn into Ignus.

As I tried to shout at Ignus to stop, the tide of heat turned back upon itself, and a blazing *heat* washed over me. I felt my flesh begin to smolder, then smoke, and the beginnings of PAIN… I clenched my teeth, and over the pain, I could hear Ignus cackling… cackling, crackling laughter…

As I shouted his name again, the heat died — as I drew my arms back from my face, I saw that my skin had blackened from where Ignus burned it… and Ignus was watching me hungrily. I knew, more than anything, that whatever Ignus *was,* whatever power that had embraced him, it had the power to destroy me — if his flames were to kill me, there would be nothing left of my body.

I barely held myself back from testing whether I could kill him before he destroyed me. Part of my anger was spilling over from my previous incarnation, but I was unable to control it. Ignus didn't seem evil, precisely, more of an elemental force. But in any case, I wasn't the one to help him. If we remained together, the time would come when one of us would kill the other.

I left Ignus in the no longer Smoldering Corpse bar, resolved to walk as far as the Lower Ward before resting for the night. I hoped Ignus was able to find help on his own. I also hoped I wouldn't hear of Hive blocks burnt down in the morning.

As I left him behind, Ignus called out, "*You are all tallow for my flamesss.*"

FALL-FROM-GRACE, PART I

I returned to the Clerk's Ward next day. My path had take me to a large, circular building. Seeing no name, I entered. A tiny room was just inside the outer doors. I pushed open the inner doors, moving into a foyer.

Before me was a stunning golden-haired woman, dressed in an azure and violet dress, with two long, elegant wings draped across her shoulders. She was surveying the room with a slight smile… she was easily the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

I greeted her. The woman turned as I addressed her. She took my measure, then nodded slightly… I noticed her eyes were azure, the exact same color as her dress.

"Well met, traveler." She reached up to brush back a stray lock of golden hair. "How may I help you?"

"Who are you?"

"I am called Fall-From-Grace." She studied me for a moment. "You are new to Sigil, are you not?" I could answer that two ways, both true. I opted for the literal truth.

"No, I suspect I have been here for quite some time, actually."

Fall-From-Grace raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"Yes… but that is a long tale, perhaps longer than I know. I'm more interested in what this place is."

"This is the *Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts*." She studied me for a moment. "I take it by your question that you did not intend to partake of this establishment?"

" 'Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts?' What kind of brothel is this?"

"I established this brothel to give those lustful fevers that strike the mind more avenues of expression rather than the simply carnal. Much pleasure can be had in conversation and engaging in the verbal arts with others."

Morte commented, "Sounds dull."

She replied, "I assure you, it is not. Tour the brothel, see for yourselves."

My curiosity, always easily aroused, prompted me, "I have to ask: Why did you establish such a place?"

Fall-From-Grace raised an eyebrow. “That is an odd question.” She frowned. “I don’t think anyone has ever asked me that. At least, directly.” I became more formal, matching her tone.

“My apologies, Lady Grace. I didn’t mean to be so direct. I was merely curious.”

“Oh, no apologies are necessary. I am more than happy to discuss the reasons with you, if you wish.”

“I would like to hear them, yes.”

“Part of the answer to your question requires that you know that I am a member of the Society of Sensation. Our faction believes that one should experience as much of the multiverse as possible.”

“And that is why you established this place?”

“This brothel is intended to slake the lusts of even the hardened intellectual. It is designed to stimulate the mind, to heighten one’s awareness of themselves and others, to create new ways of *experiencing* another person. It is for those who seek something more than the shallow physical pleasures that fill the Hive and Lower Wards.”

“I see. So this establishment just encourages intellectual fencing rather than, uh, well the *other* kind of fencing. The women here must be special, indeed.” I doubted the customers forbore from taking shallow physical pleasures elsewhere, however.

“The women here are aspiring Sensates. They have come to me in search of instruction, to prepare themselves to enter the faction. Also, many of them have a natural grasp of language that can shatter the crust of the most hardened individual.”

“I see. So the ladies here are ladies-in-training, so to speak?”

“Yes. I hope that by learning the art of language and its subtleties that the patrons and the students here may learn more about themselves. One is only as limited as their command of the language. To be able to employ language to evoke emotions in others is a tremendous skill.” I also wondered what manner of being I faced.

“If I may ask, Lady Grace, the wings on your back… you are not human, I take it?”

Annah interjected, “She’s one o’ the fiends, one o’ the succubi, she is. She'll take yer measure, then she'll take yer soul to the Lower Planes, so’s she will.”

Fall-From-Grace replied, “Your companion is correct. I am a lesser tanar’ri, more specifically, a succubus.” She gave a soft sigh. “I'm afraid we’re a little too common in the Lower Planes and elsewhere for our own good. Most of my race spend their time seducing mortals with various pleasures of the flesh.”

“And you…?”

“I'd like to think that I have distanced myself from that… it is ultimately a trivial and non-productive way for one to spend one’s time here in the multiverse. There is much more to life, wouldn’t you agree?” Rather than commenting, I broached another topic, one I hoped she could help me with.

“Perhaps you can help me. I seem to have lost my memories… in so doing, I've lost myself.”

“You have been stricken with amnesia?” Fall-From-Grace looked pained. “How terrible! Do you have any idea how it happened?”

“Not really… at least not that I can remember. I woke up on a slab on the Mortuary, and everything before that is black.”

“You awoke in the Mortuary?”

“I think the Dustmen mistook me for being dead… or I was dead… or something. All I know is that I regenerate wounds quickly. I could be immortal, but I don’t even know that for sure.” Fall-From-Grace seemed to be appraising me with renewed interest.

“Those scars on your body.” She reached out a hand, as if to touch me. “May I?”

“Yes.”

Fall-From-Grace dragged her finger across my chest lightly, tracing the edges of my scars and following the curves where they blended into some of my tattoos. She seemed fascinated.

“These scars do look as if they would have taken several lifetimes to accumulate.”

“They certainly do… though some are more recent.”

Fall-From-Grace stepped back. “Some of those wounds would have been fatal. To a normal man.” She tapped her chin, thinking. “What do you intend to do now?”

“I need to get my memories back, and my life back. I intend to scour the Planes and search inside myself until I can piece together who I am and what brought me to this state.”

Fall-From-Grace was still thinking, her finger tapping on her chin. “I must say, I've never met a man who had lost himself in the literal sense.” She raised an eyebrow. “Forgive me, but your condition is intriguing.”

" 'Intriguing?' Frightening is more like it. I don't like not knowing who I am, what I may have done, who my enemies are, and who are my friends."

"I have offended you with my words." Fall-From-Grace bowed her head. "I give my apology, if you will have it."

"Apology accepted." Fall-From-Grace nodded.

"If it will help, you are welcome to tour the Brothel. Several of our students are well-versed in the verbal arts. Perhaps some of them will be able to re-kindle your memories."

I had felt a growing attraction as she spoke, and I blurted out another question, "Would you like to join me on my travels?" I thought I was done with spilling the contents of my mind like that.

Annah stiffened, then started muttering under her breath. "Who's ta say she'll be comin' with us? We donnae need the likes o' her, so's we don't."

"Bar that, fiendling!" Morte clicked his teeth together. "I'm ALL for the succubus coming with us… the Powers know *you're* about as fun as passing a caltrop through your bowels."

Annah predictably rose to the baiting. "Ye'd best latch yer bone-box, skull, or I'll rattle yeh so hard they'll be pickin' yer teeth off the spire —!"

"Travel with you?" Fall-From-Grace smiled slightly. She seemed to be ignoring my companions. "That's rather forward of you."

I quickly thought of some reason, any reason, for her to accompany us. "I'd rather be honest with my intentions. You seem extremely pleasant and well-versed in the ways of the Planes. A companion with that kind of knowledge would be welcome."

Now I had offended Morte. "Hey, wait just a minute! *I'm* the one well-versed in the Planes! That's my job, chief!"

"Having two people knowledgeable about the Planes in our band seems pretty smart to me. Besides, I said, 'pleasant,' too, Morte."

"Pleasant on the eyes, maybe! Looks to ME like all some chit has to do is show a little skin, and you'll sign her right up!" Morte fell silent. "Not that I mind that really, I just thought I'd mention it."

"Noted, Morte. Look… Lady Grace, excuse me if I'm being too forward, but would you care to travel with us?"

"I appreciate your candor. I shall counter with some of my own: Why should I travel with you?"

"You mean you wouldn't be interested in traveling with an immortal amnesiac who is searching the Planes for himself?"

"Oh, I *would* be extremely interested." She smiled slightly. "Such a suggestion is intriguing, make no mistake about that."

"Then you *would* like to travel with me, then?"

"If you wish me to, then there is something you must do for me. There are ten students in this establishment. I would like you to speak to all of them, then return to me with your thoughts. Then we shall see if we shall travel together or not."

BROTHEL OF SLAKING INTELLECTUAL LUSTS

I moved off, to talk to the prostitutes in this most unusual brothel. The brothel was in the shape of a circle, with a circular corridor running around inside it. The rooms of the prostitutes were located against the outer wall, opening onto the corridor. The center of the circle was lined with benches and plants, providing a pleasant area in which to mingle.

Starting down the hall, I ran into a tall, elegant woman, who, with her sharp features and regal demeanor, was a striking example of aristocratic beauty. Her clothes appeared to be spun of silver thread, and a small phial dangled from her necklace. She was perfumed with an exotic, erotic scent that seemed to draw me towards her. She looked me over, arching an eyebrow with what I sensed to be disdain.

"Greetings. My name is Vivian; am I to presume I am being summoned?"

I assured her she was not, and asked about the scent hanging about her. She scowled for a moment, then smiled at me.

"Yes, yes, and I thank you for your compliment… but I assure you, this particular aroma is *nothing* to my personal scent."

She then explained that her personal scent had gone missing, had in fact been stolen. I agreed to help her find it. She seemed to feel she was imposing on me, but I assured her it was no imposition for a lovely woman such as herself.

At this, Annah mumbled something angrily; I caught the words "piking" and "idjit-stick." Vivian thanked me for my offer.

In a room off the main corridor I met Juliette, a dark-haired young woman who I found staring listlessly off into space, sighing miserably and occasionally picking at the seams of her green velvet gown. It was difficult to discern whether she was depressed or simply bored. I asked about her problem, whether it was due to no suitors.

"I am already with a man, sir, and I do love him dearly. 'Tis just that I wish…" She tapped her finger against her chin. "… something *more* of our liaison."

"There's a problem with the relationship?" I asked.

"Yes, there is a problem…" She huffed. "…in that there are no problems to speak of! Our families took the news of our courtship splendidly, his siblings love my siblings, and our friends think our union to be blessed by the Powers themselves. All fine and good, but things are going…" She frowned. "…so *smoothly. 'Tis* not right to have such a trouble-free courtship."

"I don't know about that…" I temporized.

"Dost thou not? Hast thou ever had such a courtship?" She glanced briefly at me. "T'would seem that thy life is filled with a variety of problems, judging by the pallor of thy skin."

"I can't remember any courtships I have had. The remnants of the ones I have encountered suggest I may have had some problems."

" 'Tis just that all my friends have such interesting relationships… ones fraught with turmoil, feuding families, daggers at one another's backs, poison, mad siblings and irate fathers with large swords. I have a lover whose family loves me and whom the world loves." She sighed again. "A great source of annoyance. How I wish I could formulate some way to spice things up…"

Morte floated close to me, whispering: "I feel sorry for her lover. He doesn't know how bad he has it. A chit like this is nothing but trouble."

"That doesn't sound wise, Juliette. Relish what you have," I suggested.

"I wish to experience troubles, though. I wish to experience the up and downs of courtship… but with him, no other." She sighed. "Ah, such a thing is love. It can be as dull as a club, and is of no use to an aspiring Sensate."

I asked what she wanted to spice things up, but she did not have a clear idea. I came up with a suggestion.

"Why don't you make up some fake love letters from a hidden affair?" Juliette's eyes brightened.

"Excellent notion! Most excellent!" She suddenly frowned. "But he knows my handwriting… wilt thou write some for me?"

"Not my sort of thing. I can find you some, though."

"Oh, wouldst thou? Excellent! When thou dost find some, please give them to my love, Montague… he may be found within the Civic Festhall. As for the letters… please try

Scofflaw Penn. He runs a print shop in the Lower Ward. I thank thee!”

NENNY NINE-EYES

I moved on to another room, meeting Nenny Nine-Eyes. The petite, attractive young woman was smiling blissfully and humming to herself. Her wide, pale blue eyes seemed to constantly drink in her surroundings as she looked about.

The young woman curtseyed gracefully and looked up to me, smiling.

"Well *met*, good sir! I'm Nenny! And how are *you* this fine d-?" She suddenly noticed my scars and placed a gloved hand over her mouth. "Oh my! You're hurt!" She blinked. "All over!"

Morte spun around me, mocking the girl's obviousness. "Powers above, chief… she's right! I never noticed before… you're covered in *scars!*" I ignored Morte, replying to her concern.

"They're all old scars. I'm fine." She then became fascinated by my tattoos, tracing some with her finger.

"I *think* that's ink." She traced a finger around the edge of a tattoo. "Is it ink? And what a pattern! Look at the way the lines intersect here." She touched the center of the tattoo. "That's simply amazing…" She pursed her lips and frowned in disappointment. "I could make it out better if there weren't so many scars…"

"There's nothing to be done about the scars; they're permanent."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry… pox on me for even mentioning them!" She cringed. "But I *have* to know… are you absolutely *sure* you're all right? I'm looking at you, and I can't help but believe that you're not in *some* pain."

I could tell her what I knew of my life story, no doubt unsettling her much further, but I settled for "I have amnesia, but that is all."

"Amnesia?" Nenny blinked, then brightened. "Loss of memory! You are *so* lucky," she chimed perkily. "Everything must be so *new* to you."

"That's… an angle I hadn't considered." Nenny clapped her hands delightedly.

"I'm so pleased I could open your mind to that idea! I've heard that's what being a Sensate is all about… bringing new experiences to others." I asked her what she did.

"I'm talking to *you*, silly!" She giggled and poked me in the belly. "Just like I talk to *all* the patrons here. All the prostitutes do; that's what's the Brothel's about! Learning new ways to talk and share experiences and understand other people."

"The Brothel for Slaking Intellectual Lusts is a school that was started by Mistress Fall-From-Grace. The prostitutes here — like me! — are taught the ins and outs of talking to people, all to help us learn more about ourselves and others. I love it here… it's a non-stop wave of experiences, crashing into me, filling my head with fresh new ideas!"

Morte observed low-voiced, "I guess it's good that there's *something* in there."

I asked if she knew anything about Vivian's missing scent. She knew something, but was hesitant to tell me what she suspected, for fear of saying something bad about someone else. I asked her to try and say something not nice about the person she suspected. She tried.

"Oh, all right." Nenny put her hands on her hips and frowned deeply, almost exaggeratedly. I resisted the temptation to laugh. "Oooooh, I dislike her very, *very* much." She paused for a moment, then looked at me out of the corner of her eye, as if gauging my reaction. "Was that convincing?"

"No, not really…" Nenny frowned.

"I knew I wouldn't be any good at this!" She looked up at me, depressed. "Do you know how *hard* it is to say bad things about someone?! It feels so wrong."

Charmed by her simplicity, I suggested "Why don't you practice on me, Nenny?" She looked dubious, but gave it a try.

"You big mean nasty brute!" She put her hands on her hips. "Meanie!" She looked at me. "How was that?"

"Try hitting me." Nenny clamped her hands over her mouth, looking shocked.

"Oh, I couldn't! I musn't!" She blinked. "How does one hit somebody, anyway?"

"Go ahead. Do it lightly, if you have to. Remember: I'm a mean, nasty brute. I deserve it."

Nenny slapped me; I barely felt it. She still looked shocked and frightened she had hurt me. "Oh, I'm sorry! Did that hurt? Tell me you're okay!"

“Don’t break character, Nenny. Come on; show me what you've got. You can say something bad… just let it all out.”

“Oh… I mean, oh!” Nenny drew her tiny frame to its full height, balled her hands into fists, put them on her hips, and scrunched up her face in a cute scowl. “Oh, damned be you! You deserved that for all the indignities you put me through! Going out late at night,” Her eyes roamed up and down my body. “Getting into fights and getting all scarred up! What are the kids going to think, hmm?!”

‘Kids?’ I wondered to myself. Out loud I said “Excellent.”

“Oh, don’t you ‘excellent’ me, like I'm some backlicker looking for your approval! I am my own woman, and this woman is about to walk out of your life unless I get some solid commitment!”

“All right… that’s enough out of you, Nenny.”

She punched me again. “And this!” She punched me again, promptly turning into a little fist-flailing whirlwind.

“Okay, okay… time to let go of the anger.” Nenny sighed tiredly.

“Whew. That was easier than I thought!”

“No kidding.” Having helped her in a small way, she now felt ready to accuse the person she suspected of the theft of the scent, another of the prostitutes, named Marissa.

The next room held a striking young woman, who I later learned was named Ecco, with skin the color of burnished copper. A translucent white dress, held precariously by golden clasps, was draped carefully over her shapely form. She was mute, unable or unwilling to communicate even by sign. This made her an ideal listener for the Brothel’s patrons, but I quickly ran out of things to say, and left.

MARISSA

I entered Marissa's dimly lit room, approaching a moveable divider. Squinting at the figure behind the partition, I could barely make out a shapely female form in the darkness. She turned to me, but I could see nothing of her face.

I greeted the form I could now barely see. The figure answered in a voice that was slow and deadly, like a steel dagger drawn across stone.

"Yes? Come to speak with Marissa, have you? Quite rude of you to enter a darkened room, storming behind my partition like so… rude, and foolhardy." I could hear a faint whispering sound, like a slight breeze… or the hissing of serpents.

Morte whispered quietly, "Whoah… creepy chit."

"My apologies, my lady… I wasn't sure if someone was here." I replied to the vague shadow. The woman gave a sligh *thmph.*

"But it would seem there *is* someone in this room, wouldn't it? Shall you be on your way, then?"

"Not just yet… I had some questions. " She grudgingly allowed me to ask them.

"Why do you remain behind this screen?"

"Is it your wish that I step away from this partition, into some patch of light, and speak to you face to face?" Marissa laughed, and there was the sound of scales sliding on scales. "Nay, I think not. The darkness suits me, and doubtless suits you as well. It also prevents any unwanted… and embarrassing… casualties. Now what is it that you want?" I was now intrigued.

"I want you to come into the light."

"Nay, and the addition of 'please' will not serve to persuade me. Now what do you *want?* Surely you did not come all this way to *see* me."

"I *do* want to see what you look like…"

"You have no such want." Perversely, the more she demurred, the more I wanted to clearly see her.

"Oh, I do."

“What do *you* look like? The darkness hides us both. Let’s make it a game? I'm frightfully bored. Let me guess… are you a human male?”

“Yes.”

“Are you… wounded in the throat?”

“I can’t see but I believe so, yes.”

“Hmm… describe yourself for me.”

“I'm tall, muscular, and horribly scarred,” I replied truthfully.

“Indeed? Hmmm…” She paused for a moment. “How were you so horribly scarred? Wait… never mind. I do not wish to know.” I was very curious what she was hiding.

“Now describe yourself, for me.”

Marissa described herself as a shapely, pale-skinned, beautiful woman with a forked tongue, hair made up of writhing asps, and glowing eyes… which I assumed she must be keeping shut. I considered if she could be from the lower planes.

“Are you a fiend?” Marissa laughed lightly, the sound accompanied by a slight hissing.

“No, hardly… though I've powers some might *call* fiendish. My glance turns living things to stone, for instance. From beings of flesh to statuary with the bat of an eyelash…”

“That must be inconvenient at times.”

“You think so? That must be why I sit here alone, in the dark, hiding behind a partition.” Though I couldn’t see Marissa, I was certain she was sneering. She suddenly sighed. “If only I knew where my Crimson Veil had gone. Have you seen it, perchance?”

I assured her I had not seen her veil, and asked her about the missing scent, saying someone had seen her sneaking away from Vivian’s chambers. Marissa said nothing for a moment, though an angry hissing issued from the darkness around her.

“Yes, I've been known to creep into Vivian’s chamber for some of her perfumes… though I doubt you'll meet another here who hasn’t. If you’re implying that I've got her *personal* scent, well… feel free to sniff around. You'll not find it on me or in my chambers, I assure you. Perhaps whoever took my Crimson Veil took Vivian’s scent, as well.”

KESAI-SERRIS

I continued to the next room about the ring. The occupant was an alarmingly voluptuous woman with a thick mane of wavy, raven-colored hair, bluish skin and shimmering, crimson eyes, like rubies which had fires lit behind them. Though she was not beautiful in the typical sense of the word, her features were exotically unusual. I greeted her. Her voice was deep and sensuous.

"And my greetings to *you*, sir." Her burning eyes roamed over me. "I'm Kesai-Serris. So tell me: what might I do for you, hmmm?"

"Anything!" Morte cried, "Do anything you want to me!" Kesai laughed heartily, revealing canines long enough to be considered fangs. She shook her head and smiled at Morte.

"Truly, though, please… what can I do for you?" I deflected her question with a question.

"If you don't mind my asking, what are you?" Kesai shook her head.

"What, can't you tell?" She drew herself up, thrusting her ample bosom towards me. "A woman!" She raised an eyebrow. "I can see my answer doesn't please you… I'm plane-touched, actually, like your friend here." Kesai indicated Annah. "That's all you need to know."

I asked if she might know where Vivian's scent was.

"No, I don't." Kesai frowned. "Most of the women will say she's prissy, but she's always been nice enough to me… complimenting me on my eyes… and she smells so good! I hope she finds her own scent again, soon."

As I had talked to her, I had realized that Kesai's exotic features were not un-attractive.

"You do have very lovely eyes, you know."

"Tch." Annah sneered, rolling her eyes. "Idjit."

"Don't be upset, Annah… you're just as lovely." The wrong thing to say, as I knew as soon as I spoke.

"An' what's *that* supposed ta mean, yeh pikin' tard?! Didja think me *jealous* o' this chatty tart? Yeh sod!" Annah spat and looked away from me, then stalked from the room. Kesai-Serris shrugged and looked back to me, replying to my compliment.

"Why, thank you! You can see them glowing in the dark, you know… bizarre, no?" She paused to look at me. "You've some nice eyes, too… so dark, and mysterious! So full of character." I next asked Kesai about Marissa, and her veil.

"Hmm. No, I haven't seen it since the last time she wore it out… but Nenny might have seen something, so try asking her. I'll admit it's been nice… Marissa won't leave her chamber without the veil, and so we've all been spared her foul tongue… leaving us only Kimasxi to deal with." Kesai smirked. "That Kimasxi's the worst of the two, though."

"How so?"

"Marissa's haughty and mean, but Kimasxi… she's a bitter, spiteful monster of a woman, with a venomous tongue and the demeanor of a balor. I can't see *why* anyone would like to speak with her — I sincerely doubt her appearance makes up for that flaying, poisonous mouth of hers — but she receives patrons nonetheless." I was curious about Kesai's talents.

"Well, what do you usually do for patrons?"

"Talk, of course! Usually about dreams, often those erotic in nature… but not always!" Kesai winked at me, smiling. "So! Would you like to tell me yours? Don't be shy; I've heard everything, you know. Nothing will shock or surprise me, and I so love to hear people's dreams. We can trade if you'd like, too — but you must go first." I played along with her light mood.

"My dreams were recently revised when I saw you, my lady…"

"*Were* they, now?" Kesai smiled, her gleaming red eyes looking me over once more. "You look very savage, you know? Tell me: are you rough with your lovers? In the *act*, I mean… very physical?"

"Why would you ask such a thing?"

"I was curious… and enjoy talking about the act of love. Many people are uncomfortable speaking of it, but it's important to be able to, especially with one's partner — it's good for the both of them! It's my hope that my clients will find the voice to talk to their own lovers about such things, if they don't already. So: you never gave me an answer…"

"I'm only rough if it pleases them." At least, that was what I thought I would do, since I had no memories of such acts. The last few days had been too filled to think about this topic much, and there were too many unresolved issues with the one woman I had seriously considered it about. As I thought of Annah, I realized my comment to her just now had been undeserved,

treating her like a spoiled child. Although she did need to find a better way to deal with her jealousy…

"I thought you'd say as much. I'm quite rough, myself… I like to be carried around, and I particularly enjoy biting! I've sharp teeth, though, so I've to take care. Sometimes I get carried away and draw a little blood, you know?"

Morte commented, "It's enough to make me weep… where was this chit when I had a *body?!*

"Roaming the Outlands, most likely. But that was a rhetorical question, wasn't it?" She winked at Morte, then turned to me again.

"You have sharp teeth?" I asked, having only glimpsed them before. Kesai nodded.

"Mmm-hmm, I certainly do. Would you like to see? Here…" She opened her mouth slightly, running her violet tongue over her bottom teeth; her canines were just long enough to be considered fangs. I thought her fangs didn't look too dangerous.

"I don't think I'd mind the biting…" Kesai laughed.

"I doubt I'd get through that thick hide of yours, anyway. Do you have much sensation left in your skin?"

"No, sadly; not really. The scars are very thick."

"Oh, that's a shame. You *do* have a lot scars…" Kesai looked closely at my face. "Even your lips, the lids of your eyes… tell me: are you scarred everywhere? You know… *everywhere?*"

"No, not really. Parts of me have somehow managed to stay out of harm's way."

"That's good, then!" Kesai laughed cheerfully, then put on a mock serious look, placing her hands on her hips. "You never *did* tell me about your dreams, you know. Come on, let's have them!"

"I… don't have dreams, actually." I realized this to be literally true. Not just for the few days for which I had full memories, but stretching back over a much longer time. Kesai arched her eyebrows in surprise.

"Truly? How sad! Even fiends and devas dream, you know. Are you *certain* you don't?"

"Quite certain. No dreams, at all."

KIMASXI ADDERTONGUE

I left, going to the next room around the ring, which was empty.

As I approached the next room, a man entered it before I reached the entry. I paused outside, but could hear a loud woman's voice yell through the open door " AGAIN?! YOU CLUELESS DUNG SACK!"

I could barely hear the man's reply. "Yes, mistress…"

"Take THIS!!" The woman said, followed by the sound of a blow.

"And THIS!!" She said, followed by the sound of another blow.

" AND DON'T COME BACK, YOU PITIFUL EXCUSE OF A MAN!!" was yelled.

Another barely heard reply. "Thank you… mistress."

I heard footsteps approaching the door. The gentleman leaving was unremarkable save in that he had a black eye, as if he'd been struck in the face. He bowed slightly as I approached him. "Greetings, sir."

Curious, I asked him, "How'd you get the black eye?"

He smirked. "Oh, this? A long story, sir. One you would not be interested in."

Morte said, "Oooh, no… you've *got* to tell us, now."

I concurred. "Yes… please, sir: do tell."

The man sighed, rolling his eyes. "Very well… but I shan't be made to divulge the details. Despite my earlier remark upon the tale's length, I might sum it up in two words: Kimasxi Addertongue."

"I have heard the name…"

"Ah, you have not yet spoken to her, I see. I will tell you no more of the most delightful treat that is Kimasxi, good sir… instead, I would insist that you speak to her yourself. She is one of the prostitutes here, and Lady Grace's most fascinating student." He smiled at me.

I went into the room to meet the object of his affection, wondering if Morte and Dak'kon were sufficient protection. The wild-looking tiefling girl met my gaze with an angry scowl. Her tattooed body was practically naked, covered by only a narrow leather thong, a black cloth brassier and armored shoulder pads

that appeared to serve more as decoration rather than actual protection. Her spiked hair — as well as the thin fur that covered her goat-like legs — was brassy white, and numerous silver rings dangled from her ears, nostrils, lips and brow. She wore a leather collar around her throat with the inscription "Kimasxi Addertongue." To my greeting Kimasxi bared her teeth at me.

"And just what are *you* looking at, you banged-up sod?" Morte replied for me.

"My friend thought you were attractive, but *whoah!* was he ever horribly mistaken!" She sneered at Morte, then looked below him, where a body would normally be.

"Sharp tongue… for a stemless deader." Morte kept at it.

"Like I'd let mine anywhere near if I had one! What, did you hear the word 'brothel' and think you could make some jink here, you flea-bitten gutter-whore? Hah! Can't believe they even let you in the door, what with all those ticks hopping off your shaggy legs!"

"Ticks?! The only annoying insect around here is *you!*" She suddenly turned to me. "Hey! You here to talk to me, or what?"

" 'Or what?' What else can I do with you?" I asked, amused by her inventive invective.

"What did you have in mind, you sodding jawbox? Go ahead; give me a reason to say 'no' to you."

"What do you usually do for patrons?"

"I'm a practitioner of abuse." I wondered how literally to take that.

"What's that mean?"

"I'll show you." Her hand lashed out to slap my face, but I managed to barely dodge the blow. Kimasxi pouted visibly, then scowled. "Oh, well."

"I would've thought something half-animal would have faster reflexes." I noted, willing to match her insults. She gave me a skeptical look.

"You can *think*? Huh. You know, *I* would've thought something half-zombie would have *slower* reflexes."

"Well you thought wrong… I imagine it happens a lot."

"You must *imagine* a lot: imagine you're not so thrice-damned hideous, imagine women take you seriously… and stop staring at my breasts!" Her last words came as a surprise — because I wasn't. I was momentarily confused, trying to find some hidden meaning behind her words.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, sure; you weren't looking, huh? You hulking, lecherous corpse… what's the matter with you? Haven't you even seen a pair of teats before?" Smiling slightly at my own over-analysis, I replied to her insult.

"Is *that* what those are? I figured them for some sort of tiny, knobby cancerous growths." She raised an eyebrow.

"Look, if you can't identify a pair of breasts as nice as mine, you *obviously* haven't spent much time in the company of women…"

"Are you implying that you're female? Isn't that stretching the definition?"

Kimasxi looked at a loss for something to say. For an instant, a smile threatened to crack the grimacing mask of her face — then she became more of a basilisk than ever. "All right, what do you want of me?"

I questioned her about the missing items, but she had nothing to add. I did wonder about one thing, though, which I thought Morte might appreciate, although I might later regret it.

"Say… can you teach Morte here to be more abusive?" She raised her eyebrows.

"Now *that's* an unusual request. I don't know, it seems pretty foul-mouthed already…"

Morte broke in. "*He!* That's '*HE* seems pretty foul-mouthed,' Kimasxi 'Bladderdung'… you scruffy, goat-gammed harlot!"

"You *wish* you had legs like mine, you pitiful wretch of a bone-box! I can walk, run, dance… what do you do? Bob around wishing you *had* a pair, goat's or otherwise!"

The two of them laid into one another, exchanging barbed, blistering insults and clashing with razor-edged tongues…

At last the two stopped their bickering, and eerie silence settled over them as they eyed one another hatefully. Finally, the tiefling made a grudging admission to Morte: "You're not bad, really. Not bad at all."

"Better than you, perhaps?" Morte waggled his eyes at her. "Eh? Eh?"

Kimasxi narrowed her eyes at Morte. "Don't push it, *skull*."

"I won't, *tiefling*. I will admit I might have learned a thing or two, though…"

Kimasxi turned to me. "So was that all you wanted? I'm not spending any more time near you than I have to."

It was time to move on. "I feel the same way. Farewell."

Kimasxi called out as we left the room, “Why don’t you go wander around Baator a bit, you meandering arse.” I very much doubted there was any chance I would end up in Baator.

Annah rejoined us after we left the room, although she was silent and kept giving me venomous looks.

DOLORA

I walked over to the center of the structure, where benches and tables were placed around a large tree, wondering if any prostitutes I had missed might not be here.

I immediately noticed three curious beings. The strange, cubic creatures seemed to be as much machine as organic. As I approached one of the things, it silently stared at me with wide, unblinking eyes. Its face hadn't the slightest trace of emotion on it.

Morte complained, "C'mon, chief! We're in a building full of some of the sexiest chits this side of the multiverse and you're stopping to talk to *modrons*?"

"What can you tell me about them, Morte?" Morte made a noise of utter disgust.

"What's there to say? Annoying little clock-work pests… they're always working to impose law and order upon the multiverse. Not *good*, mind you… just *law*. Let's just forget about 'em and go chat up the ladies, eh?"

"My apologies, Morte, but I'm talking to the modron." Morte sighed loudly.

"Fine, whatever — but don't say I didn't warn you. You probably won't get anywhere with 'em though, chief… they're an odd lot to talk to."

I greeted the modron. Its voice had a metallic, reverberating quality to it, as if it were more a sound played out on some warped musical instrument than true speech:

"Your greeting is returned." There was a soft *click* as the creature blinked. An awkward silence hung in the air between the two of us. Before I could continue, it said, "Identify yourself to us."

I was tempted to reply Adahn, but did not care to find him popping out of any more corners. Instead, I settled for the truth. "I'm not sure who I am."

The modron bored on, "We would know why this is so."

"I don't know, myself. I just can't remember."

"All things should have a name; all things should be identified. We find your answer unsatisfactory, but it shall have to suffice for the present." The creature paused and blinked at

me. “We would identity ourselves as modrons, quadrone type, winged variant, to the subject.”

It was almost as if it considered non-identification to equate to non-existence. I hoped it wouldn’t ignore my questions, as I asked, “What are you doing here?” It replied in the same level tone.

“Our purpose here is observation.”

“What are you observing?”

“We are observing one of the establishment’s staff,” it replied.

“Who are you observing?”

“As previously stated, we are observing one of the establishment’s staff.”

It was very precise in answering my questions. Either that, or it had a more subtle sense of humor than Morte. “Yes, but who *exactly* are you observing?”

“The object of our scrutiny is named ‘Dolora.’ ”

“Why are you watching her?” It replied with a little speech, adding quite unnecessary elaborations.

“We have not been informed as to the specific purpose or purposes which resulted in our being given our present task. The command of our superior pentadrone is sufficient reason to perform said task; as such, the purpose or purposes are irrelevant to us.”

A woman walked into the area where we were standing. The modron I was talking to, as well as its two companions, immediately swiveled to stare at her. The modron in front of me ignored my next question.

I wondered if this was Dolora. I approached the dark-haired, pale-skinned woman, who had a cultured, refined look about her. As she turned to me, I noted that her eyes — which I had previously thought to be gray — were the color of brushed steel.

Her reply to my greetings confirmed her name. Her voice was soft, calm, and without inflection — it had a certain ‘far-away’ quality, as if somehow not attached to her.

“Greetings… I am called Dolora. May I serve you, somehow?”

“In what ways can you serve me, Dolora?” She blinked her eyes, then touched her hand to her heart, bowing her head slightly.

“I am able to debate any scholarly or academic matter quite proficiently, if that is your wish. I am also well-versed in various games of strategy, should you wish to play something

— though I have the materials for few such games, here." I was interested in testing her.

"Debate, you say?" Dolora nodded.

"That is correct. I am neither a tome nor a tutor; I have no desire to educate my patrons. Should you have a matter to discuss, however… the fifteen factions and their effect on Sigilian politics, the most effective battle stratagems for warring in Acheron, the meaning of existence itself… I would be most pleased to choose a counter-point and engage you in debate."

I chose a topic and began… the debate lasted a long time as the two of us exchanged points and counter-points, each attempting to methodically undermine the other's position. As I spoke, a strange feeling began to come over me… a memory, trying to surface…

Memories of a great hall began to form in my mind… a vast place, full of well-dressed elites… a formal ball was taking place. Before me was a small, impeccably dressed fellow who wore a golden medallion; it was emblazoned with a symbol I dimly recalled as the "Sign of One." The two of us stood in a circle of onlookers who'd gathered to listen to our debate.

"But… but that's impossible!" the man was saying, looking perplexed.

"Oh, but it is." I recalled myself replying. "I've made several inarguable points and given you a number of examples. You simply don't exist."

"But… you can't! Were I to accept that, I'd… I'd…"

"Yes. You'd cease to exist."

And without a flash of light or puff of smoke — with no fanfare of any sort — the man was simply gone.

The onlookers *oohed* and *aahed*," some clapped… I remembered giving a flourishing bow and walking away, a small, satisfied smile upon my lips.

I suddenly realized Dolora was watching me closely. "Are you feeling well? We might finish our discussion at another time, should you like…"

I indicated I was ready to go on. As hard-pressed as I was to beat Dolora's infallible sense of logic, I eventually won out. She merely nodded in approval.

"You are a most skilled debater; this there is no denying. I do feel, though, that had I time to perform some research, you might not have bested me." I thanked her, and she replied, "If you would like, we can debate once more upon the same

topic… I could argue your position this time, should you desire it."

I wondered at the cool, deadly attacks she had launched in the debate. "Wait… are you always so ruthless in a debate?" Dolora nodded.

"Mistress Grace instructed me to show no mercy, for another of her students always allows a patron to win after a lengthy debate. It was Mistress Grace's desire that I provide a different sort of experience for the clientele."

I had found recently little intellectually challenging in my interactions with others, although I was still often emotionally involved. Dolora's cool manner provided no hook for my emotions, but I found I had relished the debate. I asked if we could play a game.

"Of course. Is there anything in particular you wish to play?" My condition left me equally willing to play any game.

"No… I don't really remember any games…"

"Here, then — allow me to show you one." Dolora brought out a thin, lacquered box, which unfolded into a small board marked with a grid. The contents of the box proved to be a number of polished stone chips… half of them black, half of them white. "This game goes by many names. Shall I explain the rules to you?"

Dolora explained to me the rules of the game — how the chips were moved, how one bested one's opponent. It seemed, somehow, faintly familiar to me. "The rules are simple, yes? But a great deal of complexity lies within the game, itself. It takes a great deal of time to master. Shall we play?"

As I played, I came to realize that I had done so before. I recalled varies ploys and strategies that had won me previous games, trying every trick I knew to beat her. Suddenly, a strange feeling came over me… a memory, trying to surface…

Memories of a smoke-filled field of battle began to fill my mind… atop a great hill overlooking the fighting I sat, mounted upon a massive, four-legged beast. The braying of horns carried my orders to the troops below.

Even as I watched, my forces divided, fleeing left and right as the foreign army fought its way up the hill to slay the enemy lord — me.

"The fools," I had thought, lips curling into a wicked smile. "My knights shall charge down the hillside and stop their advance in an instant… and at that very moment my 'retreating'

footmen will fall in to crush their flanks! Ah, yet another victory soon to be mine…"

I suddenly realized Dolora was again watching me intently. "Are you feeling well? We might take up the game another day, if you so wish…"

I asked to continue. Dolora played excellently, counteracting all but my most crafty moves, but eventually my feints and calculating maneuvers won over her well-crafted strategies. She nodded approvingly as she began to put the game away.

"You are a fine player, perhaps a master. I commend you for your skill." I asked if she would answer some questions. Dolora cast her eyes to the floor with a sound that might have been a sad sigh.

"I am willing to serve you as a patron, but have no wish to answer other questions at this time… my apologies, but I fear you shall simply have to bear with that for the time being."

When I asked if I could help, she looked up from the floor and into my eyes. Once more I was struck by the pale smoothness of skin, the cold depths of her silvery eyes.

"No… no, I fear not. My troubles are a matter of the heart. In time, I think, all things shall be resolved." She explained that another still held the keys to her heart, and while that was so she was not free to love another. I promised to help her if I could.

YVES THE TALE-CHASER

I entered another room, the last in the circuit I had made about the brothel. Inside was a fetching young woman with a far-away look in her soft, sea-green eyes.

She responded to my entry by speaking, “Greetings. I am Yves, the Tale-Chaser.”

Morte snidely commented, “What a coincidence! I, too, chase tails.”

Yves continued, unperturbed, “Have you come to trade tales?”

I had some questions, first, such as how she got her name.

“Once upon a time, a girl came to an oracle who was rumored to know many things and asked of it a boon. Her life was in need of direction, so she asked this oracle as to what would give her purpose…”

“Now, the oracle was not evil, but it was vague and tended towards drink, which caused it to be obscure in many matters of judgment and focus. Its only answer to the girl’s question was that within one story that she would hear in her lifetime was the truth that she sought. The girl went off and collected stories, which she chases to this day, not knowing which of the thousands hold the truth.”

“Such is the danger of a foolish question and the wisdom of an unspoken one.”

I wondered if she knew any tales about the brothel, asking, “Can you tell me about this place?”

“That is part of Mistress Grace’s story, which is not mine to tell. She has said that when she nears the end of her years, she shall tell me… and only if I pledge never to share it with another.”

“She hopes that she will never need to tell me her tale, for she hopes I will find my own story before that time and leave this place. I think she fears my life will be squandered in searching for this tale, and not acting upon what I already know.” Yves sighed softly. “But it cannot be helped.”

I asked about the scent and the veil, but she had nothing to add. She did know, however, a tale concerning Marissa.

"Once upon a time in a world of heroes and a time of petty, childish gods, there were three sisters. Cursed with a hideous appearance, they were considered demons by the people of the land and forever shunned. One missed her sisters terribly, yet left that world with its shame behind… but exchanged the pettiness of a pantheon for the pettiness of self."

Impressed by her knowledge, I also asked for a tale of Ravel, the night hag. She had one ready.

"The tale of Ravel Puzzlewell, frightener of children, begins and ends with a question: 'What can change the nature of a man?' "

"Many were the times she posed this riddle to those who approached her, those who sought to glean from her the strange magics that she alone seemed to possess. All attempted to answer her query, but to no avail… and they found the price of their wrong answer to be some horrible fate, always more terrible than the last victim's. To recount their various torments would be to speak of things that nightmares are woven from."

"The tale strikes me in this way: Ravel herself knew not the answer to this question, but she lusted for such an answer. Only the *why* of the matter remained in question. Why did the nature of a man matter to one of the Gray Sisters, especially of one of such power as Ravel?"

"It is said that she put the question to the Lady of Pain; not directly, but shouted it to Sigil itself, daring for the Lady to answer. When no reply was forthcoming, she wove terrible magics that threatened to open the Cage and let the fury of the Planes roll in like a wave."

"She received no answer other than banishment. To this day, no one knows the answer to Ravel's question… and now there is no one to petition, for Ravel herself is gone, lost to the Planes." I started to ask another question, but she interrupted.

"Wait… there is more. Though my tale ends with Ravel's demise, there are some that claim the hag still lives. There is a silent prostitute here who once talked of such things, but she speaks no longer. If she would speak to you, she might tell you more of Ravel." I asked what else she knew of the silent prostitute.

"Ecco?" Yves frowned, thinking. "I once heard a tale of a girl who knew the word that, if spoken, would undo the multiverse. Perhaps this is Ecco. Ask Dolora, though… I understand that she sometimes meets with one who knew Ecco

before she stopped speaking." I requested she tell me more specifically what she did in the Brothel.

"I collect tales, and trade them with others who've tales of their own."

I was ready to trade tales with her, and I started with my first fresh memory. Yves leaned forward as I told the tale of my wakening in the Dustmen's Mortuary… she seemed to devour my every word. As I finished, she smiled at me. "I shall remember this tale. I, too, will tell a tell of the Dustmen — 'Chapters of Dust.' "

"There are chapters in the Dead Book, the massive tome in which the Dustmen keep that records the passing of all that lives into the Eternal Boundary. In this Book, there are chapters that are naught but dust, and it is believed that the names therein are lost souls who cannot die, but must suffer life eternally until history itself dies and grants them release."

I had another tale ready for her, of the Alley giving birth. As I finished, she said, "I shall remember this tale. And now, I have one for you. Before I begin I must ask: do you know what a modron is?"

To my affirmative reply, she continued, "Then I shall tell you the tale of 'The Clock and the Quadrone.' "

"Once upon a time, there existed a modron. It was newly-created, its logic fresh and untested, and it had come to Sigil, following the commands of its modron superiors."

"It knew of nothing but commands and dictates, of obedience and passing along the orders of its superiors. For you see, modrons are only aware of the commands of their immediate superiors — they have no grasp of a higher authority. Until this one."

"One day it came upon a small shop, within which there was a small clock that could no longer tell time. It was cracked along the edges, the wheels of its hands broken. The modron immediately set itself to work at getting the parts to fix the broken clock."

"It made a new wooden housing for the clock's parts, replaced the bent springs, carefully filed and oiled the clockwork machinery, and carved new hands from the sparse metal available to it. The newly-repaired clock's precise ticking reminded it of the great gears of Mechanus, and it comforted it as much as any thing may comfort a modron."

"And what the modron never came to understand was that it truly *loved* this clock that it had worked on, and for reasons it

could not explain, elected to remain in Sigil and be with the clock for the rest of its years."

I traded the rest of the tales of my adventuring, and she recounted the following tales in exchange.

'The Petitioner at the Gate.'

"It was far after peak when the distant pounding was heard at the gates of the Prison."

"Carus — the oldest Mercykiller known to the faction — dragged himself from his post, making his way down the hall to the great gates that separated the punished from the outside world. The pounding did not fade as he reached the gate and spoke to it."

"He called out and received no answer. He opened the gate, far from feeling caution, but a strange, compelling sensation."

"A haggard figure was on bent knees just beyond the door. Her hands were bloody from where they had been pounding against the gate, and her breath came in labored gasps. As the flickering light from the interior prison chamber poured across the cobbles, she glanced up at the Mercykiller who stood framed in the doorway, and began to sob with relief."

"He felt himself mirrored in all but his gender as he stared at the woman, and he was stirred by her presence. Carus found himself unsure of what to say, so he simply waited for the woman to provide an explanation."

"She did. It was a simple statement, but of utmost importance, and it made Carus… whose knees ached painfully with every movement… bend down and help the woman to her feet. He brought her in from the outside, guiding her gently into the passage beyond."

"She had said that an injustice had been done. And that was all that Carus needed to hear."

"In the end, it came to pass that she could not fulfill her duty as a Fury, for a man guilty of a blood crime had died unpunished. She begged Carus and the Mercykillers for aid… and so they executed her. She had failed in her charge."

'The Gilded Tale.'

"Upon the Plane of Ysgard is the Gilded Hall, where those Sensates that seek the pleasure of gullet and loin can be found. They indulge these passions in earnest, never realizing that the doors of the hall never open and that there is no clear path back to the Civic Festhall. They are the unwanted Sensates, the ones that do not truly believe in the faction, but instead seek only

pleasure for pleasure's sake. Are prisoners who do not realize they are such truly prisoners?"

'The Lady's Suitor.'

"The tale concerns a suitor of Lady of Pain, one of many over the years. He was a young man who was obsessed with the Mistress of Sigil. He saw her everywhere, in every corner of her city. He would hear the rustling of her robes, the scrape of her blades, and grew infatuated beyond all reason. He hoped that if he worshipped her, that he would at last be able to see her… and so worship her he did."

"He was found dead on the blood-soaked steps of his own home, grievous stab wounds covering the whole of his body… but his eyes were open wide, and upon his lips was a triumphant smile."

An untitled tale.

"Once came a man who had experienced the most beautiful thing in the multiverse. It was his intention to place the experience within one of the Civic Festhall's sensory stones — magical devices which held feelings and memories for an eternity, leaving them for others to partake of."

"But he thought about it: wouldn't its being shared dilute the experience? So he held it to himself, precious thing that it was, and aged with the memory. But as he aged, the memory became tarnished and beaten, and he could no longer recall the glory of the experience."

'The Execution.'

"Once, a murderer roamed Sigil's streets, a black-hearted man by the name of Kossacs. He had been blessed by his Abyssal mother so that no one could strike him with an intent to harm or they themselves would die. He reveled in his blessing, using it to start fights and murder anyone who crossed his path."

"During one of his murderous rages, he was captured by the Harmonium with nets and brought before the Guvners. The trial was short, final, yet Kossacs laughed at the proceedings, knowing that no one among them could harm him without dying horribly. At the final day of his trial, he was proclaimed guilty and sentenced to death."

"Kossacs sentence proclaimed by the Guvners was this: 'Confinement for thrice-thirty days, during which time you shall give up your life, be declared dead, and your body removed when all signs of life cease.' Kossacs laughed and dared any of them to try and harm him, yet the court was silent."

"The Mercykillers lead Kossacs to their prison and locked him in a dark, empty cell. There was no cot, no lights, and the only door was a steel grate in the ceiling.

As they lowered him into the cell, the Mercykiller told him — in the corner of your cell will you find a chalice. It holds poison. Your death will be swift."

" 'Aren't you going to execute me?' Kossacs snarled at the guard.

No one in Sigil shall lay a hand on you with intent to harm,' came the Mercykiller's reply.

"Then I spit on your cowardice!" Kossacs laughed, feeling for the chalice in the darkness, then hurling it at the wall and shattering it. Its poison dripped from the walls and dried, until it was no more. "Come then — you will have to try and kill me now."

"But there was no response from the grate in the ceiling. It was then that Kossacs noticed the cell had no cot. No lights. And no food and water. All that remained was the shattered chalice, the poison gone. And for the first time, Kossacs knew the icy touch of death's approach.

"In twice-thirty days, the grate opened, and Kossacs' body, now cold, was taken from the cell. It had given up its life, and the execution had been carried out."

I was out of stories, but asked Morte if he had a story to trade.

He replied, "Me? Why do *I* have to tell a story?"

I told him to just tell a story, to which he complied.

"An elderly man was sitting alone on a dark path, right? He wasn't certain of which direction to go, and he'd forgotten both where he was traveling to and who he was. He'd sat down for a moment to rest his weary legs, and suddenly looked up to see an elderly woman before him. She grinned toothlessly and with a cackle, spoke: 'Now your *third* wish. What will it be?' "

" 'Third wish?' The man was baffled. 'How can it be a third wish if I haven't had a first and second wish?' "

" 'You've had two wishes already,' the hag said, 'but your second wish was for me to return everything to the way it was before you had made your first wish. That's why you remember nothing; because everything is the way it was before you made any wishes.' She cackled at the poor berk. 'So it is that you have one wish left.' "

" 'All right,' said the man, "I don't believe this, but there's no harm in wishing. I wish to know who I am.' "

“ ‘Funny,’ said the old woman as she granted his wish and disappeared forever. ‘That was your first wish.’ ”

Yves responded with ‘The Fiend’s Game.’

“A fiend sometimes wandered the wilderness of a certain Prime world in the guise of a friendly old man. One day, he came upon some hunters in the wood.”

“ ‘What are you doing?’ The fiend asked. The hunters told him, and the fiend nodded. ‘I have never been on a hunt before. ‘ ”

“The hunters invited the old man to come along, and the group eventually came upon a glade where several deer were grazing. The hunters carried crossbows, but did not fire, and the fiend asked them why.”

“ ‘They are unarmed,’ the hunters chuckled, patting their crossbows. ‘We hunt nothing that does not have the ability to defend itself. After all, where is the sport in that?’ ”

“The fiend nodded at this, and promptly gated in three of his fellows. The hunters led them on a merry chase, but eventually they were caught and eaten.”

I asked Dak'kon to share a tale. Dak'kon nodded solemnly. “I shall impart the tale of ‘Ach'ali Drowning.’ ”

Dak'kon told the story of Ach'ali, a foolish githzerai of myth who had become lost in the chaos of limbo. Normally, a single githzerai may use their focus and mental discipline to form the chaos around them into a small, habitable environment. Ach'ali, however, asked so many useless and unfocused questions in her quest to return home that her isle of matter dissolved around her, and she drowned.

Yves smiled. “Fascinating, Dak'kon. Let me share with you and your companions another version of your tale that I have heard…”

Dak'kon looked attentive, and perhaps a little surprised.

“One day, she encountered a slaadi on his way to the spawning stone. She hastily erected a wall of chaos matter, which even the ravenous slaadi found difficult to break down. Hungrily, it waited, and spoke to her through the wall. She asked it questions, and as she became more absorbed in her pointless queries and the slaadi’s answers, her own wall decayed and collapsed upon her… and thus she drowned in the matter of Limbo.”

I finally asked Annah if she would trade a tale. Her answer indicated she seemed to have gotten over her anger at me.

"Aye, I'm a no good at telling such things, I'm not." She frowned, and waved her hands as if trying to shoo away the idea. "Donnae be asking me fer such nonsense, now." Yves smiled at Annah.

"But I would very much like to hear your story…" I added my voice.

"Please share your story, Annah…" Mort couldn't resist his own addition.

"*C'mon* already, fiendling. You already have one tail you won't part with."

Annah looked uncomfortable, her tail lashing slowly back and forth.

"Well, I know one story…" She suddenly became angry, glaring at Yves. "…but yeh might not like it, yeh won't, so don't be blamin' *me* fer yer chokin' it outta me!"

"Go ahead, Annah…" I encouraged her. Annah scowled, then finally relented with an exasperated sigh.

"I heard a story when I was a wee lass."

"This berk's walkin' home real late, near anti-peak, an' passes an old toothless crone in a dark an' otherwise empty street. 'Where yeh goin'?' she asks him."

" 'Home, to me wife an' kip,' he says."

" 'Near the Slags?' " she asks him."

" 'Sure enough,' he says."

"So she asks him a favor… ta take a box she's got ta Deader's Pit an' give it ta the woman there. Now this berk's a real sap, too nice ta say no despite the fact he's sure somethin's not quite *right* about this old crone, and agrees. 'But what's the woman's name?' he asks. 'Where does she live? Where should I look fer her if she's not by Deader's Pit?' "

"The woman hands him the box — a wooden thing, wrapped in colored cloth — an' tells him ta just go, an' she'll be there. Finally, she warns him: 'An' whatever yeh does, do *not* open the box!' "

"So he takes it home with him an' hides it in the rafters, thinkin' he'll bring it by Deader's Pit when it's light out. His wife, though, seein' him hidin' the box, gets right jealous thinkin' it's a gift fer a lover or somethin', an' opens it up as soon as he's not lookin'."

"Well, turns out the box was full o' gouged-out eyes an' severed male members with the hair still on 'em. Her scream brought the berk runnin'… he remembered what the crone said, got right scared and wrapped the box back up."

"He went out straight away ta Deader's Pit, an' sure enough there was another old hag waitin' there for him. He hands her the box, an' she says ta him: 'This box has been opened and looked into.' "

"The poor berk tries ta deny it, but she gets this dreadful look on her face. 'Ye've done somethin' horrible!' she tells him, then disappears. That done, he hurries back ta his kip."

"He's feelin' ill when he gets back, an' takes ta bed. His wife bitterly regretted openin' the box an' all, but it was too late… the next day he died of a rottin' disease, an' the first things ta go was his eyes an' stem."

Annah nodded grimly, her tale complete.

Yves smiled. "That was a wonderful, tale Annah; you should never hesitate to share it. Now I've one for you and your companions — 'The Parched Land.' "

"Once, a large village was struck by a terrible drought. A farmer journeyed to the Worshipping Stone, and again implored it as to the cause of the drought. He asked the Stone why it did nothing when the fields were parched and dying, why the animals and the people suffered while the Stone did not a thing. 'Have we not given enough offerings?' the farmer asked, begging almost upon his hands and needs. But the Stone did not respond; it merely sat, and cast its shadow."

I had found only nine students of Lady Fall-From-Grace, not ten. I looked again through the rooms which were empty the first time I passed, but found no other student. I did encounter a talking armoire, which claimed to be a mage transformed. In one of its drawers was the missing veil, perfumed with the missing scent.

I confirmed my suspicion regarding the missing student when I looked at the basement of the brothel. Ten stones were set to catch the experiences of the students in the ten rooms above, but only nine were actively in use. I returned to the mistress of the establishment. Fall-From-Grace turned as I approached and smiled slightly.

"How may I help you?"

"I spoke to nine of the students, as you asked… but I could not find the tenth."

"And you could not find the tenth student? How curious," she replied

"I'm thinking the tenth student is me. In which case, I have spoken to all of them." She nodded.

"Very well. And your thoughts?"

"You and I should leave this place and explore the Planes. There is nothing more for either one of us to experience here." Fall-From-Grace nodded again.

"Very well. I will travel with you, if you still desire my company."

"I do."

Annah commented in a loud voice, "Oh, mistress 'igh and mighty will be joining us? What do we need her fer?"

Morte replied, "You couldn't possibly understand."

Annah told him, "I wish yeh'd fall from a great height. I might even bump yeh off me'self."

I told the others I would meet them outside in a moment, but that first I needed to talk to Annah. I asked if she was all right.

She just glared at me.

When I asked if I could ask her some questions, she replied, "Why don't yeh ask the stuck-up-ubus yer questions, then?" Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Why are we even *traveling* with her? We don't NEED her, we don't."

Although I wanted Fall-From-Grace to travel with us, partly for the reasons which I am sure Annah resented, such as her charm, knowledge and sophistication, I still wanted Annah along as much as ever. More, Annah had joined me first, so I said, "Annah, I want you with me — not her. If she bothers you, I'll ask her to leave."

"Do it, then!" Annah glared at me. "I'm bettin' yeh won't — if yeh do, then we'll be better off for it, if not, then we'll be havin' this talk again, we will." I did still however hope that I might be able to convince Annah to declare a truce.

"Annah, *please.* You're very important to me, and I need your help."

"Oh, aye, and why is THAT then? This should be rich, it should. Yeh pity me, is that it? Yeh think I slow yeh down? Go on, say it!"

"I *don't* pity you, and you *don't* slow me down — you're quick, you're skilled, and I really need all the help I can get." Annah frowned, her tail flicking back and forth.

"Aye… well… *know* I'll gut her if she starts sizing us up for a feast, I will." She glared at me. "And don't get any ideas I'm staying cause *yeh* want me to — I'm just helpin' yeh out, I am."

ART AND CURIO GALLERIA

After partaking of a meal nearby, I continued to explore the Clerk's Ward. As we walked I also gained an insight into Fall-From-Grace's character, when she spoke to Annah of all people.

"Annah… were you raised in the Hive?" Fall-From-Grace asked, in a serene voice with no hint of confrontation.

"Mind your own business, succubus. I've nothing tae say to yeh," Annah replied, irritation and a hint of anger present in her voice.

"Very well, then." It seemed to me that Fall-From-Grace's question indicated more than a sensate's desire for experiences. She was truly committed to the philosophies she espoused, and was willing to offer politeness and consideration to anyone.

Passing down one street, Fall-From-Grace informed me a building we were passing was the Art and Curio Galleria. Inside was displayed a selection of sculptures and paintings.

One painting in particular caused a reaction in me. It was a portrait of a grotesque, hook-nosed old crone. The hag's flesh was a sickly blue-gray color; her eyes glowed red like the embers of a dying fire. Her chin, long and sharp, jutted forward in an extreme under-bite; two yellowed canines protruded upwards from her lower jaw, like small tusks. The smile upon her withered, purplish lips spoke of a horrible secret. A placard read 'Gray Hag of Oinos.'

As I began to turn away from the painting, something in it drew my attention… a strange, tingling sensation arose in the back of my mind… a memory, beginning to surface…

I recalled standing, confused, in a maze of briars. The hideous crone from the painting was before me, cackling wildly. I gritted my teeth in frustration, wondering why she was laughing at me. "My poor, dear, lovely man-thing!" she crooned. "Why, that was your *first* wish!" She pointed a single bony, clawed finger at my forehead. My temples began throbbing painfully……and I could remember nothing more.

I spoke to Yvana, who owned the galleria. She was a well-dressed, elderly woman in a gown of peach-colored and golden thread. She stood quietly, her hands folded together primly. She had no pupils — her eyes were entirely white.

Before I could ask about any of the objects in the galleria, she had a request of me. “One moment, sir… your voice; it is heavy with age and wounds. Would you be so kind as to permit me to touch your face?”

“Yes, go ahead.” Yvana smiled, gently running her old hands over the skin of my face. She frowned, looking slightly puzzled.

“So many scars… both old and new. They seem to…” She touched the side of my throat, flushed, then pulled away. “Pardon me, sir. I was curious to see how far they went.”

“It’s fine. And they’re everywhere; my whole body is scarred.”

At her nod to continue, I asked if she could see at all. Fall-From-Grace interposed.

“I believe she is blind by choice, and not by circumstance.” Yvana nodded, smiling.

“Your friend is quite correct, sir… I cannot see, but only because I do not wish to. In time, I will allow my vision to return so that I can re-experience the contents of my galleria with the benefit of new, fresh eyes.”

I asked about the galleria. “Why, it’s my galleria of the Planes.” She smiled and gestured around her. “These pieces have been brought from far and wide. Some I sell, some I keep — all I display, at one time or another. Please, enjoy them… and again, should you have questions regarding any of the pieces, do not hesitate to ask me of them.”

I asked about the painting, ‘Gray Hag of Oinos.’ She was able to confirm it depicted the hag Ravel Puzzlewell. I asked her about some of the other pieces in the galleria.

The Arcadian stained-glass window.

The hundreds of chips of translucent green glass which made up this stained-glass window didn’t appear to be held together by anything, but rather remained free-floating and mysteriously suspended within the iron frame’s boundaries. The shards rippled and moved in slow waves, causing bizarre patterns to fluctuate across the window’s surface as various portions of it refracted the galleria’s light in different directions.

Yvana’s commentary: “A stained-glass window found hovering on the third layer of Arcadia thirty-two years ago, foretelling a scene that had yet to occur. When the event came to pass, the images faded to leave what you saw behind. It is believed to have captured both the light and the darkness from the Orb of Night and Day on Arcadia, then slowly release it,

creating a brief but slow fade of dawning and dusk — but only within the glass itself."

"Arcadia is a Plane of peaceful order, also known as the Land of Perfect Good. The Orb of Night and Day is a sphere set in the top of Arcadia's highest peak; each half emits either light or darkness. The turning of the Orb gives Arcadia its day and night."

The battle-horn of Acheron.

A massive horn of beaten lead, wound with brazen chains. The horn was horribly mangled, as if some tremendous force had crushed it. Jagged blades protruded along its length, almost as if it were meant to be used as club by some gigantic creature, as well as a battle-horn.

Yvana's commentary: "Ah, the Cleansing Horn… a horn of beaten lead, metal drawn directly from the cube of Acheron. It is said that the Cleansing Horn last sounded where the Companies of the Jackal and the Gouged Eye Clans met for their battle at the Disputed Lands. Legends tell us that this horn's power was used near the battle's end to draw the floating cubes together, crushing the routing Company of the Jackal before it could escape."

"Acheron is a Plane of harshly enforced order, where conformity is more important than good. It is composed of gigantic, metallic cubes which float through an endless void… many cubes are large enough that cities or entire kingdoms have been built upon their faces."

The Dark Birds of Ocanthus.

Several shards of black crystal — or ice — swirled within the freezing wind that this ornate pedestal gave forth. Each shard looked razor sharp; touching or grabbing one could be perilous.

Yvana's commentary: "All of them are chipped from the great magical sheet of black, infinite ice that rests in the black belly of the Plane of Ocanthus. It is said that this sheet of ice is the final destination of the River Styx, and that the recollections of all that have plunged into the Styx's memory-destroying waters still lie frozen within the ice."

The ruby statuette.

It stood on a pedestal, carved into the image of a winged humanoid. The figure was either demonic or angelic in nature… but it was difficult to tell which, because it refracted the light in the galleria strangely. There was no placard indicating what, exactly, the statuette was.

Yvana's commentary: "That piece was found in a cathedral in the fertile fields of Elysium on the first layer, Amoria the Untroubled, where it bordered the River Oceanus. The name of the piece is not known, but the skill and craftsmanship are believed to be one of the most striking examples of gem crafting in the Planes. The mere way in which the piece captures, distills, and enhances the light through its facets is part of its breath-taking wonder. It seems to bring to light the possible ideological connection between even the most evil and the purest beings in the multiverse… fascinating."

The kyton's animate chain.

An animated, bloody iron chain, coiling and uncoiling upon itself. The chain itself seemed to bend and weave like the spine of a snake.

Yvana's commentary: "The chain comes from the city of Jangling Hiter, the city of chains that hangs on Minauros, third layer of the Plane of Baator. The chains there are the finest in the multiverse, but the inhabitants of Jangling Hiter are malicious and cruel, using the chains as living weapons against all that enter their city and violate their laws."

"Kytons move about the city of chains as spiders upon webs, adorned in chains woven tightly around their bodies. Kytons possess a power known as the 'gift of chains,' which allows them to manipulate chains with their minds. It is believed that my galleria's chain was animated during a battle in which the kyton controlling it was slain with a cursed hammer… its life essence then passing into the chain itself."

The statue of the screaming man.

The statue looked like it was about to make some angry proclamation. The sculptor had captured the essence of fury magnificently; the chiseled tension lines around the neck and forehead alone must have taken many long months to get correct. Fine cracks ran over the entire statue.

Yvana's commentary: "This statue is believed to be the final fate of the Etherserian sorcerer Gangroighydon. Attacked by a conclave of rival sorcerers at the height of his dream madness, he was imprisoned with a spell that turned his flesh into stone. Gangroighydon is said to have been frozen with a final, awful curse still upon his lips, a curse so terrible that it was *never* meant to be spoken by the lips of a living man."

"It is said that the fury of the curse was enough to blister the flesh from the bones of those that heard it, and that it could even shatter the stones themselves."

The painting ‘Outland Raiders.’

Tall, black cliffs against a blood-red sky. There looked to be figures hiding amongst the crags of the cliffs but, whenever I squinted at the painting to try and make them out, the images faded into nothing.

Yvana’s commentary: “An interesting piece, yes? The painter managed a most interesting effect with the forms in the cliff’s shadows. The woman who brought me this piece told me she found it in an abandoned camp on the Outlands… the original painter was never found. Presumably, they were slain by the same raiders whose image they captured in the painting.”

The painting ‘The Folly of Udo.’

A dark cityscape, a far-away view of some giant center of civilization being burned to the ground. The streets of the place were empty, however, absent of soldiers, refugees, and even corpses.

Yvana’s commentary: “This painting illustrates one of the legends of the Prime world Goha. Udo was a wizard-king of such skill and power that he set to casting a spell that would turn himself into a Power, and the people of his great nation into divine servants. With the spell’s completion, lightning crashed down around Udo’s palace setting it ablaze and, before the thunder had died away, the city was empty… not a living thing to be found. Over seventy-thousand people vanished, without a trace, in a heart-beat. No one knows the fate of Udo or his people.”

The painting ‘Moment’s Glance from the Walls of Moch'chma.’

An abstract work of greens and purples, which writhed and rippled as it was watched.

Yvana’s commentary: “Moch'chma is a githzerai fortress which floats in the Plane of Limbo. The Moment’s Glance was painted by the chaos-scholar Dy, who remembers everything she sees with perfect clarity when she is not stricken with madness.”

CURIOSITY SHOP

We left the galleria. From the doorway, I saw steps a short distance away leading up to a small building. Fall-From-Grace told me it was the Curiosity Shop, although she had never been inside.

As we climbed the steps, Fall-From-Grace asked Morte a question.

“Morte, I must confess, I am curious as to how you became a floating skull.”

“It’s a long story involving the Head of Vecna. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That was you?”

“Could we *please* change the subject?”

As I entered, I saw only a single person, who I took to be a customer. Then I saw he was not examining the object he was holding, but cleaning it. His status as worker was confirmed when a female voice called out from the back, “Standish! Break that and I'll be selling your tanned hide!”

As I looked about for a few minutes, I also watched this downtrodden little man scurry about the Curiosity Shop, dusting, cataloguing, and moving things about for the place’s proprietress. I noticed he smelled faintly of onions. He glanced up at me nervously as I approached him.

“Please, sir… I cannot speak with you. I've work to do, and my mistress simply won’t allow it…” I said I just had a few questions.

“I'm sorry sir, but I can’t. Please, leave me be, before my mistress notices me talking to you…” I questioned what he meant by his mistress.

“Yes… Mistress Vrischika. I am Standish, her servant… her slave. I committed a crime and was sentenced to slavery, then purchased in the Lower Ward, like many of her slaves… most of whom she keeps at her manor. Now please — I beg of you! Leave me be, or she'll become angered and beat me unmercifully!”

By this time his mistress had come to the front of the shop. The sharp-featured woman’s appearance was attractive though somewhat disturbing, with her blue-black skin and bright

yellow eyes. As she examined me, a small pair of bat-like wings unfolded from her back, then seemed to settle back into her skin.

"Well, well… a floating, disembodied, prevaricating skull, and Fall-From-Grace… or whatever it is you call yourself, now. Truly a pleasure to see you here. What do I owe the honor of your visit? I thought that you rarely trafficked among our kind, any more." She glanced at me for a moment with the same faint sneer. "Or is your assignment here almost finished?" Fall-From-Grace replied to her.

"I do not know what assignment you are referring to, Vrischika, though your presence here brings with it many questions. Last I had heard you were a standard-bearer for the Company of the Vulture. How did you come to Sigil?" Vrischika replied curtly, firing a question back like an arrow.

"By choice. And you? Where will your orders take you next?" She suddenly turned to me. "You see, *little* man…" Vrischika smiled, as if savoring the words. "…the best temptress is one that can make you buy into the illusion of being both promiscuous yet virtuous at the same time; a prostitute-priestess, as it were. Mistress Grace is among the greatest…" She turned to Fall-From-Grace. "…are you not? You would not think that a score thousand years of slavery had left their scars, no?"

Fall-From-Grace spoke with a coldness I had never heard before. The air almost became ice as she dissected Vrischika with her gaze.

"That is enough."

"Very well. Though you are the ones who came into *my* emporium." Vrischika looked to me, then narrowed her eyes. "You… you're the scarred man, who's been going around asking all the questions?" She looked me up and down. "You sure look lost. Did you want to come in, really, or are you just casing the place because you have nothing better to do?"

"Because Vrischika…" She indicated herself "…can help you."

I asked how she could help me. She replied, "I travel and trade extensively. I hear a great deal, I purchase a great deal, and I own a great deal. Perhaps I can make you a great deal. Is there anything that you desire?" I indicated I only wanted the answers to some questions.

"I'll entertain any questions about the merchandise, but I'm not going to be drawn into one of your famous twenty-

questions-about-anything-around-the-spire, *understood?*" I was curious, and I saw no reason to waste politeness on her.

"What are you, Vrischika?" Vrischika sighed loudly.

"An alu-fiend… a half-demon. My mother was tanar'ri, a fiend, and my father a great king of mortals. Such a rude question… but then, you're rather rude-looking yourself, aren't you?"

"What did you mean by calling Morte 'prevaricating?' "

Prevaricating… misrepresenting, perjuring, dissimulating, *lying*… oh, did I say that? I'd meant a floating, disembodied, *pontificating* skull. As in dogmatic — always stating an opinion in a self-important manner." Vrischika smiled innocently.

In my heart, I trusted Fall-From-Grace without hesitation or question. Intellectually, however unreliable a source Vrischika was, I needed to listen and consider what she said.

"You and Fall-From-Grace seem to care little for one another…"

"Oh, that baatezu camp follower whose made her home in Sigil? Curious, no? But then, what better a place to train her agents than that little 'brothel' of hers…"

"Baatezu camp follower?"

"Ever since her mother sold her into slavery, she has been a plaything of the Planes for many a century. She claims that she was able to free herself from her chains, but you may give that word as much credence as you would give the word of any other tanar'ri bitch." She smiled slightly. "Myself excluded, of course." Fall-From-Grace spoke up.

"It is the truth —"

"Truth?! *Truth?!* One does not 'win free' of baatezu contracts, bitch cloaked in human skin. You speak lies, and all the tanar'ri hordes know it, from the lowest legions to the other comfort-suckling succubi as they cavort across the planes. 'Fall-From-Grace was but a baatezu slave from the moment she was born, and so shall she *always* be.' You still are an indentured plaything of the baatezu, to be tortured and commanded as they see fit." Vrischika sneered. "You even *behave* as they do."

Fall-From-Grace had regained her equanimity, and calmly responded.

"One may win free of baatezu contracts if one is wary of the wording, and if one realizes that the baatezu are beholden to keep their own word. One must simply beware of any meanings that may be twisted to their ends… and I am *well versed* in

language and its subtleties. Even so, it was not an easy matter…"

"Enough!" Vrischika retorted, "I do not care to hear you speak your lies in my presence!"

Fall-From-Grace maintained her flawless composure and simply nodded… though when I caught her eye, she gave me a slightly exasperated look, then smiled. I turned back to the shopkeeper.

"What was it you said about her training agents, Vrischika?"

With a quick glance at my companion, she replied, "Yes… they are her eyes and ears in the city of Sigil and across the Planes. What they do not see or hear they may coerce from another man that has seen and heard. And who could think humans capable of such deception and trickery? Oh, Grace is indeed a clever one. Not as clever as her mother, perhaps, but clever nonetheless…" Fall-From-Grace again felt compelled to counter.

"That is not the purpose of my establishment…" Vrischika overrode her.

"Oh, but of *course* not! Did I dare suggest such a thing? But perhaps you should let the man judge for himself." Vrischika turned to me, eyes blazing. "Do you not wonder, little man? Does the mephit of reason and curiosity ever enter your mind as to this matter? Does not the arrangement at the brothel seem *strange* to you?" Vrischika went on before I could answer.

"Occam's razor can leave a scar, but it can remove the cancer so often caused by poison of liars and imaginers. And now here she is, traveling with you. Most curious. Why would someone, a proprietress of such an establishment, leave it for any reason? And for a man she barely knows? Questions, questions…"

"The answers may be painful, indeed."

Fall-From-Grace said, "He is well aware of why I agreed to travel with him, Vrischika… when he asked me to do so."

"Oh, I'm certain he did ask… what man could resist?" Vrischika sneered and looked away in disgust. I asked her about the shop itself, to get off this topic.

"What you see within this shop is the result of much trading and traveling across the Planes." She made a sweeping gesture of the shop. "Weapons, charms… and other *specialty* items are for sale here, as well… everything that is rare and oh-so-exquisite fills this emporium. Your needs. I sate them."

I examined the items in the shop itself. I asked Vrischika about those that intrigued me.

I saw what appeared to be a tongue floating in a jar of brine. Vrischika frowned at it. “This is a fiend’s tongue… a cornugon's, I think, but who really knows? It’s said that, placed into the mouth of any living thing, it will give the ability of speech, even if there was none before. I'm selling this oddity for only sixty-six coppers, should you want it.”

That could be quite useful… I bought it. “Yes,” Vrischika purred, “a wise choice.” The copper I poured into her hand seemed to disappear the moment it touched her palm; she handed me the item. “Please, enjoy your newest acquisition.”

I examined a bottle labeled as ‘Gorgon Salve.’ Vrischika held it up for me. “I traded for this with some sword-slinging Prime Worlder… Perseus, I think, was his name. Smeared onto the surface of any being turned to stone, it will revert them to flesh. Only one hundred copper commons; a bargain, considering how handy it might come in should you ever find a friend of yours transmuted to rock.” I had a plan for this as well, so I bought it.

A small, metal replica of a cube-like creature with huge eyes on one of its faces. The toy had two legs, two arms, two folding wings, and at least eighteen points of articulation. Vrischika smiled as I picked it up. “A collector’s item, perhaps, or a piece of artwork. Who knows? But I like it. If you do buy it, ask around… someone might know more about it than I. You can have it for only fifteen hundred copper coins.” I recognized the toy as a depiction of a modron. There was something fascinating about it. Despite the high price, I had to have it as well.

A plain-looking jug… despite its common appearance, I felt reluctant to touch the thing, as if it might bite me. Vrischika watched me, chuckling, then shrugged. “It’s a jug. It’s got some sort of monster trapped in it — that’s why your hair’s prickling up like that. If you'd like it, it’s only one hundred and twenty-three copper.” Finally, an item I could ignore. I turned down her offer.

A number of small bottles, each labeled as ‘Baby Oil.’ Vrischika picked one up and presented it to me. “Interested? It’s the real thing, of course. Thousands of mewling, mortal babies went into the making of the stuff.” I wondered if what she said was actually true, but anything was possible if it originated on the Lower Planes. “Eh… no thanks.” I replied.

A twisted little imp-like creature, sculpted out of pure, milk chocolate. “It looks delicious, does it not? Imported from the Lower Planes. These are rare, you know, and quite prized by lovers of chocolate and confections. It’s a real quasit — a fiendish familiar — polymorphed into chocolate by powerful sorcery. It’s only one hundred and ninety-nine coppers.” Except for an unlikely encounter with a chocolate connoisseur who happened to also possess information I must have, I saw no use for this.

A rather unassuming book held closed by a tiny brass lock. “That,” cooed Vrischika, “is the Codex of the Inconceivable. I'll only say that it’s just… just… well, I can not explain it. Mere words simply won’t suffice! You can own it yourself for a mere one thousand copper commons… and believe me: it is well worth it.” Curious, I unlocked the book's bindings and opened it. As I glanced over the tome's contents, my jaw dropped. I stood, spellbound, flipping through the pages.

“That was… that… I…” Its contents were simply too much to be described — mere words seemed powerless to explain the wonders it held. Morte was curious as well.

“What? What? What’s in it, chief?”

“I don’t know what to say, Morte…”

“WHAT? You’ve got to be kidding me, right? C’mon lemme see it!” Morte floated over my shoulder to examine the Codex’s contents. His eyes nearly popped from their sockets as they scanned the pages. “Ooo. Ooooooo. Oh, I… but… wow.”

I stood thoughtfully for a moment, looked down at the Codex, before closing it and reverently putting the tome away.

A small glass phial labeled as ‘Deva’s Tears.’ “These were collected from a deva who was captured during a Blood War skirmish. The fiends tormented the imprisoned angel for eons before he at last escaped — this small bottle holds the twelve tears he shed in that time. Their price is but one hundred copper commons.” Perhaps later.

A bottle labeled as ‘Elixir of Horrific Separation.’ Vrischika presented it to me. “This stuff was compounded by a scholar who'd found she possessed a darker half — a side of her which took control, at times, and bade her do awful things. This potion was to have ‘split’ the darker half away from her, creating two separate beings. Mercykillers, however, found and executed her for a string of depraved murders before she could use it. I'd charge you only two hundred copper commons for the Elixir.” Some other time.

A stained, ground glass lens the width of my hand, held in a brushed steel ring. A small, geared protrusion coming off the ring made it look as if the lens should attach to some sort of clockwork machine, and it smelled faintly of a horrible perfume. Vrischika held it up for me. “I've no idea what this really is, but it radiates fairly powerful magic. An old soldier named Ghysis brought it up to me from a Lower Plane battlefield — he'd murdered his own men in order to escape his tour of duty there, and brought me a number of interesting items he'd collected over the course of the campaign. I've kept it mostly as a conversation piece, though you may have it for one hundred and forty-nine copper coins, if you'd like.” Useless without the rest of the machine, I judged.

A ring in a small, padded case. Vrischika held it up so that I could see it more closely. “This is Yevrah’s Ring of Almost Invisibility. It makes its wearer invisible — well, almost. I will part with it for the meager sum of three hundred and forty-nine copper commons.” Almost invisible — I was sure Annah could achieve that on her own, with inaudibility as well.

An oddly shaped dagger presented on an ornamental display rack. A placard beneath the rack read ‘Sword of W'hynn.’ Vrischika tapped its pommel with her fingertip. “It’s also known as the Cheater’s Blade. Merely holding it aloft will win you the game. If you’re certain you'd like it, I can place it in your hands for fifteen hundred copper commons.”

“Win me the… what do you mean?”

Vrischika narrowed her yellow eyes at me. “Oh, come now. You know *exactly* what I mean. Buy the Cheater’s Blade, you beat the game. It’s that simple… for only fifteen hundred copper commons. Do you want it, or no?” I still wasn’t sure what she meant, but I declined. After all, what challenge or fun would be left to any game that could be won so easily?

A large pewter ale stein covered in strange runes. Vrischika held it up for me to see more closely. “An ale mug of unusual manufacture, which keeps its contents — usually beer, of course — icy cold whatever the surrounding temperature. Two hundred and ninety-nine copper commons, and you'll enjoy the frostiest ale you've ever had outside the paraplane of Ice.” I had met a mageling at a café in this ward who had such a mug.

A doll. The years had not been kind to this tiny rag doll; it was coming apart at the seams, and it looked like its threads were unraveling. It was obviously intended to be a replica of the Lady of Pain, but the button eyes and its plush softness didn’t

strike much fear into my heart. Vrischika held it up for me. “This was found in a well-trapped strongbox sunk deep beneath the surface of Sigil. It was part of a small horde of treasure and forbidden magical texts, though I don’t know what it’s for. If you like it, it’s only ninety-nine copper coins.” If tales of the Lady of Pain were true, worshipping even so harmless a replica of her could be fatal. One experience of being mazed had been enough for me; I wasn’t interested in testing her again.

I left the shop, although I knew I would be back later, to examine the sale items again.

AELWYN

The light was failing when we left the Curiosity Shop. I returned to the Art and Curio Galleria. It was deserted, except for Yvana. I walked until I stood before the statue of Gangroighydon.

When I saw the gorgon salve in the shop, I had resolved to test if this was really a statue. I was curious to meet this sorcerer, and truthfully I had grown overconfident in my abilities to cheat death. I applied the salve to the statue.

I smeared the foul-smelling ointment over the statue. There was a strange shimmering around the statue, and I watched as the statue took an intake of breath and the eyes of Gangroighydon filled with a blazing, vengeful madness.

I counted on the sudden, to him, change in surroundings to arrest whatever he was about to say. However, I was wrong.

Before I could do a thing, a blazing torrent of words flew from the sorcerer's lips. As he spoke, I felt an agonizing sensation, like a sudden wave of raging heat, pour over me and settle into my skin like a blistering wound. Blindness struck me as my eyes burst, running from their sockets like shattered eggs… I heard someone screaming, and realized it was me…

The last thing I heard, even over my own cries, was Morte shouting…"New taunts, by the Lady's bladed teats, what a—"

I died, a victim of Gangroighydon's Awful Curse.

I awoke the next morning in an inn to which the others had dragged my body. Fortunately, I had been the only one close enough to feel the full effects of the curse.

I left the inn, and continued walking about the Clerk's ward, talking to citizens I met. As I was moving through crowds about an outdoor café, I saw a woman who I recognized from a description given to me. The tall, slender woman occasionally looked up from her cup of wine to scan the surrounding patrons and passers-by. Her facial features were elegantly exotic and her eyes — a brilliant gold in color — caught the light, sparkling as she looked about. I caught her attention. She regarded me carefully for a moment before replying. She spoke slowly and carefully, avoiding direct eye contact with me.

"I, Aelwyn, return your greetings." I had met her friend before.

"Aelwyn? Your friend, Nemelle, is looking for you." She began to smile, but then covered her mouth with her hand and looked down at her drink.

"I, Aelwyn, am most pleased to hear of Nemelle. Might I, Aelwyn, persuade you to tell her of this place?"

I readily agreed. She looked at me directly and — for just the briefest of moments, before she cast her eyes back down to her drink — my senses were awash with a warm, comfortable feeling: pure happiness. "I, Aelwyn, thank you."

"It's my pleasure. May I ask you about her, though?" To her nod, I said, "The way she speaks, and what her words do… how?"

"I, Aelwyn, can only say that we come from another place, another world. We are not like the people here, whose words, thoughts — very feelings, even — affect nothing directly."

"I, Aelwyn, take great care so as to not affect those around me too greatly. Nemelle, she is new here, and cannot do so. It is something she must learn, should she choose to remain here much longer."

"But why?"

"There are many reasons. I, Aelwyn, feel it is not right to impose reality upon those without the ability to impose their own reality upon me, Aelwyn."

"Is there anything you cannot do by simply speaking of it?" She frowned; a strange, unpleasant feeling rose in the pit of my stomach.

"Please… I, Aelwyn, would speak of it no more."

"Just one other question…." I temporized. She looked at me directly, my face reflected in the glittering golden discs of her eyes.

"He would speak of it no more to Aelwyn, and thus would no longer force her to speak in such a way to him." I found myself unable to voice another question… my words caught in my throat as I tried to ask.

Her ability to mold reality, now that I had experienced it, was impressive. I had bent the reality that was Sigil slightly myself, but never as directly as Aelwyn had done. I wondered, however, whether in time I would gain that ability, as I had re-learned so many other abilities since leaving the Mortuary.

A little further along, an old woman examined me closely with her sharp, gray eyes… first my face, then my arms and various tattoos.

"Greetings, scarred one. Come to speak with Elobrande, have ye? Come to have yer fortune told, mayhap, for a paltry five coins?" Smiling, I gave her coins to read my future. Elobrande placed my coins in her belt pouch and took my hands. She quietly studied my palms, frowning deeply. At long last, she spoke.

"Some rare folk are what's called fateless, ye see. They wander through their lives doing as they see fit, creating their own destinies. Ye have no fortune to tell, scarred one… none at all. I've nothing to tell ye… and so here is yer coin." She returned my five coppers.

As I was about to go, she said, "Hold ye one moment, scarred one…" Elobrande reached out, touching my arm. "My mother gave me something once, long ago… a scroll, sealed with wax. A hooded man had entrusted it to her, and said that a man such as ye would one day unwittingly come to claim it. Here… I would have ye take it, now."

"What is it?"

Elobrande's shook her head, frowning. "I do not know. She was sworn never to read it, and I obeyed her request to leave the seal unbroken, myself. The man had paid her handsomely to take the scroll, but warned her of the direst consequences should she open it."

As I walked away, I examined the scroll. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I had a bad feeling about the thing — as if opening and reading the scroll could be somehow dangerous. Curiosity about this message apparently to me won out, however. I broke the seal, and read it.

The scroll contained a few lines of shaky calligraphy and a strange rune. The calligraphy read:

this may not KILL you but it will SLOW you down I am SURE

STOP CHASING ME YOU THIEVING BASTARDS it's MY body MINE MINE MINE

now… DIE

The rune suddenly throbbed, and the entire scroll began to dissolve into a stinking, black mess. The fluid seeped directly into the flesh of my hands… in seconds, the magical hemotoxin began to render my blood into black bile. For a moment I clutched at myself, howling in agony… and then the pain

subsided. I went back to Elobrande, and asked how she came by the scroll.

"As I told ye, scarred one… it was given to me by my mother. A hooded man had given it to her some fifty years past, paying her well but bidding her to never read it, whatever the circumstances." Elobrande sighed, looking away for a moment. "A user of magic, she was, powerful in the Art, but frightened of this man just the same. She had said his eyes — all she could see of him, really — hinted at madness, and that the flesh around them was puckered and gray… like yours. I know nothing more of him."

I decided to catch up on several promises. I traveled back across the ward, and let Nemelle know where her friend Aelwyn was located. I also re-visited the Lower Ward to get from Penn the printer a letter.

I returned to the Clerk's Ward, this time to find the Festhall used by the Sensates. I needed to walk close by where I had seen Aelwyn, so I returned to that spot to see if she was still there. She was, and her friend Nemelle had joined her.

Aelwyn saw me. She clasped her hands together and bowed her head to me in thanks, tears of joy falling from her golden eyes. Just as my own eyes began to water, she wiped away her tears and smiled — causing a wave of intense pleasure to wash over my entire body.

"Aelwyn *thanked* the stranger! She had been reunited with her dearest friend, Nemelle!"

"It was my pleasure." She nodded, then looked down again, the feelings her smile evoked fading away into pleasant memories.

"I, Aelwyn, would tell you something now, stranger."

"The name I, Aelwyn, chose for you — 'stranger' — is not so fitting. You and I, Aelwyn, have met before… in the Festhall. In a place you could not have been were you not a Sensate, yourself. Whether you recall or no, unless you betrayed the Society of Sensation at some point, you are a Sensate."

"I see… tell me more."

She nodded. "You and I, Aelwyn, have met on two different occasions. The first was no less than two centuries past, the last more recently. Perhaps no more than fifty years ago."

I was finding information on my past from the most unlikely sources. "That's quite a long time ago…"

She nodded again. "My, Aelwyn's, people are extremely long-lived, Forgetful One." She sighed unhappily, causing a

chill to descend over me. “You seemed a different man, then… less grim, less scarred. So eager to see all that the multiverse had to offer. You courted me, Aelwyn, then, and was nearly taken as a lover — but then you disappeared.”

“Where did I go?”

“I, Aelwyn, was told you had been slain… murdered.” She looked up for a moment to peer curiously into my eyes. “I met you only once more after that.”

“Did I remember you then?”

“No.” She shook her head sadly, then touched her throat. “No, you did not. You lashed out at me, Aelwyn, made to slay me. Screamed how I, Aelwyn, could not fool you, would not ensnare and murder you…”

“We had met in one of the northern towers of the Festhall, on the seventh floor. Before you could choke the life from me, I, Aelwyn, used my powers to bade you leap from a window to your death. When I, Aelwyn, finally went in search of your broken body, you had already gone…”

“I see…” I knew I had traveled many paths in previous incarnations, but I had not considered insanity as one of the branchings.

“That is the whole of my, Aelwyn's, tale for you. We were not strangers, once, but have now become so. Farewell, stranger, and may fortune walk with you in your travels.”

“Thanks, Aelwyn. Farewell.”

CIVIC FESTHALL

Fall-From-Grace pointed out the Civic Festhall ahead of us. I hurried towards the structure, nearly colliding with a woman and her two companions.

The smell of alcohol wafted heavily from the young woman and, despite her dark skin, I could see that her face — beautiful, but cruel-looking — was flushed. She was slender but well-muscled, adorned in exotic jewelry and translucent silk clothing. Numerous scars crisscrossed her thighs and forearms; they looked to be from battle-wounds. A sneer appeared on her face.

"Well, well… what have we here? A little tiefling gutter-queen, come crawling out of the Hive?" The woman pouted, talking as one would to a small child. "Are you lost, little tiefling? Oh, look! It has a tail! How…cute!"

Annah flushed, and with a snarl, blades sprouted from her fists.

"Now, fiend-kin, don't do that," The woman seemed unconcerned as Annah drew her weapons, and clucked disapprovingly with her tongue. "Careful now, or I'll remove that tail of yours and feed it to my dogs."

Fall-From-Grace spoke up. "Young Sarhava? Sarhava Vhjul, could it be you?" The young woman appeared confused for a moment, then recognized Fall-From-Grace. She seemed startled and abashed.

"Mistress Grace! I had not noticed you… only shamefully do I admit this, for your noble appearance would be obvious to even a dullard." Fall-From-Grace gave the barest of nods.

"Your words are most skillfully chosen, unlike those heard so recently." Sarhava seemed shamed.

"Yes, Mistress… I regret that such words were spoken in your presence."

"I regret they were spoken at all." Her tone barely changed, but the subtle reprimand seemed to crack the young woman's face like a whip. "It pains to see an old student of mine behaving so…"

Fall-From-Grace continued, "These are my companions that I am traveling with. I would expect the same courtesy given to

them as you have given to me. Such is a hallmark and the responsibility of those… noble-born."

Annah glared at Grace and Sarhava furiously.

Sarhava bowed low. "Then allow me to excuse myself with an apology, Mistress Grace, to you and your companions. My words were ill-chosen. 'Tis the drink that caused me to speak such rubbish, and I am filled with shame for having belittled myself so before my teacher of old." She turned and left.

No one else standing in front of the Festhall chose to intercept us as we entered the main doors. We were entering a large hall, with doors opening off to our right. Of those moving about the hall a large man directly in front of us dominated it. I moved towards him.

This towering man's golden skin sparkled slightly, almost as if it were metallic — whether it was his actual flesh or merely painted on, I could not tell. He regarded me coolly as I approached, giving a respectful bow as I drew near.

"Welcome to the Civic Festhall, traveler; We are Splinter, doorman to the Festhall and Priest-King of Ur. How may We help you?" Despite his humble offer of aid, his voice was powerful and commanding, a deep and rumbling sound that resonated throughout the chamber. I asked how he could help.

"We do many things in this fine hall, traveler. We answer questions guests might have regarding it or its inhabitants. We direct both visitors and members of the Society of Sensation alike to the sensoriums or lecture halls. We also accept new members into the Society. Lastly, it is through us that purchases from the Society's vaults are made… spells, items and such."

Curious, I asked about him. He replied, "There is little to say that We have not told you. We are the Splinter, doorman to the Festhall, demigod son of Isahar and Priest-King of Ur. Planewalkers came to our world and told Us of the Society of Sensation; We were fascinated and returned with them. We left Ur in the capable hands of our queen so that We might come to this place and experience 'servitude' and 'humility' for a time. As time does not pass here as it does in Ur, the century We have spent here will be as a mere several months in our own world. After another decade or so, We imagine We shall be ready to return to Ur and rule it once more."

I asked about the layout of the Festhall. He explained the location of the meeting rooms and training halls, and that he would have to be consulted to take us to a sensorium, to experience recorded sensations. I had recalled something I had

heard from Barking-Wilder, about my room in the Festhall. I asked Splinter how I could get a room in the hall. Splinter replied that I had to be a member of the Society of Sensation. But I had just learned I had been a member, once.

"What if I already *was* a Sensate? I haven't come to this place in a long time, but I assure you… I was a Sensate." Splinter bent down a ways to examine me more closely.

"We do not recognize you… but We see no lies dripping from your tongue. Very well. We shall grant you access to those privileges allowed only to members of the Society of Sensation… *if* you can show Us what sensations you have gathered recently. We would ask for five sensations, then, each pertaining to one of the body's senses… or a single experience which has strong elements of all five senses."

I had just the thing. "I'd have a single experience to contribute, then: I woke up, not knowing where I was, on a cold, blood-slicked iron slab in the bowels of the Mortuary, a place where only the Dustmen or the corpses in their care have seen…"

"My entire body reeked of embalming fluid, but even the smell of that was not enough to match the coppery scent of gore around me. Dozens of bodies lie on countless bloody slabs like the one I rose from, all in the process of being gutted, flayed, and the like by nightmarish clockwork devices for reasons unknown. The only sounds were the squeals of labored metal and the unsteady tread of undead workers as they pushed the slabs about the Mortuary on rusted iron tracks."

He nodded. "A disturbing experience."

I replied, "And I even left out the part about the chattering skull that flew at me as soon as I was upright. Will it suffice, Splinter?"

He granted me full access as a member after I shared the experience.

I moved about the rooms off the main hall. I ran into the lover of Juliette from the brothel, and fulfilled her request to make him jealous with a false love letter. At least I tried; he seemed willing to give up the affair at the first hint of trouble. Perhaps they were better matched than I thought.

I was also able to do a service for Dolora as well, obtaining the keys to her heart from Merriman, a bitter, cantankerous old codger. Naturally, I had to do a service for Merriman as well first; after my service I found Merriman a much more likeable fellow, if somewhat confused.

I also ran into Jumble Murdersense, and after some minor difficulties persuaded him to remove the curse he had placed on Reekwind, a story teller I had met in the Hive.

I continued walking, and found an area of guest rooms, on the fall side of the Festhall from where I had entered. I spoke to the room clerk, who startled me by offering me a key to my room. She could only explain that her ledger indicated the key she handed me was for my room, which had been waiting for me for a good, long time.

I entered the room, which seemed neatly kept despite the likely many decades since I had last used it. Among many common items on shelves in the room was one that was different. It was a heavy dodecahedron — about the size of both my fists balled together. It seemed inexplicably familiar to me. Its texture was cold and smooth, but whether it was metal or stone, I could not tell. A certain, almost intangible 'tension' ran over the object, as if it were ready to spring into the air at any moment.

Upon closer examination, I realized that each side of the dodecahedron was a plate that could be twisted clockwise or counter-clockwise… it appeared to be a puzzle-box or combination lock. As each of the pentagonal plates had five possible positions, the dodecahedron had no less than two hundred forty-four million, one hundred forty thousand, six hundred twenty-five 'settings.' It would take every second of the next seventy-seven-odd years to hit all the combinations — but then, I decided I *might* just get lucky and stumble onto a solution in minutes…

As I methodically twisted the cold, gray facets of the dodecahedron, a strange sensation formed at the base of my skull. My hands seemed to move of their own accord, turning the object and spinning its facets with mechanical precision. I had done this before… I knew the combinations, once… and I also became aware that there was a certain *danger* within the object. Whether it was from simple traps or something less mundane, though, I could not recall.

In moments, I had what might be the first four sides locked into their proper places. As I began to twist the fifth side of the dodecahedron, I recalled a cunning blade-trap that would snap out to lash at a meddler's hands, slashing their wrists and severing fingers. I avoided the trap with the proper number of rotations, certain that I had made progress in the unraveling of the object's secret.

After avoiding the dodecahedron's springing blades, I slowly puzzled out the next series of facet positions. As I started to turn the ninth side of the dodecahedron, I suddenly remembered a second trap — jets of toxic gas that would form a billowing cloud of lethal, corrosive vapor around a curious meddler. I circumvented the trap with the correct amount of twists, positive that I had nearly unlocked the dodecahedron.

I began my work on the final facet positions. Just as I was locking the twelfth pentagon into place, I recollected sorcerous runes hidden within the dodecahedron that would blast the unwitting holder with bolts of magical lightning. After disarming the trap with the correct number of facet rotations, the dodecahedron *clicked* and began to open in my hands…

The dodecahedron split once, twice, and eventually unfolded itself impossibly into a perfectly rectangular tablet the size of a large book. Etched into its surface were a series of bizarre symbols. It looked to be a code or language that I felt should be familiar to me… but it was not. Further examination of the tablet revealed that by twisting the pentagonal facets that were now upon the underside of the tablet, different 'pages' could be displayed across the tablet's face. I finally realized that the dodecahedron was a tome or journal of some sort.

It was frustrating to have these notes by a former incarnation in front of me, but be unable to read it. I uselessly attempted for a while to access the secret of the writings from the depths of my mind. With a grunt of frustration I put the journal away and left the room.

I entered the main area of the Festhall again. A series of lectures was just starting in rooms reserved for their presentations.

FESTHALL LECTURES

I entered a room just as a lecturer was starting a speech, "Sigilians, welcome! Please, take your seats, and listen to the 'darks' of which I speak!"

" 'Darks?!' " Morte spoke, "Gimme a break! We're really not going to *listen* to this rattletrap, are we? C'mon… let's go find some Sensate chits that have never had the pleasurous sensation of tasting the fiery passion of a skull's lips." He waggled his eyes in anticipation. I ignored him and kept listening to the speaker.

The speaker outlined his theories on what one could expect when they died, such as what plane of existence they would end up upon. He seemed quite sure that one who had lived a goodly, or at least a proper, life would after death find a new life on a pleasant plane.

He was finishing his talk, and said, "No matter where you go, know this: You shall be embarking on a *new* life. A new life, my Sigilians!"

Morte whispered: "And that's supposed to be an incentive? We get to do this all *again?* Gee, I can't wait to be a floating skull all over again. Whee! Pike him. What a tard. Spoken just like someone who hasn't died before, huh?"

The speaker continued. "You shall be one of the inhabitants, the petitioners, on this Plane or, ideally, one of the building blocks upon which the Plane is built! It is the goal of *all* petitioners! To accomplish this goal, you…" He clapped his hands together for emphasis: "… MUST *clap!* HOLD *clap!* TO *clap!* YOUR *clap!* IDEALS!"

Morte whispered again: "Oh, this is one, big steaming load."

The speaker ended his talk. "And that is what awaits you *after* 'death,' my audience! Have a care as to how you live your life, but know that it is *not* oblivion that awaits you after this life!"

Mort said, aloud this time, "What wash!"

The speaker's head turned to face Morte, frowning slightly. He leaned out, trying to see who spoke.

"A question? A question from one of the living, perhaps?" Morte ducked below the lecturer's field of view, then turned to me and whispered.

"Go ahead, chief. Tell him the dark of it." Morte was not alone in being dissatisfied with the lecture. I decided to put the lecturer to the test.

"Prove what you say is true."

"Eh?" The lecturer looked taken aback. "And how might I do that?"

"Die. Here. Now."

The audience became silent. Feeling the pressure, the speaker swallowed slightly. "Well now…" He smirked suddenly. "If you go first, I shall do so." The audience chuckled.

I smiled slightly as I replied, "Agreed."

The speaker's face was stone for a moment, then it brightened. "Come up to the stage, my friend!" He turned to the audience, smiling. "A rare treat, Sigilians! Today — and today only — we shall have a live demonstration of how to become a petitioner."

I moved to the front of the room. I killed myself, then got back up.

The speaker turned white at this, taking a step back. "By the Powers…!"

I simply smiled, turned, and started walking from the room.

I heard him eagerly trying to wrap things up behind me. "… then I shall end this session… um, I shall continue to lecture here at the Hall, so… eh… tell all your friends." I was sure the audience would talk about this lecture to their friends.

I had gotten only a momentary satisfaction by venting my frustration over the journal I could not read on this hypocritical speaker, and resolved to try to find a more useful release for my feelings.

In the next room another lecture was about to begin. Thin and sharp-featured, his yellow skin covered with tattoos, this lecturer looked over the room and its inhabitants with cold, black eyes.

"I am *known* as Three-Planes-Aligned, a githzerai scholar. If you are here for my lecture, it begins in a few moments." He spoke in a very low, somber tone. "Today I shall speak of the power of alignment and belief, and how they shape the Planes."

"First, I shall explain the concept of alignment."

"Alignment is a descriptor of one's beliefs, and how one acts upon those beliefs. At their core, all creatures predominately behave in one of three ways: with good in their heart, with evil in their heart, or indifference — or neutrality — in their heart. They predominately express each of these core behaviors in one of three different ways: in an ordered manner, in a chaotic manner, or in an indifferent, neutral manner. Thus, there are nine core alignments that one is capable of. The nine alignments, then, are lawful good, neutral good, and chaotic Good… lawful neutral, true neutral, and chaotic neutral… and lawful Evil, neutral evil, and chaotic evil."

He continued explaining how alignment, and the beliefs it engendered, could affect one's environment, or how a deity gained power from the faith of worshippers. A deity without worshippers could die, its corpse ending up on the Astral plane.

He then gave the example of gate towns, which are located on the neutral Outlands, but which share beliefs with an adjacent plane which a portal in the town opens onto. He then discussed the sliding of a gate town.

" 'Sliding' occurs when there is a high concentration of belief in an area of differing belief. When this occurs, the area itself will move — or slide — to a Plane that matches the new belief."

"Now, the gate towns usually have a strong belief that matches the Outer Plane beyond the portal, but the belief is not yet strong enough for the town to slide from the Outlands and into the Outer Plane."

"For example, the town of Ribcage borders the portal to the lawful evil plane of Baator. As expected, the residents of Ribcage are largely lawful evil residents, but the entire town's alignment and beliefs are not strong enough so that Ribcage will slide into Baator."

"For example, Ribcage might one day see the sudden rise of a lawful evil order of clerics, promoting their dark beliefs and converting many citizens to the worship of their lawful evil god. Were this to occur, there would be a good chance that the town would slide off the neutral Outlands, becoming part of the lawful evil plane of Baator."

"Whole layers of Planes may move this way. Thus, many wars are wars of belief and faith by necessity. They are the tools by which territory is obtained and held."

"This, then, is the power of alignment and belief to shape the planes. This session has ended."

"May belief guide your actions and shape the Planes to your will. Farewell, all of you."

The speaker refused any questions, and left the room.

I overheard in the hallway outside the room that another lecture, on the Blood War by Ghysis the Crooked, was about to begin. My fascination with that conflict had convinced me I must have some connection to it, and I hurried into another room where the lecture was to be held.

The squat, hunched old man who was to give the lecture still had the broad shoulders and scarred, callused hands of a worker or warrior. An aura of weary despair seemed to hang about him. The speaker started his lecture.

"Right! Now lissen up… this is th' seminar on th' *War*. If ye're 'ere ta lissen 'bout th' Blood War, take root. If ye're not, ye're in th' wrong 'all and ye'd best 'ump yer soft, comfort-lovin' Sigilian limberstembs outta 'ere."

Morte commented, "The Blood War? More boring than listening to a Guvner recite laws. Let's find some young Sensates who need to be indoctrinated in the ways of passion!" He waggled eyeballs in anticipation.

I had missed a few words while listening to Morte, as the speaker continued, "It just tells the Blood War from the 'uman point o' view. I's not promotin' one side or another, 'cause they *both* stink in different ways."

"So… what's left o' ye're wantin' ta lissen ta some Blood War stories… tales about th' *War*. 'Ere ta 'ear the '*orror* of it all, no doubt. Th' floatin' fortresses wove and weaved o' 'uman skin! Th' Planes-wide battlegrounds th' Blood War be fought on!" He bared his yellowed teeth. "Tales o' fiends lockin' fangs with other fiends! Grar! Snrarrrr!" His snarl faded, and he looked suddenly bored.

"Well, lemme peel back yer lids an' crack yer bone boxes: 'tis all a steamin' 'eap o' barmy nonsense ta be dwellin' on that forge-dung." He spat in derision, rolling his eyes wildly.

"I'll tell ye *this*, though: Ye can't *imagine* th' scale th' Blood War is fought on. Nothin' ye've seen, 'eard, or participated in — *nothin'* compares: time, numbers of 'legions,' sheer bloodshed… nothin' compares, berks. Ta try an' imagine it — forget it. My advice? Simple: Stay away from th' big bloody mess all together."

"Th' only thing ye needs ta know is this: fiends are killin' fiends. Baatezu are slaughterin' tanar'ri, tanar'ri are butcherin' baatezu. Right now." He spat again. "Neither's winnin'. Don't

think either *can* win. Biggest stalemate this side o' eternity… thank the Powers."

"That's it." He shrugged. "That's it. I'll be answerin' any questions ye gots fer me, now…"

Evidently he had decided to terminate the lecture already, before he had barely begun. No one else in the room seemed to be interested in asking anything of the speaker, but I had questions enough for all of them.

"So you'll tell us no tales of the Blood War?" I asked.

"All right, one: let me give ye an example of what 'meat' means ta them. They'll get some mean-spirited mortal mercenaries together, maybe a drop o' a few million strong an' let them slaughter each other for no real reason at all — a pointless battle over some Power-forsaken piece o' land. Guess where *all* those souls go?" I asked the rhetorical 'Where?' so he could continue.

"Their souls sink inta th' Planes o' evil they fight on, where they can be ripped from th' soup o' th' Plane an' set ta fight again as lemures or manes or whatever the pikin' sod those little fiendish dung-heaps become. The more of those soddin' petitioners they get, the more troops they 'ave."

I asked for more information on the Blood War itself, to which he replied, "If I were ta boil it down, it'd be this: th' Blood War's been goin' on damn-near-forever, an' will keep goin' on until damn-near-forever itself gets penned in th' Dead-Book. Th' tanar'ri, th' champions o' *chaos* an' evil are tryin' ta stomp th' green-colored dung out o' th' baatezu, the champions o' *law* an' evil. They butcher each other over 'ow each o' them thinks evil *should* be, if ye can believe that. Hah!"

I asked what would happen if someone stopped the Blood War, to which he said "Ye can't make any pikin' difference in the War! It's too soddin' *big*. Ye're a stone, a pebble in an ocean that's a pebble in another ocean which is a pebble in another ocean an' so on and so forth 'til th' stenchkows come 'ome. As a pebble, yer goal is ta be not noticed an' sink ta th' bottom with th'rest o' the dregs…"

"If ye could make a difference — which ye *can't* — ye shouldn't *try*, 'cause then th' Planes would tumble on down." To my questioning look, he held up his hands like pillars. "Th' Blood War's like a big, bloody support beam proppin' up th' Planes… kick it down, an' a lot o' th' Planes'd come tumblin' down with it. Lot o' baggage rests on th' back o' th' War." He

suddenly brayed like a donkey, laughing bitterly. “Th’ biggest, nastiest pack animal on th’ Planes…”

He grinned cynically. “Besides, as some say, war’s *great* fer business.” He laughed hollowly, then looked as if he could suddenly cry. “Eh… never ye mind that… another question?”

I asked if he was all right, since he seemed pained. He smiled sadly.

“Aye, aye… listen, cutter: I'm no priest, nor would I want ta be one, but ‘ear this: keep evil out o’ yer heart. When ye die with evil in yer heart, yer spirit falls inta th’ Lower Planes, where ye become a petitioner…”

“Any guesses as ta what ‘appens then? Petitioners in th’ Abyss an’ Baator get twisted inta footsoldiers… an’ get ta fight in th’ Blood War fer all eternity.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “So that’s th’ dark as ta why th’ baatezu an’ tanar’ri try an’ corrupt all they touch; ‘cause they need more troops. ‘Eed this: keep evil far from yer ‘eart, berk.”

I questioned what had started the Blood War. He replied, “Ye got a right ta be curious what started this big ol’ soddin’ soupy mess in th’ first place: what set th’ fiends ta lockin’ ‘orns in the first place, bitin’ an’ clawin’ at each other until that was the only reason they were alive…”

“Simple: they met.” He sighed. “Tanar’ri an’ Baatezu crossed each other one day an’ like two drunken bigots, they set ta fightin'. That simple.” He frowned. “Well…”

“Naw, pike that: imagine two drunken *priests* who believe each knows th’ *only* way ta live. Now make those priests ripped with scales an’ fangs an’ horns an’ a cruel streak seven leagues wide an’ put them in an itty-bitty soddin’ cell… an’ ye ‘ave a good idea o’ th’ love that can spring forth. An’ there ye ‘ave it! The origin o’ th’ Blood War.”

I asked why it was two evil races which were fighting. “One believes evil should be nice an’ orderly. One believes evil should be chaos, runnin’ rampant across th’ Planes. Both evil, but doesn’t mean they can agree on anythin'. Bad blood, bad blood… each wants ta exterminate th’ other so only their ‘brand’ o’ evil remains. They hate each other, like… like…”

He wrung his hands together, trying to find the right words. “Ye see, they don’t hate like *we* hate. We don’t even know what hate *is.* We have one, *one* word fer ‘hate.’ They ‘ave…” His voice dropped. “…thousands, upon thousands, their meanin’s twisted an’ piled like… bodies. *That’s* why they fight.”

To my question where the Blood War was fought, he responded “Plenty o’ places… *usually* th’ Lower Planes. Anywhere along th’ River Styx… the nine layers o’ Baator, th’ four furnaces o’ Gehenna, the Gray Waste, cold, red Carceri — the prison plane — an’ the pikin’ near-endless well o’ evil that’s th’ Abyss.” Somehow, the Gray Waste sounded familiar to me…

He described the Gray Waste in more detail at my request. “Also called th’ ‘Glooms.’ “ He shrugged, then shivered, as if by reflex. “Gray in every sense o’ th’ word. Colors burn yer eyes there; they shout, are too loud, and yer dreams are pulled ta th’ surface an’ poured on th’ ground, lost forever. Only th’ night hags rule there… the Gray Ladies o’ th’ Waste.”

I asked about the tanar’ri. The man nodded. “The tanar’ri pay better than baatezu, but ye need ta be two or three-faced an’ have a bunch o’ eyes sprinkled all over yer body, ‘cause ye can’t ever turn yer back on them: they’re chaos, the ones with whim an’ whimsy in their hearts. Trust, or upholdin’ their word, aren’t high on their list…” He sniffed, then shrugged. “They don’t care what happens, so long as *somethin'* happens an’ ’tis evil. Mostly they attack th’ baatezu ta keep from killin’ each other.”

He then described their enemies, the baatezu. “They don’t usually pay as much as th’ tanar’ri, but they don’t break their written word. They’re smart, though — several hundred, hundred, *hundred* fold smarter an’ they been makin’ contracts since time began. They know ‘ow ta peel someone with words, they do. Sign, an’ most likely ye'll be peeled an’ hung ta dry in their legions…”

“They plan like bastards. They put more thought an’ preparation into a single, strategic skirmish than most ‘uman armies devote to an entire campaign.” He sniffed, and scratched at his chin. “They usually assemble their forces on Avernus, the first layer of Baator.”

He described Avernus in response to my question. “Avernus? Hrm…” The man grimaced, as if recalling the place caused physical anguish. “ ’Tis inhabited by th’ damned an’ those that prey on th’ damned. Th’red-flecked lands, of noxious sands and blisterin’ fires that scream across the landscape. That was my taste o’ Baator, th’ layer o’ Avernus. Terrible place.”

I was particularly interested in one type of fiend, succubi, because of my companion. He described them, “Tanar’ri — lovely but dead evil, they are. They seduce mortals ta try an’

drag them inta th' Abyss." He nodded to Fall-From-Grace. "No offense, m'lady."

She replied, "None taken. You are quite correct."

I asked how one survived the Blood War. "Ye wanna know 'ow ta survive th' Blood War? Three things, cutter:" He held up a maimed hand with only two fingers.

"First off, ye stay th' pike out o' it. Secondly, keep yerself th' pikin' 'ells out o' it. An' lastly… ye stay the bloody, pikin' sod-pike out o' it."

"If any part o' th' War rolls yer way, let yer imagination give yer bum a kick an' run as far an' fast as ye can. If ye can't run, then lies *really* still an' pray it passes ye by." He paused for a moment. " 'Cept, there's no place it don't touch an' there's almost nowheres ye can run ta get away from it."

I asked why the War wasn't being fought in Sigil, to which he said, "Aw, now, cutter, look: they 'ave fought here… a few times. Sometimes we get a lil' spillover from the Blood War. Our Lady of Pain, bless 'er steel-ridden heart, puts out th' fires…"

"… *some* o' th' time." He sneered. "There's been times, some horrifyin' drizzle-on-yerself-ye're-so-sodddin'-scared-times, when they've smashed an' burnt an' clawed their way through whole soddin' city blocks in Sigil afore she decides ta clean house." He clucked his tongue and winked cynically. "So she ain't always as keen on stoppin' the Blood War as it might seem, see?"

"Why don't the fiends just take Sigil?" I asked.

He laughed, but it turned into a sputtering cough. "Don't get me wrong now: both th' tanar'ri an' th' baatezu want Sigil fierce. 'Tis th' most precious stagin' ground in th' pikin' multiverse — th' Cage is th' City o' Doors an' connects *everywhere.* Ye can't ignore it, an' if ye're servin' in th' Blood War an' wanna win, ye *gotta* have it." The man coughed again. " 'Tis just th' fiends aren't goin' ta *get* it while th' Lady's in charge, 'tis all. She's tough as nails, 'er blades'll cut ye deeper than any fiend's fang. An' that knots th' fiends' stems like ye wouldn't believe. One quiet Lady, 'er 'ands tucked in 'er sleeves, 'oldin' back th' Blood War all by 'erself." He laughed bitterly.

Fall-From-Grace commented in a low voice to me, "I don't find it hard to believe that a woman can stop the Blood War."

I noted that fiends were still allowed in Sigil, to which Ghysis replied, "Oh, damnably certain. They can't brawl in th'

streets… too much. So as neutral ground, Sigil allows them ta rattle their bone-boxes without tryin' ta murder each other. Sometimes they'll chat it up with each other 'ere. The peace don't stay that way fer long, though…"

"Also, just 'cause they can't butcher each other in th' streets don't means spies, recruitment an' back-stabbin' don't still go on 'ere. They fight battles with lies an' words, berk. Sometimes 'tis all in th' bluster an' blather. An' there's safe houses about, too. Places where they can cool their talons afore th' next skirmish…"

"An' they like ta recruit 'ere, too. Lookin' fer boys fresh off th' Planes with a little greed in their 'earts that they can make part o' their glorious army." He stopped speaking to peer closely at me. "Mayhap they recruited ye once, eh, cutter? Ye look like ye've tasted th' War."

"Perhaps." I replied noncommittally.

"The War leaves a scar on ye, cutter. Ye'd *know*. And ye'd know ye *never* want ta go back." My temples begin to throb painfully as I considered the man's words… a memory began to surface…

The lecture hall began to fade from view as terrible visions began to seep up from the base of my mind… visions of a place where seasons were like nothing I'd ever felt, or heard, or tried to shut out. A place where prayers went unheard, falling like stones to the earth… vein-colored lightning flashed across things that were once sky, but now boiled beneath my feet and screamed when I brushed against them…

I ran at the head of a large band of men, passing through dark canyons where the walls quivered moistly and beat like a heart, wearing only my own blood as clothing. At last I stood in a place where the ashen gray terrain slithered like a mass of snakes, coiling around my ankles and whispering my evil to the earth. I marched endlessly, silently, through this colorless land, where fatigue seemed to *live* and hunt me like a shade over the wastes, whipping me with despair…

In time, I and the ragged men who followed me came upon a hag sitting upon a mound of gigantic, writhing larvae, poking at one of the slime-covered things with a broken talon. I indicated for one of the men to run forward and speak with her; the hag's grating voice carried to my ears…

"I would speak with him," she said, then cackled. Her eyes gleamed as she pointed me out to the man. "The handsome one

that leads your ragged column. I would speak with him." …and that is all I could recall.

Ghysis had noticed I had faded out, asking, "Cutter? Ye feelin' all right, there?"

I assured him I was fine, and deflected his concern by asking if the fiends recruited often. He nodded grimly. "Ye can be sure o' that. Sigil's th' best source o' fodder on th' Planes. Beats milkin' planets o' all their prime inhabitants… too much work."

I asked if he had any other advice on surviving the War. "Aye: whatever ye does, don't *talk* about th' Blood War with *any* fiend… or any deva or archon fer that matter. Just don't talk about it, period, 'cause ye never know who in the 'ells ye're really chattin' with. And all o' them get mighty touchy when ye bring up th' War. It's their reason fer livin'."

"Don't go through any portal unless ye're pikin' sure ye know where it goes. Maybe ye 'aven't 'eard tales o' clueless planeswalkers steppin' through a portal an' endin' up smack-dab in the middle o' a Blood War skirmish. Know why ye 'aven't 'eard o' them? 'Cause those sods are dead, dead, *dead*."

"An' whatever ye does, never sign on fer a tour o' duty, no matter 'ow much jink they flash in yer mug. Certain death an' signin' on fer a tour in th' Blood War are th' same thing, cutter."

"Chances are when ye sign up, they peel ye so yer tour o' duty is 'til time itself grinds ta a 'alt. Even death wouldn't be a release, 'cause then ye sink inta th' Lower Planes an' get dredged back up as somethin' worse'n ye were before. Then they got their talons on ye fer all eternity."

I asked how one could get out of a contract. "Unless they don't want ye, ye don't 'ave much chance. I never heard o' it bein' done with mean-spirited recruits, or somebody they really wanted ta keep their talons on. Outwittin' a tanar'ri is risky but can be done… the baatezu are much more dangerous with their contracts. Ye sign one o' those, ye're dammed fer life…"

"Ye might try a little garnish, try an' dawb them, an' they might let ye make a run for it… but where would ye go? There are so many 'ells…"

I questioned how one got hired into the Blood War. He replied, "Ye know, every once-a-when some leather-headed berk comes 'round askin' about a job in th' Blood War. They want some jink, they want a quick stint an' then ta get along with their lives. Mayhap I was one o' these leatherheads.

Mayhap I was a sellsword, an' 'eard there was a little jink ta be made in th' War. Got me interested…"

"Taught me a lesson, it did: we're like ants runnin' around th' heels of dancin', sod-pike gods. I saw big men, who claimed ta be big soldiers…" He shook his head. " *Paper* soldiers. Wars' a *furnace* fer them. Makes them wake up or *burn.*"

I asked, then, how he had survived the war. The man's face darkened. "I… well, that's th' one thing I won't speak of, cutter. Suffice ta say a man does what 'e 'as ta do ta escape the War."

I had heard a hard story of his survival. "But a woman named Vrischika told me you had to murder your own men to escape the War."

The man's face became red with anger. "Watch yer mouth, cutter! That's a lie! Foul, foul lie! Are ye *barmy*, jawin' with a fiend over th' War and believin' 'er every word o' it?!"

I simply replied, "What happened, then?"

"I'll tell ye what happened, berk!" He sighed and calmed down slightly. "I was part of th' Company o' the Blazin' Effigy… a part of its original number was fifty-three mortal mercenaries, though only nine o' us remained. Camped somewhere in Avernus, we were, awaitin'reinforcements fer th' next battle…"

"Well, my tour was nearly done, then… in fact, I was ta leave after that battle. Th' trouble was, had I died there, I would 'ave been theirs forever — too much blackness, too much evil in my 'eart. I would 'ave ended up a petioner in Baator, an eternal soldier in th' War." He shuddered at the thought.

"Me an' two other lads fled like dogs, that's what 'appened. We scurried across the Plane fer a handful o' days afore we came to this great pillar o' livin' 'eads… an awful sight, it was… they jabbered an' hissed at us, callin' fer us ta come closer. That night I stole away from the others an' went ta talk ta th' pillar." Ghysis shut his eyes and rubbed at his temples.

"I… I asked this pillar 'ow I might be freed, 'ow I might escape Baator… an' it told me in exchange fer th' two o' my brothers." He was quiet for a moment, biting on his knuckles as if fighting back tears. "Ta me… at th' time… t'was just math."

I felt sudden compassion for the tormented soul in front of me. I softly said, "That's a terrible choice to be forced to make."

He nodded. "Not sure if I'll forgive m'self. Now I'm just a soldier who's lookin' fer a place ta die. Tryin' ta erase th' stain o' evil, cleanse my inner Ghysis afore I die an'return ta th' Blood War. I lecture 'ere ta keep people away from it all, ta

prevent them from ever havin' ta make a choice like that." It didn't escape my notice that his story wasn't that far from what Vrischika had said.

"Right… this is th' last bit, then. Some o' ye are Sensates, so's I got one thing ta say ta ye: don't sign up ta see 'what th' pikin' Blood War is about.' Don't be a barmy idiot. Use a sensory stone if ye gots ta know, but stay the 'ells away from anythin' ta do with th' Blood War fer real."

" 'Tis just not worth it. 'Tis…" For a moment, a look of great pain crossed the man's face; it looked as if he was going to weep. "…not worth it, at all. That's the end o' this session, so farewell."

The day was far advanced, so I retreated to a room at the Festhall to rest for the night. As we walked to the room, Annah turned to Fall-From-Grace, who she had ignored up to now.

"So, how long will yeh be traveling with us, succubus?"

"As long as I am permitted, I suppose," came the reply, in Lady Grace's even voice.

"Well, ye're not permitted. I don't trust yeh." There was a note of triumph in Annah's voice at this petty victory.

PUBLIC SENSORIUMS

Next day, I had Splinter send us to the public sensoriums. I sampled stones there, and the experiences they contained.

The experience ‘unavoidable pain.’

The experience was a short and violent one: struggling with another, slightly stronger man on the edge of a blazing-hot stream of molten lava, my weapon-hand was slowly, inexorably forced ever closer to the magma. Beads of sweat evaporated the instant they appeared; the hair on the back of my hand blackened and smoldered above the awesome heat. Finally, my howls of suffering echoing from the canyon walls around me, my hand and the axe it held plunged into the lava and charred to ash in a few, agonizing seconds.

Pain was something I had long familiarity with, even in the short time for which I had memories. I had known pain as bad or worse than this.

The experience ‘tender love.’

My eyes were closed; I could sense myself standing on the tips of my toes, pressed against someone tightly. Soft, soft lips brushed against mine, giving me the most gentle of kisses… my heart seemed to flutter in my chest, and I felt as if I could fall backwards and simply float off into space…

There was an innocence to this experience which echoed what I must have felt every time I began a new incarnation, bereft of memory. Yet, from the same beginning I had followed many paths, mage and soldier, good and evil…

The experience ‘mind-numbing tedium.’

The experience couldn’t be more than a few minutes long, but *hours* seemed to pass… a long, boring lecture in the driest, dustiest hall in the University of Chalm in Sigil. I looked about the vast hall, hoping to catch someone’s eye to pull a face at — but the other students were either asleep or staring listlessly into space. I dropped my quill pen, picked it up, and dropped again… just for something to do. I considered stabbing myself in the eye with it, just to see if my senses hadn’t been wholly numbed by the incredible boredom…

Perhaps there was some benefit in not remembering, an immortal’s years must include long stretches of tedium.

The experience ‘bitter loathing.’

Venomous tears of pain brimming in my narrow yellow eyes, I gathered the tattered remains of my small, scaled, red wings off the floor. I humbly backed out of Groba’s study, gritting my needle-like teeth beneath sealed lips.

Sure, I was only a spinagon — least among devils — but that was no cause for a pit fiend to tear my wings off because he didn’t like the message I had brought him! What would my gelugon master do, now? He certainly couldn’t say anything to Groba, and what use was a spinagon without its wings? I would probably get cast into the Pit of Flame for ‘incompetence!’

Vengeance out of the question, there was little to do but shake my clawed fist and hate, hate, *hate* Groba with all the loathing my hard little black devil’s heart could muster…

Besides the many I had killed in my lives, there must have been others, the friends and lovers of those I killed, anyone who stood in my way, who had loathed me.

The experience ‘pure glee.’

Dancing and leaping about in rhythm with the wood elves’ bouncing festival music, I and a dozen other dancers spun through the forest clearing like a whirling dervish, smiling and laughing like mad. As the cheering forest dwellers whooped, clapped and danced alongside me, fairies careened through the air above our heads, leaving sparkling trails of colored light…

I was in a rare good mood for some minutes after this experience.

The experience ‘consuming impatience.’

I stood debating with Amnas the Horribly Slow, Keeper of the Lion Key, as to whether or not my quest was important enough for him to relinquish the artifact into my care. The whole experience was an exercise in sheer torment… each and every one of his words was followed by a significant pause; each and every point he made was reiterated time and again before he let me speak. I presented an argument… then waited, and waited, and *waited* while he made his counterpoint. To which I shot out a snappy counterpoint of my own… then must wait yet again for another of Amnas’ drawling, meandering, seemingly endless counterpoints. It was everything I could do not to simply lop the fiend’s tusked head off and snatch the key from the twitching corpse…

This reminded me of my frustration at not being able to read the language in which the journal I found was penned.

The experience ‘grim determination.’

The entire hall was in ruins and still in the process of being destroyed, as dozens of combatants hurled weapons, deadly, arcane magicks and themselves at one another in a desperate struggle to be the last one standing. Plumes of acrid green smoke rose from the pile of limp bodies I dragged myself out of, having barely escaped the wrath of some fiendish spell. There it was — across the way, through the battling throng, through the bloodthirsty battle ahead of me, sitting untouched on a miraculously upright table — my pint of mead! And I'd get it back, if I had to kill every last one of the brawling tavern patrons to do it!

I thought back to the barkeep of the Smoldering Corpse, and how he said I had busted the place up some fifteen years ago.

The experience 'supernatural lust.'

I found myself coupling with a succubus, a creature of such intense, otherworldly beauty that even her fiend's horns and thrashing tail give me no pause. She gasped under me… I desired her so completely that the whole of my existence seemed focused towards this single goal. As my life exploded from me in a starry burst, I heard the delighted laughter of the succubus as she drained me dry, leaving my body but a soulless husk…

I glanced at Fall-From-Grace, and realized she had come about as far as was possible from what I had just experienced. I also wondered how the recording had been made, whether a Sensate had deliberately attracted the attentions of a succubus just to leave this record.

The experience 'horrible regret.'

I stood on the deck of my flagship, the Divine Hammer, as it floated over the continent of Agarheim, held aloft by the winds of magic. The very landscape roiled and shuddered beneath the bombardment of my fleet, one thousand ships' cannons and bombards hurling their sorcerous fire down like vengeful gods. The shockwaves had begun to hit my ship only minutes ago — a constant vibration that sent shudders through the whole of the ancient craft and moved my very bones — accompanied by a constant, rumbling bass. As the land's mountains began to sink and the seas that surrounded it begin to boil off into the atmosphere, my first officer came to stand beside me.

"My Lord Admiral… permission to speak freely, sir."

I nodded my acquiescence, my stomach sinking as I guessed at his question.

"My lord… forgive me, but how? What gives us the right? A billion lives…"

I spoke without turning to him, unable to take my eyes off Rhumos, the nation's vast capital city, as it vaporized into a cloud of super-heated gasses twelve miles across and growing ever-wider. "If you only knew the full treachery of the Agarites, First Officer Felm, one which is beyond most any man's comprehension… then you would know. You would speak of our right to annihilate them? We've no right to let them live."

"But… sir? Traitors, all of them? Surely, among the hundreds of thousands. How many innocents—"

"Silence! Speak of it no more — our king has spoken, His will be done. The task set to us is a horrible one, not fit for contemplation or questioning. There is no room for pity, no room for remorse – only *duty*."

The two of us stood silently for a time, watching the last minutes of Agarheim. At long last I sighed… a low, stuttering exhalation that sounded as if something had broken inside me. Beneath the brazen plate that covered the ruined half of my face, my dead eye began to weep…

"Falm… my friend… I would have you understand. I know now, as I look down at what I have wrought here, that were I to think upon what I have done… what I have *truly* done… I would be struck mad. A deed such as this… the anguish would overwhelm, destroy me. So, First Officer Falm, it must be that there *are* no innocents in Agarheim… no mothers, no children, no *people.* Only traitors. Vile, cunning traitors, who deserve no less than the full brunt of our most Holy King's wrath. Do you understand this?"

"Y-yes, m'lord."

"Good. Now go… I wish to be alone, here."

"By your command, Lord Admiral." Falm bowed his head and returned below deck, leaving me to stand over the end of a civilization.

The fact that this experience was here at all indicated the admiral must later have had second thoughts. The crime committed was horrible, awful, almost inconceivable, yet I wondered whether I had done worse.

The experience 'indescribable frustration.'

I could see it now, the crown of Haephon, gleaming upon a marble pedestal. No more than twenty strides away, it was… with it, I could wrest control of the armies of Aethanopolis away from my treacherous brother and restore my father's

kingdom. A fool, my wretched brother was… I smiled grimly at the thought… to leave the king's only daughter alive, thinking she could do him no harm.

A sound! The creak of leather sandals, the softest hiss… over there, by that third pillar! She was close now, Polaphi the Medusa, jealously guarding the crown her servants had stolen for her so long ago. Crouching behind a wide pillar, I wrapped my hand tightly around my trusted Thrice-Blessed Javelin. With my Helm of Swiftness and the Hundred-Mirrored Shield, even a beast such as Polaphi would be no match for me. Any moment, now, she would round the pillar and meet the sight of me. Even if she turned away from the shield, my javelin would surely find her throat…

Suddenly, there was a gentle touch on my shoulder. I gasped, spinning around to face — of course — the Medusa. Accepting the inevitable, I only had time to loose a piercing cry of frustration before my lungs… and every other part of me… solidified into cold, gray stone.

I was glad now I had not gotten a good look at the prostitute Marissa in the Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts.

The experience 'shock and a rise to seething vengefulness.'

I stood somewhere in the nether regions of the Planes, a sweltering place where the ground was beaten copper, and the sky was of brass. Here, the bodies of sinners — petitioners in this horrid place — were rolled amongst iron brambles and bronze scorpions until their bones were fine, gray dust.

I squinted at the horizon, the bone-dust rising with putrid-smelling gusts of wind that carried with them the sound of agonized moaning. There was nothing but flat, metallic landscape as far as the eye could see. The dust was everywhere, in everything… it stung at my eyes, coated the insides of my mouth with a pasty film. I spat, wiping at it with my finger, but it was of no use: the stuff's taste had fouled my mouth completely.

I looked down at the 'key' in my hand… a minute platinum orb… and pictured the man's face who solemnly swore to me the magical portal I just passed through — now gone, of course — led to the green fields of Bytopia. Someone, by all the Powers and their proxies, was going to pay for this one.

I wished my problems were so minor.

The experience 'slowly dawning horror.'

"How good could it be?" I thought, regarding the burgundy liquid carefully. Across the table from me, the twisted old man smiled slyly.

"Please, sir, try." he whispered, his hushed voice the sound of dry leaves blown over a roughly cobbled street. "Thou shall find it more than lives up to thy expectations, I am sure."

I nodded at him and lifted the crystal goblet into the air, watching the light play through the crimson liquor. I'd come a long way for this drink… searched long and hard for this old man… and I'd be damned to let anything rush me, now. The moment was to be savored.

I raised the glass to my lips, inhaling the stuff's aroma. The bouquet was light, sweet, intoxicating… almost dizzyingly so. I'd tried countless drinks… written tomes about them, their flavors and smells, means of manufacture, in my journeys across the Planes. But this… this stuff was supposed to be legendary. No living man I'd found or heard of had tried the stuff. The stories were ridiculous — nothing could taste quite so good — but if there were the slightest bit of truth to them, this would be some fine liquor indeed.

At last, I drunk of the goblet, a cautious sip…

Incredible! Indescribable! As the flavor washed over my palette, I fought the urge to shudder with delight. Nothing… *nothing* I had tried in all my long years had tasted quite like this. I looked up at the old man, startled to find my glass empty — I had drained it all in a single draught. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, not entirely sure when I had begun to cry.

"Tears of joy, eh?" The old man laughed softly. "Quite pleasing to the tongue, is it not? Wouldst thou like some more, perchance?" He smiled at me once more.

"Yes… yes, if I might…"

"Surely." he replied, refilling my glass. Try as I might, I could not resist downing it in a single gulp. I thrust my finger into the goblet in an attempt to find some last, hidden drop of the stuff. Several times more did he fill the goblet, and each time I gulped the stuff down as a starving man would devour a feast, unable to control myself, to deny myself another exquisite taste of it.

"A drink such as this… a man wouldst do anything for it, no?"

I nodded without hesitation. "Yes, a man would…" Looking at him, his sly smile suddenly took on a whole new meaning. A

sense of horror began to creep over me, even as I began to yearn painfully for more of the blood-red liquor…

"Yes, yes…" The old man grinned, his yellow eyes gleaming. "A man *wouldst* do anything, in the *thrall* of such a drink… even the most terrible, the most heinous of deeds… as thou shall see, my newest servant."

I thought of what I had been learning about my incarnations, and how, with some exceptions, I had found bitter truths about myself. I did not like my actions, nor their consequences, and had come to realize, with something approaching horror, that I was probably doomed to repeat my actions. I would eventually lose my memories again, and start over. I must find a way to end the cycle, once and for all.

TIEING LOOSE ENDS

The public sensoriums, while interesting, was not leading me anywhere. I decided to go back to the Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts to fulfill some errands.

I found Juliette, and briefly explained the fiasco her plan to turn her lover jealous had become. I suggested she might want to try openly talking about her relationship with him. She promised to try, but I had my doubts.

I found Dolora, and gave her the keys to her heart — literally. I had learned something of her nature from her creator, Merriman, that she was a magical construct, and asked her for more information.

"Merriman never told me much regarding my construction. I know little of the inner workings of my body, much as you likely know little of yours. Outwardly, though, I am a human woman in all respects… save for the texture and temperature of my flesh. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"What about your mind, your emotions?"

"Its functions are as much a mystery to me as any human's. When I first came to this place, I did not understand emotions, nor have any of my own. I have… feelings… now, though I am only beginning to understand them."

"What do the keys do, exactly?"

"I can only assume that Merriman made the keys so that there would be no risk of me drawing away from him before he had tired of his experiment. Now that they are in my possession, I am free to develop and possess my own emotions."

I also asked her if she knew anything of the silent prostitute. She replied, "Yes. Her name is Ecco. Her voice — and in fact her every means of communication — was stolen and destroyed. Ecco's words once wooed away the paramour of the godling Paramisha. Paramisha, in a jealous rage, tore away Ecco's voice, sealed it within a crystal vial, and hurled it into a megogalamdraga's maw. Ecco's voice is forever lost to her; only another, new voice could return to her the ability to communicate once more. I know this because I spoke to Paramisha's paramour myself, once."

I next went to Ecco, and asked if she couldn't speak because her voice had been stolen. When she nodded, I revealed I had acquired a Fiend's Tongue at the Curiosity shop, with her in mind. I told her I needed to place it in her mouth, that I had been told this would allow her to regain the ability to communicate. I asked her to trust me, and attempt the experiment.

She nodded and took the bottle from me. She gingerly picked out the severed tongue from the briny solution and, after staring at it for a moment in disgust, placed it into her mouth… suddenly, her eyes widened, and there was a burst of reddish light from between her lips!

I anxiously asked if she was all right. Ecco opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it once more… and spoke! "I… I can speak again! Oh, joy! I than — DAMN THEE TO THE DARKEST OF PITS, THOU STENCH-RIDDEN WORM! KNEEL BEFORE ME IN SUPPLICATION, INSECT!"

Morte yelled out, "Yikes!" Ecco yelped and covered her mouth with both hands… her eyes were wide with panic.

"It must be… the Fiend's Tongue…" I said.

She slowly took her hands away from her mouth, nodding. "It seems I must DEVOUR THY FRAIL SHELL AND CONSIGN THY SOUL TO THE ABYSS FOR ALL ETERNITY! THOU SHALT SERVE IN MY BATTLE-THRALL 'TIL THE PLANES GRIND TO A HALT! THOU ART MINE, MINE, MI—" Ecco shut her mouth again, and began to softly, quietly weep.

I remembered something, another item at the Curiosity Shop, and told Ecco I would obtain help and quickly return. Of course, when I entered the shop to purchase the item, Vrischika, sensing my need, raised the price. Helpless, I had to pay what she asked.

I returned to the brothel, found Ecco again, and said, "Try using these Deva's Tears… they should soothe the tongue's cursing."

She nodded, smiling, and took the vial from me. Ecco placed a few of the sparkling blue drops onto her tongue: "I… I believe the Tears are working. Yes… they are! I can speak in my own voice once more — oh, how I thank you!" Ecco squeezed my hand and bowed her head gratefully, her eyes welling with tears of joy.

It took her several minutes before she was ready to talk to me again, so great was her happiness. When she did, she said, "Well… I've been without the ability to speak for so *long.* Most patrons came to me seeking someone to listen, someone

attentive and capable of understanding them that they could speak to, free of interruption and the like. Now that I can speak once more, I wonder if the time has come for me to move on… leave the Brothel, and become a Sensate."

I also asked if she knew of Ravel Puzzlewell. Ecco nodded, and lowered her voice: "In fact, I do… not only does she exist, she has *children!*"

I nearly shouted, "She *what?*"

"One of them is here, at times… Kesai-Serris. She is a child of Ravel's, though she is loathe to accept the fact. Who could blame her?" She paused for a moment, thinking. "I have never gotten her to admit it, though I am sure 'tis true."

I didn't see how this information could benefit me, and it would doubtless hurt Kesai to question her. I thanked Ecco for her help, and moved off.

I recalled the small toy I had bought, and since the Modrons were still in the brothel I talked to one of them, asking what the toy could be. It replied that it was a portal cube, and that it could be activated by arranging its limbs to the proper position. Unfortunately, it didn't know what the proper position was.

I examined the toy carefully. It was a replica of a cube-like mechanical creature with huge eyes on one of its faces. The toy had two legs, two arms, two folding wings, and at least eighteen points of articulation.

The intricacy of the toy was incredible; its joints were composed of tiny gears, cogs, pulleys, and swivel joints, and there were even tiny springs on the legs that helped support the feet. There was a little switch on the back that moved the eyes back and forth, and the wings were made of some tissue-like metal that folded up neatly when the wings were flush with the body. Despite the toy's awkward shape, it rested easily on any surface, no matter how uneven.

As I gazed at the toy, I tried to remember something, anything, about my childhood. Nothing came to me, but I found a peculiar mood had settled over me. I regarded the toy with the eyes of a small child.

Then I picked the toy up, and moved the arms and made sword-fighting noises. The toy *clicked* and *whirred* as I moved its clockwork joints. Within moments, the tiny cube had vanquished every imaginary opponent I had sent against it, and settled back to its normal position.

I then waved its arms and made cheering noises. Hordes of imaginary creatures from across the Planes cheered the cube's

victory. I could almost see a tiny oily tear brimming on one of its eyes… it was a hero, the greatest cube ever to roam the Planes, and everyone loved it. In my mind, Fall-From-Grace and Annah hugged it and showered it with kisses.

I sighed, the mood suddenly broken. I noticed Morte staring at me. When he saw my look, he shook his head.

I cocked my head as if listening, and said, "What's that, cube hero? 'Morte's a stupid skull?' Why, yes he is, isn't he, cube hero?"

Morte indignantly replied, "Hey! It didn't say that!"

"Yes, it did! It said it just now!"

"Wh —?! Gimme that thing!"

The tattered persona of a child I might once have been prompted me to petulantly reply, "No, it's mine. He only wants to hang out with me anyway. Don't you, cube hero? Yes, you do!"

Morte ground out, "I. Just. Want. To. Hold. It. For. A. Second."

"But you don't have any hands."

"I'll hold it in my TEETH."

I didn't think it would be wise to let Morte anywhere near the toy. "No, I think not."

"I'm gonna smash that modron cube to bits."

I started to put it away, then remembered the toy had made a *pop* while I had been playing with it. I concentrated, and recalled it happened when I bent the left knee. I bent the knee, then tried moving other limbs. I heard a soft *whir* when I extended the left wing. I quickly found that moving the right wing caused a *hmmmms* sound. I rotated the right arm, when suddenly there was a blinding white light…

RUBIKON

We stood in a metal room, a cube, with one doorway on each of the four walls, although three of the ways were blocked. A modron stood near the only open doorway.

As I approached, the creature focused emotionless eyes on me. “Greetings, adventurer. Welcome to Rubikon, the dungeon construct. Thank you for choosing Rubikon for your dungeoning experience. You may access Rubikon through this door.”

I tried to question it further, but it would only respond with its opening speech. Shrugging, I moved through the opening.

The room beyond was also a metal cube, with four doorways. Three creatures, which looked the same, stood about the room. Closest to me I saw a mechanical man with pale green skin. Although it was obviously a construct, it did have an animated face, which was scowling at me.

I essayed a greeting.

“Grrrr.” The creature growled at me and then paused, weighing my reaction.

The mechanical man, although armed with a built-in sword, barely came to the middle of my chest. Its armor looked paper thin as well. That made its response to my greeting rather ludicrous. I asked, “Am I supposed to be frightened by that?”

It looked confused. “Grrrr?” It made a feeble threatening gesture toward me.

“I asked you if I'm supposed to be frightened by that.”

It stared at me for a moment while considering my question. “Yes. *Grrrr* is a sound indicative of a threat. I have included an appropriate gesture to add weight to the threat. Fear is the anticipated response which will give me the advantage in the fight that follows.” It leaped to the attack.

The three creatures fought weakly, and were soon scattered parts upon the floor.

Dak'kon remarked, “This is Limbo, but it rings of Mechanus.”

I glanced at him, surprised by the comment. Since he was a githzerai, he must be sure we were in Limbo.

I entered the next room, which had only one mechanical creature. I asked it who it was. My question seemed to throw the creature completely off balance. It stood staring at me with its head cocked to one side, unsure of what to do.

"I am a monster. Now we do battle?"

"You've got to be kidding…" It continued to stare at me for a moment.

"No… Grrrr." It attacked. After dispatching it, I entered the next room. The creature there gave me no time to talk, yelling out as soon as we entered.

"Die in the name of the Evil Wizard!" The creature brandished a weapon at me. When I asked what evil wizard it was talking about, the creature stopped waving its weapon and paused to think for a moment.

"Uh… The one that doesn't exist until you set the Rubikon Dungeon Construct to *hard* difficulty level. Boy, will you be in trouble then. Meanwhile, Die in the name of the Evil Wizard!" It leaped to the attack, and was quickly hacked to pieces.

In the next room, the construct first scowled at me. The creature suddenly stopped scowling at me and adopted a look of mock terror.

"Eeeek! It is the hero, sent here no doubt, to slay the evil one. Woe to me, the hapless construct on duty at the time of his arrival!"

"What are you going on about?"

"The plot, you dolt, stick to the plot. How do you expect me to play my part if you do not cooperate? Where were we…" It paused to think for a moment. "Oh, I remember, I was about to trounce you." It leaped to the attack, lasting a short while longer than its predecessors. At the end of the combat Lady Grace made a comment to another of my companions, continuing to try to learn more about them.

"Your mastery of discipline is impressive, Dak'kon."

"In the eyes of Zerthimon, I am nothing."

"Surely you are being too harsh on yourself?"

"A long road must I still travel. This is but the beginning."

We passed through several more of the cubic rooms, easily defeating the mechanical inhabitants. Finally, we stumbled into another cubic chamber. Complex clockwork mechanisms covered the walls, and half a dozen modrons stood about the room. I asked one of the creatures what it was.

"We are modron." I asked if it meant its name was Modron.

"We are modron. We do not have a name. We are modron. All that you see here are modron. We are one."

"All right. You are all modrons, but what is *this* modron's name? The one I am talking to." The modron began to emit sporadic knocking sounds. Its face took on a pained expression as it continued to stare at me.

"We… I…" It looked away from me and the knocking sound faded. "We are modron. We have no identity other than the whole that is modron. We have no name."

"Then how do you tell one modron from another?" There was a pause as the modron considered my question.

"We know. We are modron. We are a part of the whole. Just as you recognize the hand that is part of the arm, we recognize each part of the whole."

I asked what this place was, to which it gave the same unsatisfactory reply as the first modron we met, 'Rubikon Dungeon Construct.'

I suddenly put together Dak'kon's remark, with the rooms we were moving through and a remark Candrian the plane walker had made when I talked to him in the Smoldering Corpse. He had travelled to Limbo and seen a construct of interlocking cubes, which I now realized we were inside. Rather than Rubikon Dungeon Construct, I reflected, it should have been called Rubikon Cubes. I asked the Modron to tell me more about this 'construct.' The modron frowned at me then glanced about the room.

"We should know… We are modron. We are part of the whole… We… Information not available. Address your query to the engineer."

"Where do I find the engineer?" The modron glanced about.

"We do not know. Information not available… We are confused…"

I addressed another of the modron, asking it what this place was.

"This is the Rubikon Dungeon Construct Project." When I asked this one for details, it was more forthcoming. The modron began to emit a soft humming sound as it answered me.

"Rubikon: Project goal is to determine the dynamics, both social and asocial, surrounding the environment commonly construed as a dungeon and to attempt to explain the aberrations that tend to occur in such environments."

"How do you intend to do that?"

"Rubikon is capable of forming a series of rooms linked in such a fashion as to form what is commonly referred to as a *dungeon.* Each dungeon can have one of three difficulty settings: easy, normal, or hard. The dungeon is then populated with monsters, traps, and treasure, according to the difficulty level chosen. After creation the dungeon can be fully explored." The modron began to emit a low hum.

"Queries to be answered: What attracts people to dungeons? Why do people often seek to enter them if they are places of such danger? Why are dungeons there in the first place? What are the dynamics of a workable dungeon? We do not understand…" It paused. "I… do not…"

This was the first modron I had encountered who showed any signs of individuality. I commented, "You started to say *I* instead of *we*…"

The modron gave me a concerned look then glanced about the room. "You are in error. We are modron. We are the whole… We will not discuss this."

"I know what I heard. You started to say *I* and…" The modron frowned at me. I heard a hint of anger in its voice as it answered me.

"No. We are modron. We are a part of the whole. We will not discuss this further." An angry buzzing filled the room then subsided.

This was also the first modron I had seen show an emotion, but it obviously was not willing to admit to any non-conformity. I was curious about the different settings it had mentioned.

"All right. I'd like to try out one of these dungeons you mentioned." There was a significant pause before the modron answered me.

"Request denied… Project halted due to… accident."

"What accident?"

"Dungeon construct became unstable, cause uncertain. Fail-safes activated causing dungeon to collapse, cause uncertain. Portal lens malfunctioned causing contact with home plane of Mechanus to be severed, cause uncertain. Reset of dungeon necessary."

"Then why don't you reset it?"

"Reset can only be initiated by project director. Project director disintegrated. Portal lens has malfunctioned and contact with Mechanus severed. Cannot acquire replacement director from Mechanus."

“Let me get this straight. You can’t reset without a director, but you can’t get a director without resetting?”

“Assessment correct. Project halted.”

I had an inspiration, “Look, I'm an adventurer and I've been through some dungeons in my day. Why not let me be your director?”

The room was suddenly filled with a buzzing sound that just as suddenly subsided. “Assistance welcome. You are now project director. Advise on next task.”

“Reset the dungeon.”

“Initializing reset…” The room was filled with a low thrumming sound that could be felt rather than heard. “Collapsing existing dungeon…” The sound rose in power until the floor began to vibrate. “Initializing new dungeon…” The sound rose in volume until I thought my head was about to explode. Suddenly the room went quiet. “Reset complete. Dungeon construct status: Easy. Awaiting further instructions, Director.”

The modron went on to explain that I could also travel from the dungeon to any portal I knew of, and that when the dungeon was reset any creature or item left in the dungeon was in danger of being destroyed. I then told it to reset the dungeon to hard, since I was curious to see what constructs would staff it at that level.

The rooms of the ‘dungeon’ looked the same, but the constructs were larger, about my size, with heavy armor and two built-in weapons. I tried talking to one of them.

It replied, “Greetings, intruder.”

“What makes you think I'm an intruder?”

“Because you are not one of us. Therefore, you are an intruder. As an intruder, you must die.” It leaped to the attack.

The constructs were much harder to defeat, and dealt several wounds before they went down. In the next room I asked what the construct was doing.

“I am reporting your every success, your every failure, and your every move to the Evil Wizard. From you, we learn. Because of you, we will better ourselves.” It leaped to the attack. After another hard fight it went down. I asked a question of one of the constructs in the next room. It cocked its head to one side and gave me a questioning look.

“Why do you persist in questioning us? I do not understand.”

"There is always the chance that I might learn something." It looked away for a moment in thought. Returning its gaze to me, it nodded its head in agreement.

"Yes… I suppose that's true… Let me teach you about pain." It leaped to the attack, and its destruction.

We entered several more rooms, destroying more clockwork constructs. As we entered a new room, Morte commented "I feel like I'm in a cuckoo clock. A cuckoo… cuckoo clock."

The new room was larger than any we had seen up to now. There were more of the constructs present, as well. In addition, a new type of construct was in the room.

I walked into the room, ignoring the constructs I had seen before. I moved towards a mechanical man constructed to be robe shaped. As I approached, he smiled at me and gave me a slight bow. "So we meet at last…" His voice lacked the monotone quality of the other creatures I had spoken to in the maze.

I returned his greeting, and he bowed once again. "And to you as well, sirrah." He cocked his head to one side and gave me a curious look. "So, do we do battle for control of Rubikon now, or do we engage in conversation so that you may quench your curiosity?" He waited for my answer.

"All right, I'm curious. Can we talk?" He nodded smartly at me.

"Ah, a man of knowledge I see. I must admit that I'd be disappointed in you were that not the case."

"Who are you?" He gave a slight bow.

"I am Rubikon, the Master Wizard. It is I who rule the red constructs that inhabit this realm." His conversation was much less patterned than the other constructs.

"So, are you supposed to be the evil wizard?" He frowned as he thought.

"I'm not comfortable with the word evil, sirrah. I admit that my views do not coincide with those of others in many ways, but does that make me evil? I think not."

"What can you tell me about this place?" I asked, shifting to a new topic.

He laughed and looked around. "This little piece of hell? This is an example of modron madness. It exists on the plane of Limbo, where thoughts can actually become reality. That way they can simply *will* this dungeon into being and then populate it with constructs." He laughed again. "What a marvel."

"What can you tell me about the modrons?" He shook his head at my words.

"There are no modrons here, sirrah. Only prisoners and their captors."

"I've seen the modrons."

"No, sirrah. The creatures you have met are nothing more than the corrupt remains of modrons. Most, if not all, of these poor creatures are on the verge of going rogue and don't even realize it."

"Rogue? What does that mean?"

"This dungeon is composed of the essence of chaos. Such matter can easily be shaped into objects through the will of many like-minded creatures. It makes the construction of such structures quite simple. However, there is a price to be paid." He paused.

"Modrons are the very essence of law, sirrah. Here, however, they are being exposed to the essence of chaos. Such exposure often results in a form of insanity. The modrons begin to lose their sense of *we* and instead become individuals. This is called *going rogue* and it is a capital offence in their society."

"What happens to rogues?"

He shrugged. "I don't fully understand this, but modrons share some sort of common essence. If a modron goes rogue he takes a piece of this essence with him. The modrons will destroy all rogues so that this essence returns to the common pool from which it sprang." I suppose he could be considered a rogue construct.

"Then what are you?"

"I am a prisoner, sirrah," He replied angrily. "I am not here by choice, of that I can assure you. I was created by the modrons to play in their meaningless dungeon games. Over time I became self-aware and asked for my freedom. Their leader refused me!" He glared at me.

"I did what anyone would do when they are forced into slavery. I fought for my freedom!" He paused for effect. "I disintegrated their leader and made it look like an accident. I then attempted to flee this hideous existence via the nearest exit."

I doubted whether the modrons could ever have understood what they had created, that it could have escaped their clockwork rules and turned on them. I curtly informed him that the modrons had a new creative director, me. I then asked what happened after he disintegrated the old director.

He sighed and frowned. “Unfortunately there was a fail safe mechanism that I was not aware of. My attempt at freedom was judged an *error* and the dungeon collapsed upon itself, trapping me in stasis…” He gazed off into the distance. “I have been in stasis for centuries, sirrah. I would still be there if you hadn’t reset the cube and set it for *hard* difficulty.” He turned his attention to me.

“So, what are your plans now?”

“I intend to openly march on the engineering room and claim it. I will then bend the modrons to my will and have the full resources of the cube at my disposal. Freedom shall be mine.”

“Let’s say you do get out. What then?”

“I haven’t decided yet. With the power of the cube behind me, I could be a force to be reckoned with.” He shrugged. “Time will tell.”

“What if the modrons refuse to help you?”

“Make no mistake, sirrah. They will help me. One way, or another, they will help me.” Despite his protests, the ‘evil wizard’ title seemed to me to still be fitting.

“So you intend to make the modrons your slaves?”

“They are slaves already, sirrah! They are slaves to law, logic, and the confines of this experiment of theirs. Under my rule, they will finally have a purpose in life worthy of their abilities.”

“Why do we have to fight at all? Why not just go our separate ways?” He smiled at my comment.

“You have been accepted as their leader and you control the cube. Therefore, you must be eliminated. Nothing personal, you understand.” He seemed fixated on controlling that which once controlled him.

“Well… I'm not going to just stand here and let you plot my death. I think it’s time I take you out.”

The warrior constructs were not too difficult to defeat. Although capable of wielding their weapons with awful power, they were slow, and it was a simple matter to surround one and destroy it before the others could come to its aid.

‘Rubikon’ the wizard, however, was much harder to take down. He could cast spells, including a powerful spell which drew energy directly from the plane of Mechanus through a portal. That spell alone nearly forced me into another death, and it was only through my regenerative powers that I stayed on my feet. After this one spell, I was able to match Rubikon magic for

magic, but he did not possess my recuperative powers, and eventually fell.

I was pleased to discover on his body a scroll for the spell he had cast. I copied it into my spell book. The magical concepts behind it were too advanced for me to be able to cast it, but I was sure at the rate I was recovering the magical knowledge gained in past lives I would be able to use it soon.

We passed through several more rooms, finding only more of the mundane constructs. I was close to turning back, since there seemed little more to be learned here.

NORDOM, PART I

We entered another cubic room, but it was as if Limbo had almost breached its perimeter. It looked like the walls had tried to flow down onto the floor; portions of the floor were so threadbare I convinced myself that I could look outside the dungeon construct.

There was a living occupant in the room. I saw a cube with four arms and two legs; despite its mechanical appearance, the front of the cube was a strange, organic green face, with two wide, elliptical eyes. The cube didn't seem to notice me; it was staring intently at the two crossbows cradled in its hands. A multi-faceted lens dangled from the upper left corner of the cube; it looked like it was designed to pop down over one of the cube's eyes, like a scope.

I attempted a greeting to gets its attention. The cube *chrrruped*, and there was a *klik-klik-klik* as its eyes blinked wildly. The cube whirled to face me, its eyes wide, then flung its two free hands up in the air, as if in surrender… yet its two crossbows had turned in its hands and were now trained on me. In a strange, detached way, I couldn't help but notice that every joint on this creature seemed to be a series of *whrrrring* gears and cogs.

Morte had come up beside me, and commented, "Chief, we're looking at trouble here — this modron's gone rogue."

"Rogue?"

"Yeah," Morte continued, "you see, sometimes modrons get a little chaos in 'em, and when that happens… well, I guess the *best* explanation is that rogue modrons are kind of like… backwards modrons."

"So this is a… backwards modron?"

The modron, which had been silently watching us, suddenly spoke. "Backwards modron = 'Nordom?' " The cube's voice had a metallic, warbling quality to it, as if every word it spoke was jumping off a spring and landing… well, somewhere else. Its mouth formed a bizarre sideways semi-circle, which I took to be a smile. "Gratitudes! Gratefuls!"

"Uh… I'm sorry?"

"Not sorries. Null sorries. Gratitudes! Indentification of self comprosized by doubtings + mullings + analysis." The cube *chrrruped* again, and one of its eye blinked with a *klik* — then after a moment, the other eye *kliked*, as if it didn't want to be left out.

"You're grateful… that I identified you? Aren't you a modron?"

The cube's features steadied themselves, and its mouth formed a flat line. "Indemnification of this unit (was) compromised. Subject — addressee indemnified unit as 'Nordom.' Gratitudes tendered for providing Nordom indemnification."

"It was nothing. Really."

Nordom's eyes *klik* blinked once, twice, three times; each time the black spots in the center of his eyes contracted — by the third blink, they were the size of dots. "Real-eye-zation reached: Nordom null know name of addressee. Indemify yourself."

It wanted me to identify myself. I wished I could find a name as readily as Nordom had, as I answered "I don't really *have* a name, Nordom."

Nordom's eyes widened, the diameter of his 'pupils' growing back to normal size. He *klik* blinked once — but the metal shutters that fell across his eyes didn't rise. After a moment, they begin rattling, as if stuck.

"Uh… Nordom. You can open your eyes now."

There was another *klik* and Nordom's eyes opened. "Not closing eyes: Engaged-ged in Action Clarification for Subject (Unidentified, Nameless). Formulating… submitting query: Are you lost?"

"Lost? What do you mean?"

As Nordom's warbling query ended with the word 'Lost,' a curious crawling sensation wormed through the back of my skull — with it came two certainties, hand in hand: This was not the first time I'd heard this, and that what Nordom was *about* to say to my next question was important. "When you say 'loss,' Nordom, what do you mean?"

"Absence of Name = Absence of Identity = Absence of Purpose = Absence of Place in Multiverse = Null State = Loss. Nordom existed in State, Null, until Subject (Unidentified, Nameless) attached identity to Nordom. Null Identity, Null Purpose, Null Place equates to 'Loss.' "

"Well, I imagine I had a name once, but I forgot it."

"Formulating new query." There was a *tkkk-tkkk-tkkk* as Nordom blinked three times, rapidly — the sound was like the tapping of a hammer on a sheet of tin. "Explain to Nordom why you performed this action: FORGOT-ing."

"It's a side effect of my… condition, I think."

The metal shutters sealed over Nordom's eyes with a *whrrr*, then he rattled to himself for a few moments with his eyes closed. When they *kliked* open, Nordom *chrrruped*. "Query: Memory defective?"

"Yes, you could say that."

"Pre-Conditional Action to clarify Query: Nordom memory space not yet near capacity. Query/Action: In event of 'Yes'return from Subject (Unidentified, Nameless) Nordom can re-remember for you."

A living journal? I replied, "Sure, go ahead, Nordom… anyway, look, I really have to be about my business."

There was a sudden, rapid series of *kliks* and *twangs* from the crossbows in Nordom's hands. His eyes spun and re-focused on the crossbows, holding the right one up closer to his side, as if listening to it.

"Is everything okay?"

One of Nordom's eyes remained on the crossbow, which was *klikking* faintly, and his other eye focused on me. "Query: May these ones join you on your gurney?"

Nordom clearly no longer had a place among the modrons. He could journey with us; at worst, we could leave him in Sigil, which at least would be better than remaining here. I told Nordom, "Sure. We could always use a hand… or four."

Nordom's 'mouth' formed the bizarre semi-circle it did before, and his two crossbows began *klikking* and *twanging* violently, almost vibrating out of his hands. "Gratitudes! Gratefuls! Nordom and crossbows have been attached to a larger community."

I thought to myself, I wouldn't be too grateful just yet. I then introduced Nordrom to the others who had decided to travel with me, indicating their 'designations.'

I got some indication of how Nordom would mix with the group as we were leaving the room. Nordom suddenly spoke, "Attention: Morte. Did you know I have six sides?"

Morte replied, "I noticed. Why don't you go share your insight with the chief, huh?"

I had found a 'portal lens' while we had wandered the cubic rooms. One of the modrons we had met earlier had described its

function. While we were in Rubikon, it could attach to a known, existing portal, permitting access to the portal without traveling to it. In effect, it let us go almost anywhere in Sigil we had been from where we were.

I used it to go back to the Clerk's Ward, and rested for the night.

QUELL

The next day we returned to the Civic Festhall. I asked Splinter to take us to the private sensoriums.

Splinter had told me a mage named Quell might be found there as well, someone who knew some of the history regarding the nighthag Ravel Puzzlewell.

I entered a large room; opening off it were smaller rooms, each with a stone holding an experience. In one of the smaller rooms I glimpsed a figure, dressed in robes.

I went into the small room. I saw an older man chewing on something, muttering softly to himself… after a moment, there was a *crack* as he crunched down on the object in his mouth, then swallowed it. His bushy, brassy white eyebrows furrowed for a moment, rose, and then furrowed again. “Hmmm…”

I approached him, and offered a greeting.

Without so much as looking at me, the man reached into his tunic, pulled out a puce-colored ball, regarded it curiously for a moment, then popped it into his mouth.

Feeling more than a little annoyed, I loudly repeated, “I said, ‘greetings…’ ”

The man frowned and waved me away, then nodded to himself thoughtfully as he savored the flavor of whatever he had put into his mouth.

Even more loudly, I said, “I've… got some questions…”

The man smirked, bit his thumb at me, then abruptly paused… his cheeks swelled and, with a violent gag, he spat up a large black fly which began to buzz around the chamber.

“Minaurosian candies be *damned!*” he cried, shaking his fist at the insect. He whirled on me. “What?!” In a calmer voice I replied.

“I had questions about you…” He popped a small red candy into his mouth.

“Do you always traipse about molesting puissant mages with your ignorant prattle?! Babbling, blathering, chittering, CHATTERING!” The candy shot from his mouth on ‘chattering,’ flying in a high arc to land on the floor with a wet *plip.* He stared at it sadly. I started to say something, but he overrode me.

"It was so *tasty,* too…" he mewled. He suddenly looked up, snarling.

" SORRY?! As you *should* be, you piking dung-beetle! Mages deserve respect, and bashers like you should know their proper place!" He began to jump up and down. "Proper place! Proper place!" I had not been about to apologize when he cut me off. Perhaps ask if he always acted this childish.

"Calm down, I only mean to ask you some questions…"

"I care *not,* you yeasty, beef-witted pig-nut!" His eyes bulged out and he jabbed his finger at me. "Now off with you! OFF! WITH! YOU! And do not return without being prepared to show the proper respect… come bearing tribute — a gift!" He suddenly drew close and whispered from the side of his mouth: "Candies or chocolate would be nice. But nothing common, mind you — bring something *exotic*. Now begone!"

I recalled an item I had seen in Vrischika's Curiosity Shop, a quasit she had claimed to have been polymorphed into chocolate. Despite the inconvenience, I left and purchased it, since the only alternative means I could think of obtaining the information I wanted would be to kidnap Quell and torture it out of him.

Some time later I returned; Quell was still in the private sensorium. I approached him, and told him I had the imported chocolate he wanted.

"Oh?" His demeanor changed in an instant. "Very kind of you, very gentlemanly! May I see?"

He had revealed his weakness to me, and I took advantage of it to repay the trouble he had put me through. It was doubtful he would learn a lesson from what I had in mind, but at least I could get a little revenge. I replied to him, "Actually, no."

He reared back, totally flabbergasted. " WHAT?!"

"I really don't think you deserve it. You've been so rude."

"You… you *what?*" He began hopping about. "Preposterous! Farcical! Ludicrous! *rude* would be polymorphing you into a bowl of Baatorian spice-beans, eating you, and then spreading you about Sigil in foul-smelling little puffs from my bum! *that* would be most rude, I assure you, and I have been *nothing* of the sort!"

"In any case, you're not getting it until you've apologized."

He immediately became quiet, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You would let me *see* this gift, first, at least?"

I gave him a just a peek at the chocolate quasit.

The man's skullcap shot into the air with a resounding *pop,* landing straight back on his head. "Oh… oh my. Is that… is that a…?" He licked his lips, reaching gingerly for the chocolate quasit.

"Oh, no. Apology. Now."

He scrunched his face up, biting his lip as he shook his fists silently. Finally, he stopped, brushed off his clothes, and exhaled slowly. "Very well, sir. I apologize." I noticed he had one of his hands behind his back.

Morte floated around behind Quell, and yelled out, "Hey, chief — he's got his fingers crossed!"

"Silence, you gibbering… oh! I mean, why, I'm doing nothing of the sort!" The mage smiled innocently at me, presenting his hands for my inspection.

"Hmm. All right, here: a chocolate quasit."

He took it from my hands. "Oh… quite rare, these are, and most delectable." He bit off a large piece and tucked what was left into his tunic.

"I had some questions…"

He frowned at me, licking the last of the chocolate off his fingers. "Who told you to bother me with inane questions?!" He stared at me accusingly. "Come now… what is it that you wish to bother me with, or begone!" He fished a malt-ball from his sleeve and ate it.

Back to one of my original questions, although the remote possibility of him not being Quell didn't bear thinking on. "Who are you?"

"I… am Quell." He held up his hand imperiously, as if to stop me from introducing myself. "…and don't bother to introduce yourself: you must be the most insolent, annoying pest this side of Sigil that I've heard so much about!"

"A true *pleasure* to meet you, and thank the Powers it couldn't have waited until you had curled up and died, thereby sparing me the pain of being forced to banter words with you! I would gladly trade my formidable sorcerous powers for but a minor enchantment that would pierce your thick skull and introduce at least the idea of 'manners!' "

I ignored his tirade, and finally spoke the one question I had wanted to ask him. "What do you know of Ravel Puzzlewell?"

At the mention of her name, he swallowed the candy he was sucking on with a loud *gulp,* wincing in pain. "What to tell?! Why tell at all? Such things, such tales are best left in dusty books and in the attics of old men's minds! Evil, evil! Such a

name, such a name… and such dark tales swarm about it, like flies on a corpse."

"Just the same, I need you to tell me." He rolled his eyes, plopping another candy into his mouth.

"She's a night hag, my boy, who came to Sigil… all evil and cackles, she was, alive with her shadow-magic, ready to butt heads with the Lady of Pain. Barmy, barmy barmy old hag… only succeeding in getting herself mazed. She's likely dead, by now."

"Shadow-magic?"

"Yes, yes, yes…" He seemed uneasy about speaking of her. "Ravel dabbled… no, not dabbled, but *excelled* in all schools of magic. She knew shadow magics, magics of illusion and shadow substance, shadows, residues of dead things."

"How might I find her?"

"Why… why would you *ask* such a thing? Are you *mad?* What could you possibly want with such an evil creature?"

"She knows something about my past."

"Doubtful… she was mazed many centuries ago. Gone — penned in the dead-book, she is. And even if she were somewhy, *somehow* still clutching to life with her blackened, bloody talons, what could she *possibly* know about *you?* If she wasn't the spitting image of cackling evil, that is, and was even *willing* to help you…"

I had to find out more about my past, and about my enemy. For that, I needed Ravel. "I'll just have to hope she's alive and will help me."

"By Leshe's six teats and her swollen tummy, what a flickering candle of hope hurled into the howling winds of Pandemonium that is! *Flicker-flicker-whooosh!*

Don't be any more the fool than you need be!"

"I must still seek her out, whether she's dead or alive."

"So if she's dead — as she most likely is — then what is your plan, may I ask? You have everything all figured out, do you? Quell is just blowing words out of his pits, nonsense, nothing! What *do* you plan to do if she's in the dead-book, eh?"

I had no plan beyond finding her, since I had so little information. With nothing to lose, I asked, "What do you think I should do?"

"The first brilliant question you've asked! Me? *I* think you should give up this clueless idea of entering mazes and chatting with night hags and lope back into whatever crypt you crawled

out of! Makes far more sense than fishing for the Lady's anger, it does."

"Can you tell me how to get to her maze?"

"Lunatic! Madman! Addle-cove! Have you not listened to a word I've said?! She's imprisoned in an inter-dimensional *maze* for trying to best the *lady of pain!* That means she's at least ten times as barmy as you, and at least a hundred times more powerful! She's also most likely dead, dead, dead, thrice-dead and… if by some happenstance she isn't… she'll make *you* dead!"

"I understand, but I really need your help. Can you tell me how to reach her or not?"

Quell went quiet, chewing on his lip. After a moment, he fished around in his tunic for a mint, then plopped it into his mouth. "You're serious? Serious now? Why so serious, so Baator-bent, so mule-stubborn?" He sighed. "Well, born Clueless, die Clueless."

"All mazes have portals; this much I *know* to be true. A way in, a way out… this is how the Lady fashions them. I do not know the portal — its location, or even its form — but I am told its key… is a piece of Ravel."

"A piece of Ravel? But if Ravel is MAZED, then how am I supposed to…"

"Then you'll have to make do. Find something that has Ravel's taint in it, mayhap… that is all I know! All! Bother me no more about it! If you want to go pestering someone about something like that, go to the Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lust — one of the ladies there is bound to have met someone or know something that'll help."

Ah, that told me what I needed to know. A piece of Ravel, and I knew where one of Ravel's daughters was to be found, in Fall-From-Grace's establishment. I still needed a portal, however. It was possible, I supposed, to actually build one. But the amount of research involved, the time taken in construction, could fill a mortal man's lifetime. I had hoped to find Ravel, if she still lived, in a matter of days.

SENSORY STONE TRAP

I left Quell, walking about the sensoriums in thought. When I looked up, once again fully taking notice of my surroundings, my steps had taken me to stand in front of a sensory stone. Something about it seemed vaguely familiar, although the inscription at the base, "Week-long hunting trek across the forests of Arborea," didn't seem to promise anything special.

No harm in finding out. I began the sensation.

I was standing in a circle of white tents deep in the woods, somewhere. The trees around me were, by far, the largest I had ever seen. Suddenly, though, there was an odd prickling sensation at the back of my skull…

My surroundings melted into a colorless smear, then slowly resolved into what looked like the interior of a large, gray sphere. Across from me stood a figure almost identical to myself. His eyes flashed in the half-darkness; a mad smile split his features.

"I KNEW you would come…"

"Who are you?"

"Oh, don't you KNOW? Didn't all those FILTHY, LYING, THRICE-BE-DAMNED JOURNALS tell you who I am? Those journals that were so conveniently 'left' for me when I awoke… those journals that called me an INCARNATION! Hah! Burned them ALL, I did, all that I FOUND…"

I felt suddenly ill. The journals, my life, lost not to Pharod, or the Dustmen, but to myself. If only I could learn anything of what they contained. "What did they say, exactly?"

"They spoke LIES, LIES, LIES and nothing more! Filth about a man who forgets himself, other incarnations, of preserving their experiences in writing so later lives could benefit… THIEVES! It's MY life; MINE! YOU ALL WANT TO STEAL MY BODY, AND YOU WON'T HAVE IT!"

"So… you're one of my earlier incarnations?" I had realized why the figure looked like me.

"If you'd put STOCK in such TRASH, yes."

"Where am I?"

"Oh, THIS?" He gestured around him, snickering. "Just a little TRAP, is all. I realized that KILLING you BODY THIEVES might

not be enough… I might have to TRAP you, ENSNARE you for eternity. You may have realized, by now, that there's no way out of this sensory stone… your mind is locked here. You'll note the rather SPARSE surroundings I've left for you… all to help the MADNESS set in good and QUICK while your flesh rots away." He chuckled evilly.

His words gave me pause. I thought to myself I would refer to this incarnation as my 'paranoid' incarnation, to keep him straight from others I had learned about. There was also no reason not to take my time with him.

"I had some questions then…" My earlier incarnation crossed his arms and looked away indignantly. Save for a few more tufts of hair on his head, he was identical to me — even his arms had most of the tattoos mine did.

"Did you create that trapped dodecahedron?"

"I don't know what you're babbling about. Heh. Heh-heh. All right, it WAS me. BRILLIANT, wasn't it? Did you PLAY with it a bit? Lose a FINGER or an EYE, I hope?" He chortled merrily.

"Did you put those tattoos on?"

"No!" He looked distraught. "That one incarnation, that 'PRACTICAL' one, did. I've tried to burn them off, but the skin REGENERATES with the tattoos still on them! I have tried to TEAR them off, stain them with ACID… I HATE them…" Hmm… this insane incarnation was probably the one Aelwyn had described. That would make the practical incarnation he described the one Dak'kon and Morte knew. I wondered why he had tried to destroy the tattoos.

"But… why?" His eyes flicker uncomfortably.

"It is maddening to feel the EYES upon you, reading your BODY like a BOOK…"

"How did you make this trap?"

"Can't tell you that… it'll never be REPLICATED, the magicks used in its creation were LOST, even to me. CLEVER it is, though… one experience HIDDEN beneath the other, so that no FLESH but my OWN would set it off…"

"So there are actually two sensations within this stone?"

"Yes; that of the Arborean hunting trip and that of this TRAP." He looked suddenly wary of me.

I tried to force my way into the other sensation through sheer willpower.

"What… what are you DOING? STOP THAT!"

I ignored him, continuing to force my way into the other sensation. I at last pushed myself into the 'surface' experience

— the Arborean hunt — and ended the sensation before being pulled back into the trap.

DEIONARRA SENSORY STONE

I sampled some of the other stones there, assuming I had already triggered the one trap laid for me. But I did not count on another type of trap, indirectly created by a previous incarnation.

I stood before another sensory stone. The base of this aquatic blue stone had been sculpted so it appeared to have melted into the pedestal it rested upon. A stream of perfect azure tears dripped down the sides, framing the inscription beneath the pedestal: "Longing."

As I placed my hands upon the stone, its surface rippled beneath my touch. A chill washed over my arms, like plunging my hands into a mountain stream.

As I closed my eyes, I blinked and re-opened them — my eyes were brimming with tears, and I was overcome with a terrible sensation of *drowning.* As the sensation rolled through me, there was a stirring in my breast, a *hunger*, poisonous like a serpent, BITING into my heart, until I felt as if my breast would *explode*. I wanted desperately to steady myself, focus, but all that came to my eye was tears…

I raised my hand to wipe away my tears — my hands were soft, delicate woman's hands; they brushed the stray tears from my cheek, and I cupped them in my hands, each of the tears like jewels shimmering in the lights…

The lights were cast by candle-globes that drifted through my sanctuary. I had come to this place to gather my thoughts, to reflect on the past with an eye toward the future, to cleanse the mind before the coming journey. Yet… I could not *concentrate!* My thoughts remained in the present, trapped there by the terrible feeling that writhed in my breast. What did he MEAN…?!

I closed my eyes, but his words echoed in my mind, a hundred, a THOUSAND times. Would he EVER return?! The sound was a whisper, an echo: "Only you. ONLY you." Yet I HESITATED, at the brink of time's door, and he must have thought me AFRAID to go, but I was not, I was AFRAID to stay, and the fear… the serpent writhed in my breast again, its fangs biting into my

heart, filling it to bursting with its *poison.* The tears came again, running down my cheeks in streams, his words echoing…

Echo: "Only you. ONLY you."

My eyes snapped open — it was HIS voice! I whirled, and I gasped; he stood, powerful, in the shadows, and he strode into the light of the drifting candled globes, and I felt the serpent writhing and DYING… he returned! His face, stern, but somewhere, in those features, I could almost see his pleasure at seeing me. After all, he returned for m-

Echo: "Only you can help me, Deionarra. But it was wrong for me to ask you for your help…"

I spoke… Deionarra… yet I, it was ME, gray-skinned like a statue, striding from the light — was I that *scarred?!* My body looked like it had been bathed in knife blades, the wounds, the tattoos, horrible — yet, I saw through DEIONARRA'S EYES, and she saw… how could she SEE me in such a way, she put a CLOAK over my features, she saw me in such *light,* such terrible longing, *light…* for she…how… could she FEEL such…?

I felt my vision tearing, doubling until I was that man striding from the light, it WAS me, but NOT me… I felt myself being TORN; it was Deionarra's experience, but at the same time, it was also *mine,* and I… what…

Echo: "I asked too much of you to accompany me, Deionarra. I have no right to place you in such danger for my sake…"

It was my words, but they were a surgeon's words, chosen with cold skill, without a TRACE of emotion. With every word, I felt myself SNEERING inside, knowing what the (stricken) girl would see next through her (longing-stained) eyes, and who — was I THAT person, that man TWISTING her with my words, not KNOWING how powerful they were to her, like bolts from a ballista, piercing her breast, her… yet, she SAW only RELIEF at my return. How… how could she FEEL… and not know I meant to…?

Echo: "I have come to ask your forgiveness, Deionarra. I shall return to you as soon as I am able —"

My vision tore again, doubling and bleeding, until I was facing myself again, trying desperately to speak, to WARN Deionarra that this was not a man, but a creature that killed for his own needs, he didn't CARE about you, Deionarra, you were a TOOL to him, a TOOL he needed to — but Deionarra spoke, and I couldn't STOP her….

Echo: “I would place myself in a *thousand* dangers, embrace eternity for you, my Love! I am *not* afraid! Listen to me — I will accompany you, though the Planes themselves should bar the way….”

I felt myself shattering, relief and satisfaction — his SATISFACTION at her words, KNOWING she would say them, always KNOWING, and her admission of love was like the slamming of a portcullis across my heart. Trapped. She was mine, but I must be *certain,* so I drove the nail home.

Echo: “The way is dangerous. You will have to be strong… *far* stronger than you are now.”

Swimming through her mind, relief, the wave of relief, the end of longing, yet LONGING for him more at his words, not noticing his manipulations… all I needed to be was strong, and his path would be as one with mine! My thoughts were like fires… for I could be strong, stronger than he knew, I knew no fear, I would DIE for him…!

Echo: “I can be strong, my Love. I will —”

Her words slid off of him like water. The serpent in her breast, the one piercing her heart with its poison had been replaced by this serpent in the flesh. She saw nothing of this, and his next words were planned, carefully, so carefully…

Echo: “I can’t say if we'll succeed, Deionarra, but I'll do my best to protect you. And I will expect nothing less of the same from you. You …”

“… you may be required to make some *sacrifices*.” At that final, terrible, word, I felt myself being TORN apart; he meant her harm… he meant ME harm, for I was HER, and he meant to HURT her, yet I NEEDED her to be harmed, and — I wanted to SCREAM, SCREAM AT HER THAT SHE WAS IN DANGER, RUN, RUN, DEIONARRA, FOR HIS EYES UNMAKE ALL THINGS AND —

Echo: “Of course, my Love. Life is sacrifice. This I have learned.”

I… she… her… I spoke the words, and in it, I felt myself dying inside. I was a spectator, and I had watched a woman die, for the words were a death sentence. Yet, still, still she spoke, unheeding, uncaring….

Echo: “I… left a legacy in my father’s keeping, my Love; ask for the sixth, the third, the Kay and the ‘S.’ In it, I bequeathed everything to you; it’s not much, but with it, I left…”

I… him… a wave of *irritation* washed over me; I clenched my teeth to prevent the irritation from crossing my features.

Must she *always* continue to prattle, even when I did not *prompt* her?! Must she — but no — no, kept the irritation inside, only a trace slipped out…

Echo: "Come now, I cannot DIE, Deionarra. There is no NEED for such foolishness…"

Her… I… she was overcome with FEAR, fear that revolted me, and the fear welled up inside her… I, I as I watched him frown, and I hastened to correct him! He must know the reasons and know the wisdom behind them so he was impressed with my planning! Speak! Speak, before he turned away…

Echo: "I know I often act foolishly, my Love…but you said yourself that you CAN forget things if you are badly hurt. There are things in the legacy that could help you remember should you forget yourself."

She… I coldly regarded her through my eyes, tracing my gaze along her furrowed brow, wrinkled with worry, desperation. She had acted as I *expected*… yet there was something in what she said…

Echo: "Perhaps… yet I hope nothing in this legacy is of *value*…I do not want you to leave any things here in some safe that could be of some use on our journey."

Her illusion was shattered, just for a moment — I watched, silent, as the emotion fell to the ground, splintering like silvered glass. "…of some use…" such a casual statement, yet even Deionarra SAW, and I hoped, just for a moment, I HOPED that she SAW him for what he was… the serpent, the SERPENT……and my hope died, as in Deionnara's eyes, the emotion was rebuilt, the slivers being drawn from the ground, the illusion rebuilt, but the slight sliver of pain remained. He thought I had done something foolish! Yet, I did it for HIM! I must… must make amends, but how?! I must convince him the legacy was unimportant, but it WASN'T, it WASN'T. It was EVERYTHING…

Echo: "The legacy, my Love, it… it just has a few things to help you remem —"

The scythe of words fell on Deionarra, so quick, so sharp, I could not follow its arcing path.

Echo: "A legacy? The things you do, Deionarra… such… *romantic* gestures. No matter…"

No! She… I… Deionarra… I had driven him away again, like I did the night before! I felt the serpent stirring again, reborn, curling around my heart. There was the softest of hisses, yet he did not hear…

Echo: “Would… would you wish to leave a legacy, my Love? For yourself… or for anyone you would want to. It might help you remember if you left something for yourself… or for the ones you loved…”

The word scythe fell again, terrible and swift. Yet this time, the illusion held, and the serpent was cloaked. The serpent was cunning, and it would not reveal itself until it struck.

Echo: “A legacy for myself? Not likely… the things I would leave for myself would not be safe in some advocate’s office, Deionarra. But enough of this… I must leave.”

He was leaving! I must make him remain… and the experience SWIRLED around me, terrible, the spiraling toward the final scene… the QUESTION I… she… wanted to ask, don’t ask it, Deionarra! Don’t ASK IT BE SILENT BE SILENT

Echo: “My Love, before you go…”

HIS ANGER HIS IRRITATION WHAT *NOW* GIRL WHAT *NOW* YOU MEWLING BANSHEE

Echo: “ ‘Before I go?’ It looks like I am in no danger of that. Come, Deionarra, can’t these questions wait for the morn? There is much—”

SHE… I… SHE WAS DESPERATE DROWNING SAY IT SAY IT SAY IT AND SHE… I… SPOKE IT

Echo: “Do you *want* me to come with you, my Love?”

The rush of emotion died in my mind. This was the end. The words he… I… were about to speak were true, but the truth was not the truth she saw. There were no lies, only cold calculations. Of *course* he wanted you to come with him, Deionarra. I understood it clearly, too clearly: He had invested too much in the poor girl to let her go.

Echo: “Of course, Deionarra. I would not have asked you to come with me if I did not want your company. You *know* how I feel about you…”

There was a cold silence in his mind, then a hissing of a thought, a response sharp and deadly, like a dagger blade. The lie came swiftly, unburdened by emotion.

Echo: “I love you, Deionarra.”

And I wanted to SCREAM as I felt the lie wash over her like a RADIANCE, but it was a SHADOW of TRUTH, A SERPENT’S KISS, AND HE MEANT ME HARM AND SHE COULDN’T *SEE* I WANTED TO CALL OUT BUT SHE WAS CRYING WITH JOY EVEN AS — EVEN AS —

I cried with joy… with frustration… with joy… with despair…

The emotion washed over me, like I was drowning, DROWNING, and I needed to speak, I LONGED to speak, but I could not…and…

I screamed, screamed as I tore my hands from the stone, bloody tears rushing from my eyes, running in streams down my arms, my hands, to coat the stone. Blood! Her blood! And… I couldn't WARN her… and I couldn't stop CRYING……

And suddenly, Fall-From-Grace was there, and her touch was gentle like silk, and she brushed the tears from my eyes, even as I felt the screams welling up within me. She *shhhhhhed* me, cradling my face through my bloody tears.

"I… I… can't…. bear it… I… couldn't STOP her, I WANTED to, but I couldn't do *anything*…!"

Fall-From-Grace looked into my eyes, and she nodded sadly, in understanding. "And that is the nature of *longing.* The desire for that which you cannot change or possess." She studied me, withdrawing her hand, now soaked in my blood. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes… yes… I just need a moment…" I noticed Annah was looking at me, her hand half raised, un-moving, as if paralyzed, unsure what to do for me.

"Very well…" Fall-From-Grace stepped back. "We will continue when you are ready."

I took a breath, and tried to collect my thoughts.

As much as I wanted to hurl the memory of the experience from me, I held it fast, because I knew it was important to remember it. It was *me* in that experience… it was Deionarra's experience, but because it was me, my memories flooded me, and I could FEEL both sides at once. Who WAS I? Who was that… that *shade* of me?

I considered leaving the Festhall, but there was a chance there might be something of use locked in some of the other sensory stones in the hall. I would continue even if I encountered another experience like the one I had just finished; perhaps especially because I might encounter another such experience.

MESSAGE FROM RAVEL

The stone I stood before was sickly green, securely fastened to the pedestal it rested upon. The inscription beneath it read “The Messenger.”

As I closed my eyes, I felt the skin along my arms become numb, as if all sensation was being bled from them. Tired… so tired. I tried and blinked, yet the darkness remained; my lids felt soft and sluggish, unresponsive. I was sitting on what felt to be a dirt floor, and around me, was the smell of coppery blood and… herbs? Why was I here? I came here to — what? My memory failed me, but I felt a growing panic beginning to well up within me…

“Ah… awake now, are you? A-questioning all-a-done?” The voice was an old woman's, thick and scratchy, as if it was trying to force its way past a thick layer of dust. Try as I might, I could not open my eyes and see the woman, but I felt a shiver of fear. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. I tried to respond, but all I could manage was a ragged *croak.* I couldn’t feel my tongue… and my eyes? What was wrong with my eyes?

“Now, a-see me you did, a-spoke you did and *poorly,* so the price have you paid, hmnnn?” The crone sounded amused, then her tone dropped sharply. “No more of your questions; now you will LISTEN, and you will a-member my words, for in minding me, you shall *live.*” She hissed. “Nod if you hear me, or ANOTHER bit shall I a-take.” I hesitantly nodded.

“A-member me, traveler. A-member me to a stone, one of the pretty glimmers in your Festive hall — use it like a cup, pour what you *feel* into it, and know this: A-member me to a man who wears a skin of scars n’ tattoos, who seeks memories but has miss-placed them; if smart he is, he will know the knowing of ME. Tell him to find me — or if I am not to be found, tell him to come to the glimmer-stone, and we shall speak, my precious man and I.” The woman paused, then hissed again. “ NOD if you a-hear me, ragged thing!” I hurriedly nodded.

“Ah… pretty, polite to a-listen so long… when he comes to the glimmer-stone, tell the man to speak my *name,* and your

pain shall not have been in vain…" The crone's voice trailed off, as if distracted.

I tried to speak again, but there was only a sick gurgling noise. What happened? Who was this person? Why were I… and I began to feel myself slip into unconsciousness…

"Ravel! Ravel, it is I!" I cried, suddenly regaining some volition. There was a long moment of silence.

"Ahhh… my precious man." There was the slow shuffling of feet, and I *felt* a sharp pinprick in my left eye; I gasped, and suddenly, barely, I could SEE — with my one and only eye. I lay in a gray hut, upon a dirty floor, where blood, my bright-red blood had seeped into the surrounding gray dust. My arms were gone, my legs had been hacked off at the knees. Yet… I felt numbed, and there was no pain… only fear. There was someone above me, someone looking down on me… I looked up.

As I looked up through my bloody, blurred vision, I saw a horrid bluish gray face, grinning with yellowed tusks. "Ravel is *pleased* — a-wondering I was if this messenger would make it, for *weak* he was when his bits were placed on my plate…" She held up a talon in front of me, and impaled on the tip of it was an eyeball — the right one. "Yet to the Festive hall he returned it a-seems, and our time two-together has he shared. And now you have come… success!" If I truly was speaking to Ravel, there was so much I wanted to know.

"Ravel… I have many questions for you."

The crone shook her head, my blurred vision seeing three images at once; her grayish hair was like brambles, drifting down her shoulders. "No, only time for answers does Ravel have, and she has no time to a-waste with your guess-questions. Know this, and in the knowing grow strong: you must FIND me, my precious man." I was already trying to do exactly that.

"But how? I do not know —"

"Tchhh! I am beyond knowing, in a Lady's place. Now shhh-and-a-listen to Ravel, for there is much you must do — to find me, a-three things must you do: find the door, know the key, then *unlock* the key." I stammered out a question, asking about the door.

"The door is not a finished thing… at least, when I last gazed upon it, hmnnn? But in the passing of time, perhaps now well-wrought it is. Go to the place of forges and steel; perhaps there you will find the door that takes one to me…" I knew the key was a piece of her, involved her daughter, but how to unlock it?

"Unlock the key? What do you mean?"

"A-knowing the key is NOT enough, so Ravel thinks. Knowing it and unlocking it, two tasks that must be joined… for at times, a thing knows not its nature… but you are no stranger to that…" Ravel cackled, a long, hideous cry that filled my ears with pain…

"Ravel… how am I talking to you, if this is someone else's experience?"

"Of stones and experiences and telling will Ravel do, but not the telling of how she speaks to you now." She spoke soothingly. "Many are the branchings and twistings of Ravel, and many are her *secrets.* I need you, and I need you knowing of this." I sensed she had given me all the help she considered sufficient, and would share no more. As I started to will myself to end the exeperience, she surprised me by making a final offer.

"Return — I will give what help I can…" Ravel gave a final smile, a horrible, yellow fanged grin; a blackish tongue darted from her lips and lingered at the edge, teasing. "But in the end, only the one question remains…"

"What do you mean, Ravel?"

"Only one question, this I ask…" Ravel's eyes blazed like fires, the red light turning her face blood-red. "What can change the nature of a man?"

At the question, I felt a tremor pass through, like thunder, and I felt myself *burn*… I quickly forced myself from the stone. My vision cleared, until I was standing once again before the hideously green stone…it looked different than before, more… horrid, somehow.

This time I had had enough. I left the Festhall, to find a place to sleep for the night.

FALL-FROM-GRACE, PART II

At an inn, we settled into our now customary sleeping arrangements. I shared a room with Morte. Dak'kon and Annah were together. Fall-From-Grace, who up to now had taken a room by herself, agreed to share it with Nordom.

I went into Fall-From-Grace's room to talk to her, pretending not to hear Morte's comments. Once I entered her room, I tried to ignore Nordom, who was in the corner, talking to his crossbows… or the clicking was his crossbows talking to him, I wasn't quite sure which. I decided to start by asking about something I had wondered since I had met Fall-From-Grace.

"How did you come by the name 'Fall-From-Grace?' "

"The meaning of names is a complicated subject. There is much to be said, and a great deal that is better left unsaid."

"Is Fall-From-Grace your real name?"

"Perhaps." She smiled slightly. "Perhaps not. There are names which are given and names which are earned. Who is to say which is the real one?" The subject of names was something I had given considerable thought to recently. There was almost nothing I wouldn't give to know my first name, that carried by my first incarnation.

"I think the name which is given carries the greater weight."

"That may be so. Why do you think that?"

"Because it is how people perceive you. And their perceptions may outweigh your understanding of yourself."

Grace nodded. "Your point is well-taken." So far she had avoided answering my question.

"So why are you called Fall-From-Grace?"

"Would it matter?" She smiled. "It is a given name," throwing my own answer back at me.

"It matters to me. I would like to know how you came to be called that."

"I have fallen from my people… some would say risen from my people, perhaps, but 'fall' *feels* more right to me." She looked at me questioningly. "Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does. After all, 'fall' carries with it an underlying sense of loss."

Fall-From-Grace was silent for a moment, then nodded thoughtfully. “Yes… perhaps that is why it felt as it did. I… came to terms with the loss long ago, but the name has remained.” Came to terms? Although she obviously had much practice in hiding her emotions, I had thought to detect a trace of… anguish at times behind her words.

“Are you sure you've come to terms with it?”

Fall-From-Grace met my gaze, and I was once again struck by the brilliant shade of blue of her eyes… it was turbulent, like the ocean before a storm. “I had thought so. Yet, in speaking to you, you have caused me to realize some things.” She smiled. “You have my thanks.”

“Well, if you want to talk about it, let me know, all right?”

She nodded. “You are most kind. I will do so.” She was a fiend, what was commonly thought of as evil incarnate, at least by birth. I wondered what she thought of her people.

“And you are a tanar’ri?”

“That is correct. I am a lesser tanar’ri, more specifically, a succubus.” She gave a soft sigh. “I'm afraid we’re a little too common in the Lower Planes and elsewhere for our own good. Most of my race spend their time seducing mortals with various pleasures of the flesh.”

“And you…?”

“I'd like to think that I have distanced myself from that… it is ultimately a trivial and non-productive way for one to spend one’s time here in the multiverse. There is much more to life, wouldn’t you agree?” I was curious how she had accomplished this distancing from her origins.

“How did you end up in Sigil?”

“It is a long tale, and not as interesting as some would make it out to be.” She sighed. “It is intertwined in other tales of war and slavery — it is not a pleasant tale.”

“I would still hear it.”

“Very well… know my past is not a long one, at least by tanar’ri standards. The tanar’ri are a race of the Abyss, a staggered series of Planes filled with chaos and evil hearts. I grew up upon the first plane of the Abyss. My mother was a succubus herself — as I'm sure you are aware, succubi tempt mortals to bring their souls to the Abyss. My mother was among the finest, seducing countless mortal men to their eternal damnation. She now dwells in the Abyss, selling her children into slavery.”

“Your mother sold you into slavery?”

"Yes, she sold me to the baatezu, the blood enemies of the tanar'ri. I think she rather expected that they would kill me — despite her knowledge of other subjects, she knows little of their culture and the delight they take in tormenting others."

"How did you escape?"

"The baatezu are a proud species. The thought a tanar'ri could best them at anything was intolerable to them. So I challenged one of the proudest of the balor to a contest of improvisation, and my tanar'ri nature afforded me an advantage — you see, the tanar'ri are creatures of chaos, wild and unpredictable. The baatezu are more cunning, with orderly hearts. They understand improvisation, but they are not its best practitioners. And thus, I won my freedom — and my path brought me to Sigil." Vrischika, the owner of the Curiosity Shop, had told me a different version of this tale.

"Vrischika doesn't seem to care for you much."

"No, she does not. I do not blame her. Vrischika is a tanar'ri — a fiend, like I, but of a different sort — an alu-fiend. To understand Vrischika, you must understand that tanar'ri culture is chaos, and chaos by nature, cares nothing for fairness or justice. Alu-fiends are viewed as being… extraneous. Without purpose. In many ways, it is worse than a death sentence."

"What was that she was saying about you being a baatezu camp follower?"

"Surely you remember what I told you about my past?" Fall-From-Grace took on a curious expression… she seemed to be studying me for a moment, trying to read my features. She spoke, and her voice was quieter than normal. "Does it matter?" It mattered, but not because I had any remaining doubts about her. I felt concern over her, and wished some idea of what she had endured in the past.

"To me, yes. I'd like to know who I am traveling with."

"In answer to your question, I will tell you this: the baatezu are not human. Their lusts lie in power, not for the flesh, and they care nothing for raping or rutting as humans do when they hold another human prisoner. The torments of the baatezu are far more subtle and far more damaging than *any* violation of the flesh, and the scars last far longer. Is that what you wished to know?"

"Yes. I just wanted to know who it was I was traveling with."

"I thought you knew already." Fall-from-Grace inclined her head slightly. "I was mistaken."

Fall-From-Grace then asked me why I was asking questions about the night-hag Ravel. I smiled slightly, since it wasn't often sides switched and I was the one being interrogated. Ravel was an essential part of the enigma which was my past.

"I intend to seek her out."

Grace raised an eyebrow. "Truly? I find myself compelled to ask why."

"I need information that she has."

"Is this information available from no one else?"

"I suspect that only Ravel possesses the knowledge I need." Grace rested her hand lightly on my arm, and a trace of concern was in her voice when she replied.

"Consider this — if Ravel does indeed exist, then she is extremely powerful and cunning. If a fraction of the stories of her activities are true, then she is a creature that has discovered new meanings of evil. To search for her is not a quest to be undertaken lightly."

"I realize that."

"Well, I have never met a myth. This should be quite the outing." She smiled. "Don't you ever try doing anything boring?"

"I try not to… do you know anything else about Ravel?"

"She was said to be one of the hags of the Gray Waste, and that she was believed to possess powers and a cunning far beyond those of her sisters. She came to Sigil long ago, and in addition to the evils she committed during her stay, rumor has it that her actions threatened the Cage itself. Now she primarily exists only as fiction, a figure in children's stories." Grace paused. "I imagine the Lady of Pain dealt with her as all threats to Sigil are dealt with." I knew Ravel had been mazed. I still didn't know much of her home, though.

"What is the Gray Waste?"

"A blighted plane that lies effectively 'between' Baator and the Abyss. It is frequently a battleground in the Blood War."

"Can you teach me anything of the Art, Grace?" I had been curious of the magic she wielded since I saw it demonstrated in Rubikon.

Fall-From-Grace shook her head slightly. "No, I do not believe so. The Art… and the disciplines I practice are different."

"My 'powers,' as you see them, stem from my faith, not from manipulating energies as the Art does. The Art is a *mechanism* by which the power of the multiverse may be

harnessed, through gestures, rituals and devices. My 'powers' come to me through a different means. My faith and the nature of my belief allows some of the multiverse to reveal itself to me."

"The nature of your belief? What do you believe in?"

"I believe in *Experience*. I believe there is a truth to the multiverse… even if that truth is that there is no truth at all. I believe that the Planes are meant to be experienced, and the more one experiences, in traveling, in joy, in pain, in merriment or in suffering, the more the multiverse reveals itself to you…"

"And the more you are revealed to yourself. My belief in the nature of Experience allows me to…" She paused for a moment, thinking. "I suppose the best explanation is that my faith allows me to *see* things differently. When you see the multiverse in such a way, you learn how to 'change' things — mending wounds, seeing a person's heart, and so on — just by willing them to happen."

"Do you believe in Experience because of what happened to you with the baatezu?"

Fall-From-Grace nodded. "I have thought long upon that, and I believe so, yes." She looked at me questioningly. "I think it is because I am content what I have become, and I do not think it would have been possible without experiencing the multiverse as I did." I believed she was being too modest, implying she was only the product of her experiences.

"I don't think it has anything to do with you experiencing the multiverse… I think it's how you dealt with the experience that was important." Fall-From-Grace nodded slowly at my words; she seemed thoughtful.

"There is truth in what you say."

"I think there would have been many others who, when subjected to the experiences you were, would have crumbled. You *learned* from it, and you became stronger. It shows great strength of will and of character." Fall-From-Grace was looking at me silently.

"…and I admire that about you. Not only the strength, but the ability to see such horrors as a way of becoming a better person takes a strength *few* possess." Fall-From-Grace smiled, then nodded.

"I thank you. Your words are insightful and kind. But I fear that my strength of character is not as strong as it would seem. Yet I try to treat each experience as a new opportunity for learning."

"Do you ever use weapons?"

"No… there is seldom the need, and I find that I cannot bear the touch of cold iron or even steel for long periods of time. In any event, I have a number of… natural defenses that tend to discourage attackers."

"Such as?"

"The kiss of a succubus is lethal to mortals — though they rarely realize the danger until their death is almost upon them." Fall-From-Grace sighed. "I can resort to it when the need arises." I felt relaxed enough with her answers to bring up a question personal to both of us.

"To be honest, I am curious as to your feelings about me."

Grace gave a slight smile. "A lady must have her secrets." She had reached the limits of how close she was willing to allow me. I suspected she had already allowed me closer than she had let anyone else, at least for a long time. I wondered at the reason she kept up her barriers. Partly, it must be scars due to her past. Also the knowledge that her kiss would kill a mortal man, although I wondered if it would affect an immortal…

"I'd like to know your thoughts on my situation, then." She was silent a moment, then replied with a question.

"Do you know anything that might prove helpful?"

"Well, shadows keep coming to kill me — I have a feeling they're following me, but I don't know why."

"Shadows?" Fall-From-Grace was silent for a moment. "Shadows are shades of the dead. They do not tend to hunt, they tend to lie in wait for victims. Curious."

"Well, I think there's someone out to murder me… so much so I built a tomb trap to try and kill them. According to an inscription in the tomb, he's been coming after me… for, well, as long as my incarnations can remember, it seems."

"Then… whoever the killer is, he's lived a very long time to have pursued you so long." She tapped her chin for a moment. "Could the killer be immortal as well?"

"Do you have any idea who or what I might be?"

Grace frowned in thought. "I freely admit that you are something of an enigma." She smiled. "But I find such mysteries intriguing. Shall we attempt to puzzle out your situation?"

"Yes."

"First, while it is possible that you are a tiefling or some rare crossbreed, my guess is that you are human… or were at one time."

"All right… go on."

"Your appearance is approximately a male in his early thirties — the stitching and scar tissue make an exact determination difficult."

"Tell me about it… go on."

"The key to your past is your memory, and it seems that certain locations, events and people trigger seemingly forgotten memories. It would seem to be in your best interests to visit as many locations as possible and speak to as many others as possible… in short, experience your universe as much as possible."

"A Sensates' advice, eh?" Fall-from-Grace replied with a bemused smile.

"I would not advise it if I did not practice it. And if you did not already know it to be true." I was interested in her insights about my companions, and asked her about Morte.

"Morte is most peculiar… I have seen a great deal in my life, but nothing quite like him. He behaves somewhat like a mimir. Granted, there's no denying he is knowledgeable, but he has a certain…" She sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose. "… Baatorian smell about him." She hesitated, as if picking her words carefully. "But he's not a baatezu… at least of any variety I've encountered. The smell alone, however, makes me treat the skull with caution."

"And Morte is a mimir?"

"I don't believe so. Morte lacks the silvery metal that mimirs customarily have. And he seems to have an attitude of his own. Such qualities are not present in conventional mimirs." Grace shrugged slightly. "He *may* be one, but he's unlike any I've ever encountered."

"I don't believe Morte is a mimir, either."

"Perhaps there is some test to verify his authenticity… but I would not do one if you value him as a friend. If you do, then you must accept what he has told you." I still didn't entirely trust Morte. I thought he had my best interests in mind, but what he and I thought of as my best interests didn't necessarily intersect. In addition, he seemed inherently incapable of telling the absolute truth about anything. I asked about Annah next.

"She is strong and capable, and she is quite passionate. I almost wish I had met her long ago and asked her to come to the Brothel… perhaps things might have been different." Grace studied me for a moment. "What do you think of her?" She wasn't the only one with barriers, and I deflected her question.

"I think she doesn't care for you very much."

"I would agree…" Grace smiled. "But I shall not let you dodge my question so easily. What do you think of her?" Grace wouldn't give up, and I felt more comfortable talking to her than anyone I could remem— well, that was a short time, but I needed to talk to someone.

"Well, I think I could fall in love with her." I looked away from Grace as I said this, since she was someone who I could imagine falling in love with as well.

"You might wish to tell her so," she said in a level voice, not acknowledging in any way my discomfort.

"I don't know… I seem to leave this *wreckage* wherever I go, with Deionarra especially, and the lives of others I've touched. It might be best to leave well enough alone."

"Deionarra was the woman in the sensory stone of longing was she not? The one who loved your previous incarnation?" I hesitated to answer Grace. I also felt uncomfortable talking about Deionarra, since I felt much closer to Deionarra, or at least the shade that was all that was left of her, after experiencing the sensory stone.

"Yes, she was. I did something terrible to her, but I know not what."

"To that, I would say this — love may move the Planes themselves when it is strong and true, and there is nothing truer in all of my experiences than the truth one *feels* about another." I decided this was enough talk about the women in my life, and I proceeded to ask her opinion of another of my companions.

"Dak'kon?" Grace raised an eyebrow. "He's most uncommon for a githzerai." I already likely knew what she would say, but I was curious how perceptive she was regarding him.

"Really? In what way?"

"Well, he obeys you. That alone would mark him as a pariah among his people. His entire race were once slaves, and even the *reminder* of servitude to them is… distasteful." I decided to tell her briefly how that came to be.

"Yes, he made a promise to me long ago to serve me until I died. It was after I saved his life, and he did not know that I was immortal."

"Truly? As a githzerai… he must be suffering, indeed. How did you save his life?"

"After he fell from Shra'kt'lor, one of my previous incarnations came to him as he lay dying in Limbo and gave

him the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon, that religious text he has."

"If I may ask, do you know *why* the incarnation saved his life?"

"I think I saved him because of his *karach* blade."

"Curious," said Fall-From-Grace. "You know, a blade that reflects the will of the wielder is a potent weapon if the wielder knows himself."

"Perhaps that is why I saved him, then. Is there anything else you can tell me about Dak'kon?"

"Dak'kon approaches everything in an orderly fashion. Again, most curious for a githzerai. They tend to be unpredictable — they follow their impulses rather than plan." This was something I hadn't consciously noticed before. I wondered if it was a result of his slavery?

"Anything else?"

"He seems a most pious githzerai and a steadfast ally." Finally, I asked her regarding my newest companion, the former modron.

"Nordom is a rogue modron. Even though some traces of chaos have worked their way into his system, he is still an extremely logical, ordered creature. This logic can be of great help in one's travels. Furthermore, if he perceives you as a leader, then he will be unquestioningly loyal." Great, another slave, I thought as she continued.

"Troubles may arise should Nordom be faced with any social situation requiring etiquette… such things are not well understood, even by normal modrons." She paused. "I would offer you some advice concerning Nordom, if you would hear it."

"Of course. What is it?"

"Nordom's existence has been shaken — the more you help him make sense of his situation, his place in this party's hierarchy, and what led him to the state he is now may help him to focus himself better. It is a thought."

I considered her advice, and decided I might as well talk to Nordom now. I was uncomfortable at the thought his nature could force him to unquestioning loyalty to me, but that didn't mean I was going to abandon him. Perhaps in time his individuality would more fully develop, and he would be capable of making his own choices.

Nordom had left the room while I was talking to Grace, although I was sure he was not sensitive enough to have left to give us privacy.

NORDOM, PART II

I went into the hallway, seeing Nordom with Morte. I overhead Morte asking Nordom a question.

"Psst. Hey Nordom. Calculate the easiest way for me to 'snuggle with Annah's pillows,' okay?"

Morte looked innocently at me as I walked over to talk to Nordom, who was staring at his crossbows intently. The crossbows were making a variety of clicking noises, first one, then the other, as if conversing. This curious conversation led me to my first question.

"What are you doing with your crossbows?"

"Attention, Nordom: required!" Nordom turn-swiveled to me, stuttered in mid-path, then re-oriented himself with a *klank.* "Response to Query: Action being performed on crossbows? Submit Request for Clarification: Null crossbows present."

"Oh, really? What do you call those two -klicking- things in your hands?"

"Response: Two -KLICKING- objects held in opposable digits." Nordom raised his riveted fingers and waved the two crossbows, which suddenly started *klikking* and *twanging*, as if in irritation. "Response: Objects = Gear spirits."

"Gear spirits? What do you mean?"

"Query: Define: Gear spirits. Response: Gear spirits."

"Yeah, but what *are* gear spirits?" Morte moved closer to me to get my attention, and spoke up.

"Chief, as much fun as this is, prying a bar stool out of a baatezu's rear might prove more worthwhile than rattling our bone-boxes with this stupid polygon."

"Do *you* know what gear spirits are, Morte?"

"Chief, I have no idea what this cube is rattling on about." I couldn't resist getting a dig in at his expense.

"I thought you were the *expert* on the Planes." I had obviously touched Morte's pride, as he quickly replied.

"Wh — I know more than *you*, you staggering, guttural amnesiac! 'Sides, here's three more bits of knowledge to rattle around in that empty brain-box of yours: one, there are NO experts on the Planes, two, I'm the closest thing to one you're going to find, and three, treat me with some respect. Why? See

the second reason." I looked away from Morte, back to Nordom.

"I'm curious, Nordom… how did you end up in Rubikon?"

Nordom *chrrruped.* "Query requires submitting of Chronology: Shall Nordom submit chronology?"

"Yes, I would like to know."

"Orders received at initiation of Rubikon project: Departure from Plane/Mechanus. Stage First: Arrival at Destination: Plane/Limbo. Stage Second: Parameters dictated by Superior/Creative Director: Shaped matter of Plane (Limbo) to test hypothesis. Rubikon dungeon constructed."

"Superior/ — Director of 'Create' — lost in field test. Chronology disrupted upon achievement of Stage Second, Third Stage (disruption) occurs, not part of project directives."

"What was this field test?"

"Superior/ — Director of 'Create' — field test: Scouting perimeters of Rubikon (Difficult) Dungeon construct to determine: Variances. Many deviations detected: errors considerable." Nordom gave a low whine and shut his eyes with a *klik.* "Director of 'Create' not return from field test."

"What happened to him?"

"Citing/Rubikon Wizard/Megalomaniac Declaration of Freedom: Creative Director encountered Error: Rubikon Wizard. Hypothesis: Director discounted strength of error. Sought to correct aberrance in Rubikon Wizard. Result: Director = Nulled."

"What happened during this third stage?"

"Third Stage, unprecedented: Nordom-specific stage. Hypothesis: Lack of Director, plus Exposure to Plane (chaos) resulted in perspective of /Nordom/ to deviate from norm."

"Nordom, what *are* modrons?"

There was a *klik-klik-klik* as Nordom executed a rapid series of blinks, then he *chrrruped.* "Query: Modron, what is? Define: Modron? I am modron."

"Yes, but what *is* a modron?"

"Query: Modron, Defined: Modron, I am a modron, Answered." The shutters over Nordom's eyes *kliked* close a few times, and his 'eyes' contracted to points. "New Query — "Modron, But what IS? Define: But what is Modron? Modron is Nordom. Backward Nordom = Modron." Morte butted in again, obviously impatient with my questioning.

"Aighhhh! For the sake of the Powers and my sanity, cut it out! He's going to snap a crank if you keep asking him that over and over!"

"Well, I wanted to know the answer, and I was getting it from him."

"Look, chief, NORMAL modrons barely understand anything beyond their basic tasks, and this stupid polygon here is fresh off the Planes to boot. Don't confuse the cube, all right? At least, not while he's armed. You want to know about modrons, ask me, not him."

"All right, Morte… what can you tell me about modrons?"

"It's like this, chief: Modrons are these stupid geometric shapes that clank around on their home plane, Mechanus — they're really tidy, orderly, and they'd like the REST of the multiverse to be, too. That's why they're such pests."

"What's wrong with trying to make the multiverse more orderly?"

"Because, chief, chaos has its place. And if everything was the way a *modron* sees things, it wouldn't be much of a life… at least a life I'd want to live. They just want to make everything *structured*. Yechhhh."

"I agree; chaos has it's place… too much law, and we'd all stagnate. Look, I had some other questions for Nordom…" I wondered about Nordom's plane of origin. "Tell me about Mechanus, Nordom."

Nordom froze, then slowly the gears in his elbows began turning in a slow, hypnotic synchronization. "Define/Query: Mechanus. Plane of Order. Sense. Cause generates Effect. Predictable. Law. Logic. Regimented. Obedience. Gears turn. Mechanus = Nordom Origin. Mechanus = Null Home/Nordom." Morte, stung by my earlier criticism, amplified.

"Mechanus? Boring in every sense of the word, chief. Imagine a plane filled with modrons and big turning gears, and you have the great big BORING plane of Mechanus. Too many laws, too annoying. A place you wouldn't even want to think about, let alone visit." Fall-From-Grace had by now also come out into the hall, and added her knowledge to the conversation.

"Modrons share a common 'energy.' In some ways, this energy links all of them. When one of them dies, the energy is absorbed back into the common pool, and a new modron is created from that energy. When a modron goes… rogue… then he severs the link from his kind and takes a small part of the energy with him." Morte glared at Fall-From-Grace.

"Do you *mind?* I had the answer covered, thank you. *I'm* the font of information here, NOT you, all right?" Fall-From-Grace nodded slightly.

"My apologies, Morte. I did not mean to offend."

I decided to ignore this byplay, since anything I said was likely to only make Morte madder. I instead asked Morte a question.

"So you're saying that Nordom is part of this Source, but he's cut off from it. And when a modron dies, they're re-absorbed. Will Nordom be?" Morte nodded.

"And if he dies, another Nordom is created."

"Eh… no."

"What happens?"

"Well, they'll take his energy, chief, and they'll spit out another modron, but it won't be Nordom, because he's not *really* a modron anymore; he's got too much of the Planes in him. They'll make a non-Nordom replacement."

"So… in turning rogue, he's become… mortal?" Morte paused for a moment before replying.

"Well… yeah, you could put it like that. I mean, if he hadn't had his little rogue rebellion, then he'd be fine… if he died, another modron would pop up just like him. But since he became 'backwards' — well, that part's going to be lost when he dies."

I considered Nordom again. As a modron, and a relatively low level one at that, his knowledge outside Mechanus must be very limited. But even a modron should have heard of some things, and I asked about a subject anyone who knew of other planes should be familiar with. I was curious to hear what he would have to say.

"Nordom, do you know anything about the Blood War?"

"Define: Blood War. The largest conflict in recorded history. Underlying cause of war: ideological differences between baatezu — law and tanar'ri — chaos. Qualifiers of War: Racial Genocide. Prospect of War ending unless every baatezu and/or every tan'nari is exterminated is . 00000000000000000000001%. Primary Combatants: Baatezu, Tanar'ri. Participants in war: All."

"Tell me about the Baatezu."

" AKA, 'Fiends, Devils.' Information incomplete: Generic Descriptor, Baatezu. Inhabitants of the Plane: Baator. Numbers: Incalculable. Primary Attack Form: Dependent on caste. Immunities: Fire, Cold Iron, Poison. Physical Traits: Dependent

on sub-race, majority exhibit resistance to cold/gas. Personality Traits: Lawful, Evil, Manipulative, Efficiency: 73%."

"Tell me about the Tanar'ri."

" AKA, 'Fiends, Demons.' Information incomplete: Generic Descriptor, Tanar'ri. Inhabitants of the Plane: Abyss. Numbers: Incalculable. Primary Attack Form: Depends on category. Immunities: Lightning, Fire non-magic, Poison. Physical Traits: Dependent on sub-race, majority exhibit resistance to cold, magical fire, gas. Personality Traits: Chaotic, Evil, Efficiency: 13%." Enough pointless questions. I had avoided broaching the subject Grace had suggested long enough.

"Uh… how are you doing, Nordom?"

"Introspective cycle commencing." Nordom *kliked* his eyes closed and began to *hummmm*. A few moments later, his eyes *kliked* open.

"Introspective Evaluation: Perceptions have become (1) smaller and (B) louder. Wings have been replaced with arms: reason unknown. Suspicion/hypothesis: not liked wings? Speculation. Nordom was once -ONE- but is now smaller, louder -ONE!- Change has resulted in information-processing difficulties." I decided to see if I could help him by filling the missing hole in his hierarchy.

"Actually, Nordom, Rubikon still has a Director — me."

Nordom stared at me for a moment in silence, then a slow *whrrrr* came from inside his frame and he *kliked*. I wasn't certain, but it sounded like something clicked into place.

"Uh… you all right, Nordom?"

"Status Updated: Creative Director now re-affirmed in hierarchy." To my surprise, some of the warbling had gone out of Nordom's voice; it was more level, more controlled than it was before. The effect was a little unnerving.

"What sorts of tasks did the Creative Director ask you to do?"

Nordom's shutters *whrrred* down over his eyes, as if he was thinking. "Task Routine: Evaluation/Forward-Scout/Tidier: Assigned perimeter of Rubikon project to evaluate, catalogue, tidy, then report. Report includes: In-in-in-tegrity Evaluations/Extermination of Project Errors/Wayward Item Recovery of Un-Tidiness."

"Integrity evaluations?"

"Repeated word choice confirmed (Echo?): Inter-grity evaluation. Evaluation intended to detect flaws in Rubikon project, catalogue them, then /repair/ such flaws. Nature of

Multiverse and nature of Plane: Limbo compromises Rubikon Project."

"How does the, uh, Multiverse… and Limbo… compromise the Project, exactly?"

"Properties of Multiverse: — Cracks — Seals — Cracks Again — Flaws Created. Creates "portals"/conduits in space. Frequency: Pattern Indeterminate. Solution: Unknown." There was a *sssss* as a small trace of steam rose from one of Nordom's vents. "Nordom cannot repair/seal cracks. Current Status: Nordom is limited to: perception of cracks."

"Hold on a minute. You can see 'cracks' in Planes? Portals? How?"

"Ability to detect portals: 80-90% Percent. Maximum Distance of Perception Varies According to Flaw/Mean Distance = Y+78…" A bewildering series of *kliks* came from Nordom, as if a parade of snapping beetles were marching around inside his body. "Nordom must approach within ten feet of portal. Margin of Error: +/- 5th of Foot. Will sound off if near portal." I asked about another of his tasks.

"Extermination of errors?"

Nordom's normal warble dropped to a wavering murmur. "Errors: Many. All constructs in Rubikon Project are in error and exist in dis-obeyance with Creative Director and all personnel of Rubikon project. Order issued: Errors that persist in dis-obeyance are to be rescinded. Obstacle: Nordom not up to specifications of task without suffering Null State."

"So you couldn't stop these rogue constructs by yourself… at least without being torn gear from gear?"

"Affirmatory. Null State counter-productive to completion of task."

"Well, maybe if they'd given you better weapons…"

The crossbows in Nordom's hand began *klikity-klikking* and *ta-wanging* like a pair of strange insects. He listened to them for a moment, then glanced at me. "My crossbows wish to file a query followed by thirty-three pleas for help: 'Ammunition limited by suggestions of creator.' Do you wish to provide new specifications for them?"

"Sure… well, how about something like… I don't know — a pyramid-shaped head, except the head splits into three when it hits something?"

There was a sudden *ping* from Nordom's crossbows and a sheaf of crossbow bolts begin spitting out from their tops, arcing into the air. Two panels opened up on Nordom's sides,

and the crossbow bolts sailed into them with a rattle, one after the other. After streaming out ten or so, the crossbows were silent. I had a strange feeling they were exhausted.

"Maybe they should rest for a while… look, what about the task Wayward Item Recovery?"

"Affirmatory. Items appear in maze that were not present in original design of Rubikon Project. They must be gathered, catalogued, evaluated and stored to prevent interference. Modrons are sent out to retrieve them and secure them."

"Hmmm. Did you find anything during your last trip?"

"Affirmatory."

"Can you give me what you found?"

"Affirmatory." There was a moment of silence, then the shutters slowly descended over Nordom's eyes. There was a *tkk-tkk-tkk* from inside his frame, followed by a *whrrr-klik*. A hatch opened up in Nordom's left side, and he reached over with his free hand and passed off several objects to me, including a stream of copper coins.

"Hmmmm. Nordom… out of curiosity, what sort of duties is the Creative Director responsible for? And how much do you have to obey him?"

A slow *tkkk-tkkk-tkkk* began building in Nordom — like a clock about to explode. "Response: Responsibilities of Director: (A) Integrity-Maintenance of Rubikon Project, (2) Order-Issuance to Rubikon battalion/work group. Period of obeyance in accordance with Nordom obedience: Until Rubikon project halted, Creative Director = Nordom's superior."

"So… you'll do whatever I tell you?"

"Affirmatory"

"Well, then, I have some orders for you…" I had a pretty good idea of how I could help him, if he would obey my orders literally. "Nordom, I want you to focus on clearing out any excess baggage from your memory and use it to improve your logic and introspection routines."

"Affirmatory." There was a moment of silence, then the shutters slowly descended over Nordom's eyes. There was a *tkk-tkk-tkk* from inside his frame, followed by a low grinding noise. The grinding noise turned into a metallic screeching, as panels opened up in Nordom's sides, and… excess "baggage" started flying out, and I tried to catch each piece as it flew out. Nordom settled for a moment, then his eyes *kliked* open. "Order processed." My first order had gone well. Now to try for a greater change.

"Nordom, I order you to listen to me. I have some things I want to say to you."

Nordom froze. "Awaiting. Talk."

"I order you to be MORE than you can be, Nordom. I order you to become stronger, faster and more focused than you've ever been. I KNOW you can do this, because I BELIEVE you can do this."

Nordom stared at me in silence. His crossbows had also fallen still.

"Now repeat the following words: 'I am a strong modron.' 'I am a fast modron.' 'I am a powerful modron.' 'My Creative Director believes in me.' 'I am focused for my Director.' Come on, repeat it."

Nordom spoke, but his voice no longer carried the metallic wobble I heard before: It was flat. Focused. Emotionless. "I am a strong modron. I am a fast modron. I am a powerful modron. My Creative Director believes in me. I am focused for my Director." I focused all my will into what I told him next.

"Now FEEL those words, Nordom. BECOME stronger. BECOME faster. BECOME more powerful. Let that energy within you SURFACE and use it to make you NORDOM."

Nordom continued to stare at me, but I could FEEL my words taking hold — I could feel just a *spark*, just a *spark* of the energy inside of him… if I could coax it out… bring it to the surface…

"Come on, Nordom… Strength. Speed. Power. Focus."

"AFFIRMATORY." The pupils of Nordom's eyes suddenly *kliked* and became brilliant, white dots, like tiny suns. His hands raised above his head, in a curious flying motion, and then settled back to his sides… when they descended, Nordom seemed more… definite. Sharper to my senses, somehow. Something had *changed.* Given time, I doubted Nordom would need my belief to sustain his new persona.

"ORDER PROCESSED." Nordom blinked, and suddenly settled into himself with a *klank.* A small wisp of steam rose from one of his vents; his voice seemed uncharacteristically deep, like he was speaking from within a huge stove, then resumed its normal tone. "O-o-o-rder processed."

Annah came out into the hallway, no doubt wondering what everyone else was doing talking rather than sleeping. As soon as she appeared, Nordom faced her.

"Annah! Morte wants to 'snuggle with your pillows.' "

As Nordom spoke, Morte rolled his eyes and frantically stage-whispered to him, “Shut up! Shut up!!”

“Oh, I'll give yeh somethin’ to snuggle up to! Eejit!” Annah glared at Morte as she spoke.

I suggested it was time everyone got some sleep. I entered my room, and examined the junk I had gotten from Nordom. There was a mirror, which I determined was magical. On one piece of clockwork junk was inscribed symbols, magical symbols. They were similar to the writing on magical scrolls, and I found I could decipher them.

The heavy gear that I had pulled from the twisted mass of junk held the last algebraic ruminations of Enoll Eva, who was apparently the recently disintegrated Creative Director of Rubikon. Inscribed upon this twisted gear was a complex mathematical equation the modron discovered while attempting to calculate the permutations of the Rubikon maze. It was likely the presence of Limbo had an impact on his thoughts, inspiring the narrow-minded modron to think of something both brilliant and extremely dangerous. What was written was close enough to a magical scroll that I found I could copy it to my spell book, and I determined to try this new spell at the first opportunity.

Enoll Eva? I wondered if it meant something backwards, like Nordom? No, nothing.

DODECAHEDRON JOURNAL

The next morning, I knocked on Grace's door to see if she and Nordom were ready to go. Grace assured me they were, and they both joined me in the hall. Nordom suddenly swiveled, and looked at Grace.

"I estimate Fall-From-Grace to be found attractive by the male sex of over 321,423 separate species. Give or take five."

"Oh? Does that include Modrons?" Grace asked.

"I am no longer able to answer that question. I do not know."

I indicated to Nordom he should join the others who were waiting for us in the main room of the inn. We watched Nordom move off down the hall. Grace turned and smiled at me.

"I must confess, Nordom is quite possibly the cutest little rogue modron I have ever encountered."

I had earlier been told a linguist lived in this ward, and I decided to look him up in the faint hope he might be able to help me decipher the journal I had found. I asked around the Clerk's Ward for a while, until I found someone who knew of the linguist, named Finam, and where he lived.

When I found Finam, he was at first unwilling to help, but I convinced him I solely needed his assistance in his professional capacity. I unfolded the dodecahedron journal to a page with writing on it, and asked if he could translate it. He took the unfolded dodecahedron in his hands and examined it closely.

"This language is a long-dead one, known to virtually no-one. I believe my father — a linguist, like myself — knew this language, and may well have been the only man in Sigil at the time that could understand it. I recognize it from his notes, but I cannot translate it." There had to be some way to translate the journal. With enough work perhaps I could do it, if he had retained his father's notes.

"Do you have those notes, still?"

"They'll be of no use to you if you're looking to translate anything… and the few actual books he had pertaining to that language disappeared around the time of his murder, I believe."

"Your father was murdered?"

"Strangled, he was. He had left to tutor someone — he taught various languages to supplement his research income — and was discovered dead in a side-chamber of the Civic Festhall. The killer was never found. This was some… oh… perhaps fifty years ago, now. I was but a child."

"He knew the language, though, and could teach it?"

"Surely he did and could, were he alive today. My father was said to be a great teacher." Finam sighed sadly. "I've his skill with language, but not his patience for others, sadly." He father might not be entirely out of reach, at least not to me.

"Is he… interred at the Mortuary?"

"Why, no… his ashes are kept here." He pointed to a bronze urn sitting atop a cabinet beside a bouquet of purple flowers. "Why?" A wry smile crossed Finam's lips. "A necroscope, are you? Speak with the dead?" He suddenly frowned. "I have no wish to speak of these things any longer. You'll have to excuse me, sir… farewell."

Finam had been joking, but if only he knew. I hadn't tried my abilities on a pile of ashes, but I didn't see why the state of the corpse should matter. Ignoring Finam, I moved over to the urn, blocking sight of it from the rest of the room with my body. I removed the urn's top, and used my Stories-Bones-Tell on the ashes inside.

The ashes seemed to stir faintly as if moved by my breath. A far-away voice whispered up from within the urn. "Why, why have I been summoned to these ashes, cold and grey as the heart of a hag?"

"To answer some questions, spirit…"

"Ask, then, so that I might return to my most quiet thoughts…"

"Who were you?"

"I was Fin, a linguist and scholar. I was murdered — murdered! — by a student of mine… murdered so that I could not teach another the language that I taught him. The tongue of the Uyo, it was, one of the rarest in the multiverse. I knew of none who spoke it, save myself and that one, damnable, murderous student…"

I described to him the writing from the folding dodecahedron, asking if he knew the language.

"I could teach you this language, yes… it would please me to do so, in fact, if only to spite that bloody-handed student of long ago. First, tell me what languages you *do* speak…"

As the spirit spoke to me of the lost language of the Uyo, there was a throbbing sensation in my temples as a memory began to surface… memories of this language. I recalled letters, words, phrases, until — like a Spire-wind blowing away the blanket of poisonous smog over the Great Foundry — the language was once more revealed to me in its entirety.

There was another memory, though, bubbling to the surface… a darker one. Its presence troubled me somehow, filled me with unease and unexplained pangs of guilt…

At last, I recalled Fin Andlye himself. I remembered his gentle voice, his kind manner, his schooling me in the ancient language of the Uyo. I also remembered my scarred, gnarled hand wrapped around his frail throat, crushing his larynx and thus ensuring that the secret contents of my journal — hidden and thrice-trapped in a dodecahedral puzzle-box and penned in the obscure language of the Uyo — would be forever safe from prying eyes…

Another death I was responsible for. There was little I could do now, but that little I owed the spirit to which I was conversing.

"Fin… I must tell you… it was me who murdered you."

The spirit was silent for a time, the ashes rustling softly within their urn. When it spoke once more, its voice was full of sorrow. "But… why… and why would come to me once more? Did you *forget* what you had been taught?"

"No… well, yes. It is difficult to explain, but it must have been a former 'self' of mine that murdered you. Each time I die, I reawaken, as if from long sleep… but having forgotten everything… who I was, or what I'd done…"

"I think I understand… I sense your regret, and would forgive you. May peace be with you, pupil of old, and may you prove kinder in this life than in the one which saw an end to mine…" The spirit, as he must have been in life, was much gentler than I deserved.

"Thanks, Fin. Farewell." I came to myself again, to find Grace spinning an unconvincing tale of temporary paralysis, which failed to explain why the lid was off the urn. No doubt Finam would have called the Harmonium guard if not for her charismatic manner.

I was too full of what I had just learned to pay much attention to Finam, and left his house without a word. I sat down against a wall in an alley adjacent to his house, and pulled out the dodecahedron journal.

I hefted the cold, gray dodecahedron up to examine it carefully, now aware of the various deadly traps it held for the incautious user and how to avoid them entirely. Having learned the dead language of the Uyo, I was at last able to decipher its contents…

The tablet turned out to be a journal of sorts… one kept by some prior incarnation of myself, it would seem — and not an altogether sane one, either. I thought it must have been kept by I what I thought of as the 'paranoid' incarnation. There were only a handful of completely coherent sections, as I browsed through it.

The whispers are not the shadows MOVING. They are SPEAKING PLOTTING TALKING to each other. I can understand some of what they say.

More about the shadows that dogged my steps. I read on in the journal.

The book tells me things, whispers things. It tells me to avoid the ghost girl, avoid her. I DONT KNOW HER and she TORMENTS me.

Deionarra, obviously.

And so I SWALLOWED it, hoping it'd CATCH in my BOWELS. I can make someone REMOVE it when I need to.

I had already removed that ring, hard to believe it had stayed put for fifty years.

I have learned that MY LIFE IS NOT MY OWN. I will NOT allow you have my life…

YOU will have to pull my life from my BROKEN BODY if you want it…

It's YOU who will DIE, if I cannot have it NEITHER will YOU.

YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS TREASON OF FLESH, YOU WILL NOT LIVE TO LIVE MY LIFE.

I had already encountered the results of this paranoid incarnation's life several times, especially the traps he had left for his other 'traitor' selves.

The accursed TATTOOS will not leave my SKIN! I have tried to burn them off of my skin — FAILED, failed! I try and CLOAK myself, but I always feel that people are READING my FLESH, reading me like a BOOK. Whenever they LOOK at me I WANT TO TEAR THEIR EYES OUT pluck them from their sockets and CRUSH THEM BENEATH MY HEEL…

More paranoid ranting.

WHY CAN'T I DREAM?!

I used the Goblet of Semir to force a WAKING DREAM. I saw a HAG. She TEMPTED me, THREATENED me with SHADOWS! I have never SEEN her, but she came when I DREAMT. I must NOT dream again. I must always be AWARE. I DESTROYED THE GOBLET.

She says she is someone of POWER, and that she will HAVE me, will FIND ME. Get away, HAG! Stay FAR from me! Leave me in PEACE! I want NOTHING to do with you!

Her voice reeked of evil's TALONS, talons like SPIDERS, they BURROWED into my gray matter, and I needed her OUT of my MIND. OUT! OUT, hag!

She was a MYTH, a FAIRY TALE who alone CHALLENGED the LADY OF PAIN! How can one FIGHT someone who is a MYTH? I don't have the WEAPONS. I need weapons that will KILL her should she FIND ME. I need a STRATEGY so she cannot defeat me when she COMES FOR ME. I must DEVISE, and THINK — I shall BEAT her.

So Ravel had been trying to reach me for at least fifty years. I hoped she hadn't gotten too impatient.

Fear NAMES. NAMES have power in identity. NAMES can be used as WEAPONS by OTHERS. They are a HOOK that can be used to TRACK YOU FIND YOU HUNT YOU across the Planes. Remain NAMELESS, and you shall be SAFE.

A passage that was the same as one written on the wall in the tomb I found in the Drowned Nations.

I went to the Festhall, looking for the path of my FALSE SELF in its halls. So GLARING was it, that those I did not KNOW, the FALSE ones, WELCOMED me into their confidence, treated me as a FRIEND, showed me MY ROOM, attended to my NEEDS. I had to restrain myself from launching out against them. That would have been premature. First, I needed to PROTECT my IDENTITY. I found one who knew the exclusive language of the Uyo, learned it as I could, then KILLED him. Then I went to the sensorium and prepared to END the matter. Soon, soon…

I already knew of the murder of Fin, and the trapped sensory stone; for that matter, I had found this journal in 'my' room in the Festhall.

There is NOTHING he can do. Memories are GONE, he says, NEVER to return. He says/lies and tells me this is what he told me! LIES! He says my mind is WEAKENING from every death! LIES! He sat there, BETRAYING my CONFIDENCE with every turn.

He says that only after THREE MORE DEATHS, THREE MORE LIVES will I gain the benefit of keeping my memories, but that I, MYSELF, I will DIE when I die. DIE! How can one be immortal and still DIE?! He could not answer, so he was of NO USE. I BUTCHERED

him so that no other incarnation will ever benefit from his USELESSNESS.

Could this explain why I retained my memories even when I died? If so, then in a sense, this 'paranoid' incarnation was responsible for my life.

So the GHASTLY HEADS said:

YOU have been DIVIDED. YOU are ONE of MANY men. (One in MANY MEN?) You bear many NAMES; each has left their scars on your flesh…

LOST ONE
IMMORTAL ONE
INCARNATION'S END
MAN OF A THOUSAND DEATHS
THE ONE DOOMED TO LIFE
RESTLESS ONE
ONE OF MANY
THE ONE WHOM LIFE HOLDS PRISONER
THE BRINGER OF SHADOWS
THE WOUNDED ONE
MISERY-BRINGER
YEMETH

YOU are silvered glass that has CRACKED and the pieces scattered across history

ONLY ONE PIECE is of import. Regain that, and your LIFE will be yours again. There will be a price. This price will buy you a chance. Without the chance, you are DOOMED…

YOU HAVE LOST THAT WHICH IS NEVER MEANT TO BE SEPARATED FROM MAN. YOUR MORTALITY HAS BEEN STRIPPED FROM YOU. LOST. IT EXISTS, BUT YOU MUST FIND IT BEFORE YOUR MIND IS LOST TO YOU AS WELL.

My mortality stripped from me? What could that mean?

A LEGACY, the note read, ' FORGET NOT TO COLLECT YOUR LEGACY,' and a small CODE scratched beside it: 51-AA…

A TRAP, no doubt, set by yet another of my FALSE SELVES. I'll see it DESTROYED, I will.

A legacy. I already knew of another one left by Deionarra. There was still a chance they were available. That was the last coherent journal entry.

ADVOCATE IANNIS

As I put the journal away, I heard a voice yell out at me.

"You'll 'pike off' quick if you know what's good for you. Get out of here!"

I looked up to see a group of what passed for thugs in the Clerk's Ward. I got up, and approached the one who had spoken. The young but well-muscled 'thug' — while certainly well armed and large enough to be dangerous — seemed awfully clean for a typical street tough. He was carrying a massive axe in one hand. As I neared him, he puffed up and scowled at me.

"What are you looking at, 'sod?' 'Pike off,' before I've to 'scrag' you!" Annah looked at the thug in disbelief.

" 'Scrag?!' What in the nine Planes o' Baator are yeh talkin' about, yeh idjit? Scrag's nagged, nipped, yanked by the Hardheads, yeh clueless, addle-coved berk."

He glared daggers at Annah, but said nothing. I couldn't refrain from commenting on his appearance, so different from the thugs I had met, and killed, in the Hive.

"You seem a little well-groomed for a thug."

"Stop shaking your 'bone-box,' leatherhead! This is *my* territory and you'll be leaving it quick, if you don't want my 'bloods' to tear you apart!" Annah snickered, shaking her head.

"Rattle, yeh sod. Rattlin' yer bone-box, it is. I'd so like ta see how long yeh'd last dropped smack in the middle o' the Hive, actin' as yeh are…" Annah turned to me. "C'mon, let's be off. No use wastin' our time with this wee-stemmed basher would-be." The thug's face flushed angrily as he gnashed his teeth in frustration.

"That's it — you've 'piking' asked for it! Get him, bloods!" He raised his axe and leaped to attack.

The fight was extremely short. These 'bloods' had plainly never met any real opposition before, and those who didn't have the sense to flee were soon lying on the ground, spattered with their own gore.

Nordom had stayed in the back during the battle, using his crossbows. Annah, meanwhile, not having the opportunity to try her usual sneak attack from behind had been fighting almost

directly in front of him. After the battle ended Nordom asked a question which had evidently been puzzling him during the fighting.

"Annah, does your tail assist you in maintaining your balance?"

"No, it's fer scratchin' me back, yeh soddin' box!"

"Yes, that is quite logical." Annah only sighed in disgust.

Several people had described a prominent advocate who lived in the ward. He might have information on several legacies I was interested in. Even if he didn't, he undoubtedly would know the other advocates in the ward.

It was simple finding the man's home. We were admitted into the downstairs of a large house. If there were any servants, they were not in evidence; only the advocate himself was there.

This man was dressed in soft blue robes covered with intricate designs; despite their opulence, however, the robes looked wrinkled and worn. I placed the man's age somewhere between middle-age and early sixties… the worry lines made an exact determination difficult. As I entered, the man turned slowly towards me; as he did, I was suddenly struck with the terrible sense that I *knew* this man… or did at one time. The man squinted, as if trying to place me.

"Yes? Is there something that I can help you with?"

"Who are you?"

"I am Iannis." He studied me and frowned. "Were you looking for me?"

"I don't know… what is this place?"

"I am an advocate. These are my offices." Iannis' voice took on an irritated edge. "Do you seek counsel? If not, perhaps you had best test your curiosity elsewhere." Morte broke in with a whisper.

"He's saying he's a lawyer. A counselor. One of those berks who rattle their bone-boxes at the courts." I gave Morte an annoyed look, since I already knew that. Iannis must have overhead Morte, because his frown deepened as he explained his profession.

"An advocate provides counsel, helps others navigate the labyrinths of Sigil's legal system, arranges legacies for citizens to insure that their property is divided as they choose upon death, defend those in Sigil's courts who have been wrongly accused…" He paused. "Did you need help in any of these areas?"

"Actually, I believe you have a legacy for me." I least, I hoped he did. "The legacy is number '51-AA,' I believe."

He looked at me in surprise as I named the legacy. "That is extremely old… are you certain… " A shocked look came upon his face. "I hope that wasn't one of the ones that were burned…"

"How old is it?"

"Well…" Iannis pondered for a moment. "Several decades at least." If it was the one I wanted, it should be more than five decades old. If it still existed.

"You said it might have been burned? What do you mean?"

"Yes, this office was the target of a senseless act of vandalism. A year ago we had a break-in here at the office. The vandal's sole desire seemed to be to burn my legal documentation. Much was lost. A shame, really. Sigil can be quite… wearing on a person's faith…" He seemed to lose an inch as he mentioned Sigil. "The vandal only damaged certain documents. Irreplaceable."

"Can you tell me anything else about the fire?"

"There is nothing much to say about the matter… it was a strange, localized fire. I cannot imagine what would have been precious in the documents that were burned, but someone must have wanted them destroyed. A number of old legacies were burned, and some mementos and other keepsakes of value only to me."

"Any luck in locating the person responsible?"

"No, neither the Harmonium nor the Mercykillers have had any fortune in locating the person responsible."

"Can you check and see if the legacy still exists?" He left me for a few minutes, to look up the number in his records. He returned, to report that fortunately it had not been damaged by the fire.

"Could I collect on it? I am the beneficiary." I signed the papers he put before me, and he gave me the items from the legacy.

"There we are; that should be the last of the paper work. Here are all the items that were in the Vault… one looks like a Foundry receipt, though quite an old one, to be sure. Did the deceased have something commissioned at the Foundry?"

"I don't really know. Perhaps… I'm beginning to think just about anything is possible." I might as well see if he had the other legacy. "I have also come to collect the legacy of a young woman…" He asked me for the number of the legacy.

"The young woman's legacy is '687-KS.' "

He went off to check the number. After a few minutes, he returned, looking dazed.

"That…" His eyes widened. "My *daughter's* legacy… ?!" He looked shocked. "How do you know my daughter?!"

"I'm not certain. There is a sensory stone in the Festhall that held the legacy number."

His eyes blazed with hope. "There is? But in which one…? You must tell me!"

"It is one of the Sensate sensory stones… if you are not a Sensate, you could not gain access."

He thought for a moment. "I must find a way… perhaps they would make an exception for her father…"

"If you wanted, I could speak to someone. I'm certain they would make an exception in your case."

Iannis looked relieved. "If you could, I would be most grateful."

"I will see what can be done. I would know more about Deionarra, though. What was she like?" I had slipped, mentioning his daughter's name when he hadn't told it to me, but he didn't seem to have noticed as he replied.

"Deionarra? She was… young. She had recently joined the Society of Sensation, the Sensates… not an unpleasant faction, but she had also met someone there… she followed him on a journey and there, she died. Her bod…" He looked pained. "I was not even able to recover her body…"

"You say she was a Sensate?"

"Yes… " He became slightly more animated, as if warming himself on a precious memory. "She had joined them because of her gift… and the fact there was so *much* about the multiverse that she wanted to experience. The Sensates lend themselves readily to the sharing of experience and sensation."

"Gift?"

"Oh, yes…" Iannis nodded. "My daughter had the blood of an oracle running in her veins, but it was a unreliable talent. At times, she could predict events before they took place… she had 'Sight;' she could see through time itself, sift through the threads of fate…"

"Do you know where she went on this journey?"

"She never said. I am not certain she was capable of saying where they had gone. It must have been a… terrible place."

"How did she die?"

"I do not know… her body was never recovered." Iannis' face turned blood-red and his hands clenched into fists. "And that is perhaps the most *maddening* part of this misery… I will never know what possessed her to run off like that, what happened to her, nor where her body lies now!"

"Forgive me for asking, but how do you know she's dead if you never saw the body?"

"It is most curious… I went to the Dustmen to see if they had found her body, and they directed me to one of their faction outside the Dustman monument… a Dustman named 'Death-of-Names,' I believe. He is said to be an oracle of sorts, concerning those who have died. He told me my daughter had died."

"Do you know anything about this man she journeyed with?"

"Little. I barely even knew of his existence until she had departed. By then, it was too late to have known him." I barely knew Iannis, but I owed him at least part of the truth.

"I believe the man was me. But I have forgotten much."

"You?!" Iannis looked me up and down. "You are the one… and you say you have *forgotten?!*" Iannis drew himself up; he looked like he was squaring himself for a battle. "You have *forgotten*… but the incident was not so long ago. How can this be?" Not so long ago? More than fifty years in the past. Iannis must be older than I first thought. But I could see how his torment was still fresh to him, and his daughter's loss must still seem like it had happened only yesterday.

"I have a strange condition… I lose myself… for a time. Anything you can tell me about myself or your daughter would be invaluable."

"Countless liars have I known in my tenure in this city." Iannis studied me intently. "You do not strike me as one of them… at least on this matter." He sighed. "If you truly do not remember, then whatever befell you and my daughter on your journey must have left deep scars."

"I am inclined to agree."

"Then I ask your word on this: If your memory returns, and you discover what has happened to my daughter, return to me so that my mind may at last be at rest on this matter."

"I will do that."

I then asked for the legacy Deionarra had left for me. He disappeared for a time.

"All the articles are accounted for…" Iannis was holding two scrolls and a ring in his hands. "I had no idea she had

established a legacy here…" He was staring at the items, almost hypnotized. "Here you are. If I may… may I read them, sir?" I could not deny him. One scroll held a healing enchantment, but the other was a note written by his daughter.

"Of course. Here you are." Iannis took the scroll and studied it. There was a long silence, then he slowly looked up at me.

"You… meant very much to my daughter. She was willing to give up her life for you."

"I believe that is the case." Iannis handed the scroll back to me.

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your kindness."

"It is the least I can do."

I was about to leave, but I had not been fully honest with Iannis. I knew something more about his daughter, and I didn't feel right about leaving without mentioning it. Even though what I had to say could only increase his agony.

"I saw a woman by the name of Deionarra interred in the Mortuary memorial hall. She had become a ghost and claimed that she knew me."

"Wh… what?!" Iannis looked flustered. "Wh… what did you just say?!"

"Her spirit now resides in the memorial hall. I spoke with her for a time, and she seems to be in distress."

"You… spoke to her?!" Iannis seemed to become more confused by the moment. "What distresses her?"

"Me, apparently. She said that she loved me and that I had loved her… and that I had forsaken her."

"I see." Iannis frowned and studied me… his face had become like stone. "You are the one she left Sigil with. The one who led her on the journey that killed her."

I had nothing to say to Iannis' accusation, because I believed it was true. I had led her on a journey, had deliberately manipulated her into coming with me just to use her powers. The fact that I didn't directly remember these events, or that I now felt exquisite anguish over her fate, didn't, couldn't, change what had happened. I left his house without another word.

Once outside, I opened the scroll from Deionarra's Legacy.

My Love,

If you are reading this, then the tragedy I have Seen has come to pass. I have died, and you have remained to suffer the loss.

Know this, my Love… I know why you were forced to shield your feelings from me. You sought to protect me from the terrible burden you carry with you. The distance you kept between us was your way of protecting me, and the brief moments when we were alone and you let your feelings be known, *that* was when I knew you cared for me. Carry no regrets with you, carry no guilt, for I came with you on your haunted journey of my own accord, and no matter how death came for me, I know that you did everything in your power to save me.

Our lives are intertwined my Love, and death shall not be a wall between us.

For my Sight has seen what is to come, only in staccato segments, but it is enough for me to know that we will be separated for a time, but we shall be reconciled again. Thus, do not see my death as a farewell, but only as an interval before we meet again. Carry my ring with you, and these other pieces of me, and think of me. Keep me in your mind and heart, and that will be the beacon that brings us together.

Forever,

Deionarra.

I examined the ring she had left for me, having difficulty seeing it, for my vision was blurred with unshed tears. Some memory from the depths of my mind allowed me to identify it.

The ivory ring radiated a slight glow, and though it was cold to the touch, the chill was strangely comforting. Among the many secrets of the Society of Sensation, I had remembered, was the ability to shape a peculiar stone from Elysium, dubbed "soulstone." While this stone was not as powerful as the sensory stones, the soul stone was said to carry an imprint of the shaper's feelings. Such rings were often used in Sensate marriage ceremonies, each ring inscribed with the feelings of the other.

I put the ring on my finger, resolving to find some way to help Deionarra. The ivory band stretched to fit the width of my finger.

PREPARATIONS

I returned to the Lower Ward, to the Great Foundry, to see what my receipt would get me.

When I gave the receipt to a clerk, he returned with a metal framework, which I unfolded. It was a shimmering piece of filigreed metalwork. It looked almost gauzy, sharp edges protruding from it. It must have been important if I left it behind for myself.

Then it struck me. I must not have been the only incarnation to learn of the importance of the night-hag Ravel. This item had been commissioned by another incarnation, the 'practical' one, and whatever else he may have been, he was extremely clever. It would have been just like him to devise a plan that would take decades to reach fruition. The clerk at the foundry had said the receipt looked like it was a hundred years old, which if he was right implied the project had already been nearly fifty years old when my 'practical' incarnation created the legacy to hold the receipt.

And if this was a means to reach Ravel, it could only be a portal. More, I already knew what the key was to open it, a 'piece of Ravel.' I knew just where to get the key, as well. I folded the portal back together, and stowed it. The Foundry clerk, who had been staring at the portal trying to figure out what it was, would probably never learn anything more. I smiled at the thought; it was just as well for him.

I hurried from the Foundry, headed back to the Clerk's Ward, and the Brothel of Slaking Intellectual Lusts. As we entered, Morte asked Grace a question.

"So, Grace… you uh, have any sisters?"

"Thousands." was her reply.

"Give me a moment to be delirious with joy."

Despite the urgency of my self-imposed errand, I decided to visit Yves the Tale-Chaser first. I was curious if Nordom had any conception of what a tale was, and I asked him to share a story.

"In the 13.7th Revolution, we were required to fix gear and cog sub-set thirty-one in the fifth ring of Mechanus. We removed the obstruction and the gear turned as per its normal

speed. Upon completing our task, we were then returned to the Source." Morte exploded as Nordom finished.

"What in the hells was that, you stupid polygon?! That's the most boring story I ever heard!" Nordom replied in his maddeningly even voice.

"It was what took place. With embellishments, of course."

"Embellishments?" Morte gasped with disbelief.

"I thought the return to Source was a particularly fitting image to close the tale."

Yves smiled. "A fine tale, Nordom. And now I've one for you and your companion… 'Flowers and Sensates' "

"There was a man who read much of flowers — essays, treatises, biological texts, poetry — and as such considered himself well-learned in the way of flowers. One day, he came across a half-blind gardener who tended the Sensate gardens. Who was blind in the way of flowers?"

While Nordom and Yves had been talking, I had been examining the magical mirror which had also been in the 'practical' incarnations legacy. Seeing it, Yves offered to share the tale 'Fanged Mirror of Yehcir-Eya.'

The Fanged Mirrors of Yehcir-Eya were the hope of an empire.

The last Great Matriarch of the Sea of Black Sand, Yehcir-Eya, found herself slowly dying. Surrounded by rival nations that wished to claim her lands for her own, Yehcir-Eya sought to choose one of the Lesser Matriarchs from the surrounding nations and enter into an alliance, preserving her nation against invasion. Yet she knew not which of the Lesser Matriarchs to trust.

Consulting her oracles, she asked them for a means of testing the hearts of the Lesser Matriarchs. They told her to travel to the edges of the Sea of Black Sand — there, where the shifting black sand gave way to slate, she would find what she sought.

The Great Matriarch journeyed many leagues, travelling on foot until she reached the edges of the Great Sea. There, her feet fell upon a great plate of silvered glass the size of a courtyard embedded in the floor of the desert.

Her oracles instructed her to cut the great glass and fashion thirty-three mirrors. These mirrors were sent to the Lesser Matriarchs of the surrounding nations as gifts. The mirrors would test their hearts, the oracles predicted.

No one is certain what happened on that final night, but with every mirror that was delivered, a Lesser Matriarch fell dead. There were wild tales of spectral forms that crawled from the bodies of the Lesser Matriarchs as they gazed upon the mirrors, and the howling cries as they strangled their owners.

In response to the assassination of their leaders, the surrounding nations attacked the nation of Yehcir-Eya and razed it to the ground. The Fanged Mirrors of Yehcir-Eya were scattered and lost.

According to several planar scholars, the Fanged Mirrors had the ability to cause a soul to slip from its owner and take on physical form. Whether it was because the Lesser Matriarchs were consumed by greed and a desire for conquest or whether the great plate of silvered glass found on the edges of the Sea of Black Sand was evil in itself, the mirrors created a vicious reflection of their owners. Their souls took on substance and killed their owners.

When she was done, I asked if she knew if Kesai-Serris was Ravel's daughter. She replied with another tale.

"Once upon a time, an elderly man from the Clerk's Ward vanished, and his body could not be found. To conceal it, the murderer buried beneath him another body in the cemetery. A diviner told of where the body could be found, and so they dug, and uncovered a body, but not that of the elderly man. They were confounded. They were forced to release the man, and it was not until they continued to dig to re-bury the older man's body that they found the second body."

"Sometimes one must dig deeply to find the truth."

I decided to talk directly to Kesai-Serris, who I had previously learned was a daughter of Ravel. I asked her directly if Ravel was in fact her mother. Kesai suddenly bared her teeth, her eyes narrowing to slits of blazing crimson.

"What?! Where'd you hear such a thing?"

"Ecco told me."

"Ridiculous! I think I'd *know* if that wicked hag was my own mother! Now stop bothering me about it."

"Who is your mother, then?"

"I don't know, all right? My father raised me; I never knew her. But do I *look* like a night hag, to you?!" This was too important to spare her feelings, and I was absolutely frank in my response.

"Well… there is the skin… and the eyes… and maybe the teeth, too…"

She refused to even admit the possibility, so I decided to follow another path.

I talked to several of the other prostitutes about Kesai, and finally got a lead that might get Kesai to admit to her parentage. I looked up Kimasxi Adder-Tongue, and braved her rough tongue to ask her some questions.

"I heard you're Kesai-Serris' half-sister. Is that true?"

"Yes, I'm related to that chubby, mewling, hook-nosed day-dreamer. Same father, different mothers. So?"

"I was hoping you could help me find out if Kesai is *really* Ravel's daughter." Kimasxi frowned at me.

"Normally I'd be loathe to help you like this, but I've a feeling it'd upset that flirting, preening doxy good and well. Tell her to ask our father… he's a powerful cambion, so she ought to be able to call to him right then and there. That'll get you your answer."

"Cambion?"

"Yes, *cambion.*" Kimasxi rolled her eyes. "Didn't hear me the first time? Ears all stopped up with last of your brains running out of them?"

"I'm asking what one is…"

"My, you're Clueless." She shook her head sadly, tutting all the while. "A half-fiend, berk; sort of like you… but you're half *dung*, I think. You smell it, at any rate."

"Better than half *you*, Kimasxi."

"You *wish* you were half-Kimasxi, sod… even if you ended up with a goat's bum on your shoulders it'd be better than that scarred-up face of yours."

I hurriedly left, not wishing to endure any more of her verbal flaying, and found Kesai again. Kesai had lost her anger at me, although that wouldn't have been enough to stop me. I shared my new information with her.

"Kesai, I talked to Kimasxi. She told me she's your half-sister, and that Ravel's your mother." Kesai snarled, her eyes blazing with malice.

"That… that… hells, how I loathe that woman! Why would you even *believe* that sort of tripe?"

"She says that you deny it, and in fact may not know it, but that it's true. She said you could ask your father… that he would tell you." Kesai stared at me silently for a time.

"Give me a moment." She turned from me, and began to mutter softly… the air seemed to shimmer around her slightly,

and filled with a coppery smell, like warm blood… I strained, trying to overhear what she was saying.

"Haughazanenel, Banished Prince of Ithag, Marquis of the Bloody Shadow, my father, hear me, for I call upon you…"

"Yes, beloved father, it is I, Kesai-Serris. I would bid you answer me one question, a question I've asked you time and again…"

"Yes, beloved father. I cannot bear to have another ask me and not know myself. You *must* tell me… I have asked for nothing save this. Tell me, I beg of you…"

"Y-yes… yes, beloved father, I understand. I thank you… farewell…"

"Well? What did he have to say?" Kesai remained turned away from me for a moment before finally facing me.

"I did not want to believe that wicked hag may have been my mother. I have lived long, I do not appear to age, and have… disturbing dreams, sometimes." She shuddered. "But still… I do not wish to be the inheritor of the evil she caused, nor draw the Lady's gaze as my mother did. Such evil things she did!"

"Tell me what you know of her, will you?"

"I heard she would pose impossible riddles to people, riddles she could answer but no one else could. She would devour the person if they answered incorrectly, or leave them dangling in her horrifying gardens as examples to all. Those few who somehow escaped she tormented in their dreams, riding them like steeds, breaking their wills and hurling their souls into the colorless oblivion of the Gray Waste…"

"Her magic was said to be beyond anything most had ever seen; it was imagination woven from nightmare and given substance. Stone and solid shapes bent to her will like soft clay; the laws of the Planes would bend beneath her feet and from nothing she could weave illusion… and from illusion, weave realities that could horrify and kill and confound."

"She was a mistress of all the Dark Arts, mistress and master of them all. She hounded a Guvner that dared quote Sigil law to her with shadows that devoured him all but his tongue, his fingers and the flesh of his face. She turned Mercykillers inside out, and shattered buildings of those who displeased her. Terrible, terrible powers were at her command."

"She changed her shape like water, and would use it to destroy some for amusement, and to steal knowledge from

others. She was a monster, like all that has been spawned from the Gray Waste."

"In the end, she threatened to open the Cage and let the fury of the Planes come rolling in, like a wave. Fortunately, she did not succeed. She existed solely to cause malice…"

"I do not know if she is dead… but I know, now, that she was my mother." Kesai's shoulders slumped, and her head hung down. "Oh, that I had tears, so that I could weep with sorrow!" She suddenly fell into my arms, shuddering as if she were wracked with sobs. For a time Kesai simply stood there, clinging to me… but then she pushed away.

"Thank you, but… I'll be fine. I just need some to time think about it, that's all."

"I hate to ask this now… but I need you to give me a piece of yourself, Kesai. The portal key to Ravel's maze is a piece of her, and you are of her blood. It is close enough."

"You intend to seek her out?" Her surprise quickly changed to an expression of wariness. "What… what would you need of me?"

"Your blood, most likely. Only a drop or two, I'm sure."

Kesai nodded, and took a handkerchief and gingerly pricked the tip of her finger on one of her fangs. After letting several drops of blood soak into the cloth, she gave it to me. "You're placing yourself in grave danger, you know. Even if the stories of my mother are greatly exaggerated, she's horribly powerful and completely evil. Good luck."

RAVEL PUZZLEWELL, PART I

I should have waited at least one day to prepare, but I was too close to the answers I had sought. I went into an empty room in the Brothel, and found that touching the portal with the cloth that contained Kesai's blood was enough to activate it. Passing through, we entered the maze where I was certain we would find Ravel.

We appeared in a brambly, bushy labyrinth. Thick bushes formed walls about us, while the ground underneath looked to be formed of thousands of interlaced roots. We soon discovered dangerous living hazards as well. Two creatures attacked us, more plant than animal, although they moved quickly enough, and had two branch-like claws. Fortunately, their fighting ability did not match that of my companions, and they were quickly dispatched.

We moved through the maze, dispatching several more of the creatures. We reached a breach in the wall of brambles to our right, and followed it to another opening. At the opening, we saw a small open area, and a single individual, who I approached.

The plump, hook-nosed crone before me didn't look much like a myth; she was outfitted in a simple (if dirty) brown shirt and leggings, with a number of pouches hanging from her frayed belt. She seemed oblivious to my presence, more concerned with the tangled black roots woven together to form the floor of the maze than anything transpiring around her. I studied her for a moment.

A tangle of jagged gray hair jutted from beneath the crone's hood, spreading down her shoulders like a mass of twisted gray roots. Sickly blue-gray flesh hung in loose folds from her face; her narrow chin, long and sharp, jutted forward in an extreme under-bite, and two filthy yellow canines protruded from her lower jaw, like small tusks.

"Ravel…?"

"Ah… visitors." The crone's voice was thick and scratchy, as if trying to force its way past layers of dust. Her eyes were a dull, bloody red, with black veins running through them like

tree branches. As she gazed at me, a strange crawling sensation passed through me, like snakes burrowing beneath my skin.

"Greetings… Ravel."

"Well, now, my pretty thing, have you returned at last?" Ravel's face split into a grotesque smile, displaying a row of chipped yellowed fangs. "You were a-gone so long, I a-feared you forgot poor, lonely Ravel." Despite the horrid site she presented, I was not repelled as I might have expected. Instead, I had no trouble matching the light tone she had affected.

"How could I forget you, Ravel? I missed you, but you hid yourself in a place that was difficult for me to reach. Come now… did you not wish my company?"

"Ahhh…." Ravel's yellow smile widened, peeling back the folds of her skin, and she cackled softly. "Such *sweet* words… you already are a-knowing the answer of your asking, my precious man. I scattered clues like caltrops, and these were my means of a-guiding you to my garden. I a-feared it was YOU who had forgot *I*."

"I assure you, I did no such thing. I have returned to you at last."

"Have you? But WHAT has returned?" She squinted at me with her black-veined eyes and hissed softly. "Let Ravel see how you've a-fared in this life." She reached out, as if to caress me, and I suddenly noticed her fingers were talons, each fingernail filthy and wickedly sharp. However, I felt no fear at her movement, and let her touch me.

Her ragged talons traced their way across my skin, and in their wake I felt the same strange tingling sensation I felt when Ravel first looked at me. Her eyes dimmed somewhat, and her talons slid gently along the contours of my face, lingering on my scars. I reached out to touch her, feel her features. My hand touched Ravel's cheek as her talons caressed my face, and instinctively, I mirrored her touch — as her talons dragged along my left cheek, my fingers dragged along hers. Her eyes closed, and mine followed. It felt strangely familiar… I felt a memory surfacing.

When my eyes opened, it felt as if all the color had bled out of the trees and the maze; *everything* was a featureless, dusty, dead gray. Ravel's eyes were still closed, but as I watched, they slowly opened and she smiled, a sad, gray smile. I felt words rising to my lips, echoing something I had said in the past, in a different place, on another plane…

"It is said you are the greatest of the Gray Sisters, Ravel. I have traveled far to reach you." She nodded, but slowly, too slowly, as if through a dream. When she spoke, her words were muted, as if being spoken underwater.

"But *why* have you traveled so far? Your need must be great… yet you seem to have brought *nothing* that would interest me. You must PAY for your services…"

"My need is great. My currency is this: a challenge. Perhaps an impossible challenge… one I fear is beyond even *your* abilities…." I echoed the words, and I felt the MANIPULATION, the subtle twist designed to pull Ravel's strings. Her eyes blazed a fiery gray in the dream-memory, and the gray that was eating the landscape seemed to ebb from her features.

"There is NOTHING that is beyond me, foolish man! NOTHING! Pose your challenge, I will hear you!"

"Death waits at the end of life for all men. I need it to wait for me no longer… can you do this, beautiful Ravel?"

The vision cleared, the gray bleeding away from the maze, until the color resumed, my hand still cupping Ravel's cheek. Her eyes were closed, and she sighed. I withdrew it slowly, and after a moment, Ravel's eyes opened, and she gave a rasping hiss.

"Yesssss…" Ravel's finger withdrew, and she looked at me sadly. "Oh, sad, sad, broken half-thing. All-a-pieces." She squinted at me again. "No longer the one Ravel knew are you… are you still a-broken, after all this sad, sad time?"

"Broken? What do you mean?"

"A body you possess, but a body of knowledge you do not?" She pointed her ragged talon at my chest, at my scars. "Many and such, such scars you have, all a-scrawled on your skin. Many tales does your skin tell."

"What tales does my skin tell?"

"Your scars and tattoos shout to me, 'here is a man in confrontation with the world.' " Ravel made a crooning noise, not unlike a dying bird. "Yes, such tales as would shrivel even a *hag's* ears…"

"Tell me these… tales. I would know them."

"The tales are many. They echo of balance imbalanced, trials of war, battles with fiendish elements, and a creature that feeds on others from a-far to sustain itself… and of torments. Such *torments* flesh has never known…"

"Divided in two you were, when your mortality was peeled from you. No longer balanced, much a-broken in the

separation… both a blessing and a mistake… but more mistake than blessing, Ravel thinks."

"You *took* my mortality? How?"

"Forgotten the how of it, I have… have I?" Ravel's gaze dimmed for a moment, the black veins swimming in her eyes. "And even if I a-membered it, I would never do it twice. Not forgotten the moment have I, after the *break*, a-seeing the pain stream from your veins, your cries like a wailing child, every bit of your being filled with *emptiness.* Terrible, even for these eyes."

"So… that's why I feel hollow inside? Because my mortality is gone? Very well… what are these other tales my skin tells?"

"Great, great trials of war… much too much to be born by any, any mortal thing. This war touches ALL, my precious half-man. There is no place where its caress is not felt… did it touch you?" Ravel's voice dropped, almost bitter. "To this, Ravel says 'aye.' "

"That would explain the scars… What about the battles with fiendish elements?"

"Two fiends butt heads…" Ravel sniffed, as if in contempt. "Their tiny heads filled with ideas of how the Planes *should* be, yet can *never* be or the Planes they would be no longer. Such foolishness!"

"A creature that feeds on others from afar?"

"No base hungers do you feel, but far, far more terrible ones boil beneath your skin. And *such* a cost… I know not… knot? Knot the nature nor the cause of these hungers. But heed this: Coming events cast their *shadows* before them, my precious half-man… there is no a-saying of what these events will be, not even with *Ravel's* eyes."

"And these torments… what are these torments you speak of?"

"A lodestone pulls iron to it… and so do you, my precious half-man, but it is not iron, but tormented souls. As others suffer, they are drawn to you, and your path becomes theirs." She made a sweeping gesture. "Do you not see them in the eyes of those that have traveled here with you?"

"My companions? What do you mean?" Although even as I was saying the words, I reflected I had already found troubling sides to all those shared my path.

"Do *you* wish to explain, gith?" Ravel threw a burning glance at Dak'kon, tempered with a fanged smile. "Vows may

prove tighter than any chain, no? The manacles of a race once enslaved, now a slave again?"

Dak'kon was silent, but his blade *shifted* at Ravel's words… the blade darkened, the edge sharpening until the *karach* itself seemed to carry a horrible malevolence about it.

"The cog-box…" Ravel's gaze drifted to Nordom. "Once it knew only *suffering's* definition, but now it feels its sting. There is no room for '2' in the world of 1's and 0's, no place for 'mayhap' in a house of trues and falses, and no 'green with envy' in a black and white world. When it discovers how the planes turn, when it discovers the TRUTH behind loyalty and ill-logic, more torments will it know…"

"The chattering skull…" Ravel didn't bother to even look at Morte, as if he was beneath her notice. "Are the quips enough of a shield for what lies buried inside your brain-box, hmmm? Why speak truths when lies suffice?"

"The Abyssal temptress…" Ravel sneered, her yellowed fangs piercing her purpled lips as she squinted at Fall-From-Grace. "A skin so fair, lips so rich, eyes that might cause you to forget Ravel herself… and yet she suffers, more than any other. When one turns on their nature, many are the torments that arise from such a betrayal."

"Ravel…" Grace replied softly, almost cautiously. "I have come to terms with m—"

"You LIE, succubus!" Ravel's lips peeled back in a snarl. "You LIE! Do not DARE lie to me, when your heart is a BOOK to me! Every word you SPIT *screams* of your torment!"

"Ah…" Ravel gestured at Annah, as if she was for sale upon on auction block. "Look upon the feisty tiefling… such *fiery* hair and voice…" Ravel smiled, baring her rows of yellowed teeth. "Shall I speak of *your* torment, tiefling?" Annah seemed paralyzed, her eyes wide as Ravel turned her black-veined gaze to her. I could see her trembling, her heart beating fast.

"No… no, I shall not speak of it." Ravel's voice dropped, almost in exhaustion, and the smile faded from her face. "Grown tired of cruelties and torments, Ravel has… the world is a-jagged enough place…" She turned to me, her bloody eyes dimmed, and she sighed.

"And my precious, precious half-man… for *you*, the greatest torment of all… life forever-more. Can it be life a-cares for you as Ravel does?" She gnashed her yellowed tusks with a

horrid *clacking* noise. “One so brave, so passionate, so terribly lost, sad, sad.”

“A puzzle of bone and skin were you, always, intriguing, and the most beloved of all who came to me, petitioning, requesting, pleading… pleasing? Pleading for help.” Ravel stared hard at me, her black-veined ember eyes narrowing. “So *hard* to see a-past the scars, to dig up the man-who-once-was underneath…”

“Ravel, can you tell me anything about who I once was?”

“A shadow with substance, a-seeking that which casts the light. I know you more and no… know…” Ravel paused, her eyes dimming. “No more than I know the nature of ANY man. Crossed pasts have we… a man tainted with un-death, still feeling the pangs of separation, and an old withered crone, now all-imprisoned. Seems it that we are a-meeting for the first time? No, no, not, not… knot?” Ravel seemed confused for a moment, then shuddered, as if throwing off a weight. “Knot at all. An echo of a future meeting this is… or a past meeting, depending on which way time is facing.”

“So this… this meeting echoes a meeting in the past?”

“The now and then — very… similar? So tangled the now-and-then is, both mirrored in each other… once and again, you come a-fore me with a problem, to challenge me for a solution to an IMPOSSIBILITY.” Ravel hissed at me, and her eyes blazed. “Beautiful, *ungrateful*, beloved man!”

“What was this impossibility I asked you to solve?” Ravel didn’t seem to have heard me — she still seemed to be in the past, for her eyes dimmed, as if looking far away.

“Such fire in your eyes, enough to stir a Gray Lady’s heart… passion to be free, but when freed, the fire in your eyes guttered out. With the separation, your life has shed all meaning, I fear.” Ravel smiled with her yellowed fangs, then *clicked* them together, as if laughing. “Mayhap you should sit on your hind legs and limp your forepaws — mayhap Ravel will give you a another scrap of knowing.”

“I will not *beg* for your aid, Ravel. I will ask, nothing more.”

“As it ever was for you, you would not bend your knee to me, my precious man.”

“Ravel, I have many questions I wish to ask you…”

“Oh, MORE questions do you have?” Ravel crooned softly, but there was an edge to it, as if she was reprimanding me. “Tchhh-tcchhh. But you have already asked *soooo* many.”

Ravel's black-veined eyes took on a curious gleam. "The time for MY questions is now, half-man. Know this and know Ravel's law: if you do not answer my questions, no more of *your* questions will I answer, my precious man. Step a-lightly with the answers, or the asking shall TEAR you apart…"

"Your rules are fair. Ask your questions, Ravel."

"I would know *why* you traveled here with these others… know not the place they were traveling to?"

"Of course they knew. Who would *not* want to travel here to meet with you, beautiful Ravel? Few opportunities does life provide for such a meeting. They wished to see if the tales of your power and beauty were true… as I knew them to be."

Ravel stared at me for a moment in silence, then her face split into a horrendous grin, her row of yellowed fangs glistening in the faint light of her eyes. "Ahhhh… my precious man, you carry *only* words…" A blackish tongue darted from her purple lips, and rolled around the rim of her mouth, as if in anticipation of a meal. "…but you are WELL armed, indeed…" She nodded slowly, and her grin faded. "And they travel with you willingly?"

"They chose to walk my path with me. As I said, who wouldn't wa—"

"*Chose?* Ahh… a dangerous word. Is it so?" Ravel threw a black-veined glance at Dak'kon, her voice like an arrow.

"Is it *choice,* gith? Is it? Or is it a matter of two skies?" Dak'kon's blade bled into a vicious dead black, mirroring his eyes… and to my surprise, the *karach* edge silently split into jagged fangs. I felt anger; I was the one who had come to question her. I was the one with whom she had made her bargain.

"Ravel… leave him be. *I* will answer your questions, not them." Ravel ignored me.

"What of the cog-box?" Ravel turned to Nordom, sneering. "What does IT know of *choice?*" She snapped her fingers, like the sound of cracking bone. "There is only obey and obey, hmnnn?" Nordom's eyes *kliked* as he regarded her.

"Query: What does Nordom define /choice/? Define: CHOICE: The act of choosing, selection; the right or opportunity to choo —" Ravel cast her gaze on Morte, overriding Nordom's reply.

"Skull, skull, skull…" Ravel clicked her tongue after each word, and her smile widened. "Your expression is difficult to read without the skin wrapping, but I feel your FEAR from here.

Coming here was *not* your choice." Morte replied with his usual jauntiness.

"Well, I didn't have anything BETTER to do except go to one of the Lady's mazes and meet one of the evilest creatures ever to set foot in Sigil, so I said 'sure! Why n-?' " I felt sudden fear. This was not someone to take liberties with. I tried to shut up Morte.

"Morte, be quiet. Ravel, I…"

" 'Be quiet?!' " Morte clacked his teeth. "Like the hells I will! I think we've listened to this crone rattle her bone-box enough, and now she's got some pair of stones, saying I haven't got any skin! So WHAT if I don't?! Obviously the fact SHE has skin has done wonders for HER looks! Does she think I *like* being NAKED all the time? And *another* thing—" Fortunately, Ravel chose to ignore him, moving on to her next victim.

"The succubus…" Ravel squinted. "Did she have a choice? Mayhap in her smooth-skinned mind of soft silks and hard truths, MAYBE choice… tchhh. But no. A Sensate MUST experience all, and to refuse to come — NOT a Sensate would you be. Still no choice!"

"The *tiefling.* The FIERY one." Ravel cackled softly, and her eyes kindled, as if amused. "No choice. At. All. When you *feel* instead of *think,* there is little room for choice." Annah made no response — Ravel's mere presence seemed to have silenced her. Her tail had stopped flicking, however, and her eyes had lost their hard edge. I needed to get Ravel's attention back to me.

"Enough with this, Ravel. What other questions did you have?"

"Shhhhhh… there will be time enough for you to speak, my precious man." Ravel tapped a talon against one of her yellowed tusks. "This question next: What do you feel for these that have come with you? Do they MATTER in your heart?" She smiled, black veins dancing in her eyes. "Or are they TOOLS for your will?"

"They *matter* to me, and that is all the answer you need. Ask your next question."

"Even the gith?" Ravel's ember gaze fell on Dak'kon, then slid off to lock with my eyes again. "Speak what he means to you, and say it true, or *blanketing* my garden he will be."

"He is my ally. I *know* him. He is my friend."

"Ah…" Ravel nodded… then she smiled again, her talons tapping against each other. "What of the skull?" Again, Ravel

didn't bother to look at Morte. "Surely he matters *not* to one such as you! Or… does he?"

"He seems trustworthy enough. He's loyal, and he helped save my life in the Mortuary."

"Curious, curious-er, curious-her…" Ravel smiled. "Quite the puzzle box you are a-shaping up to be. What else lurks in the dark places of your mind?" Ravel's voice took on a threatening weight, and she turned to Fall-From-Grace, her red eyes blazing. "And here is the core of it — the Abyssal temptress… does she rise above the merely carnal to you, or is she something *else* in your eye, hmnnn?"

Grace said nothing. She seemed to be studying Ravel intently… I was suddenly struck with the feeling Grace was sizing up Ravel for weaknesses. Ravel turned back to me, clacking her yellowed tusks, as if in anticipation.

"*Speak*, precious man, but have a care where your words fall."

"I could fall in love with her." The truth, but I knew I was on dangerous ground when I saw how Ravel's gaze slid off me and narrowed on Grace. I had played a dangerous game up to now with the night hag. Dangerous indeed to try to lie to her, but more dangerous to answer the truth to Ravel's next question.

"Hmnnnn…" Ravel turned, clacked her tusks, then glanced at Annah with a sneer. "And what of THIS slip of flesh… the fiendling, the tiefling with the scarlet hair and the fiery passion. What is SHE to you, my precious man?" I had known Annah for too short a time to be sure of my feelings for her. And now I focused my will, made myself *believe* she was no more than a travel companion to me.

"I like her company… I consider her my friend."

Ravel glanced at Annah, then snorted, her black-veined eyes gleaming. "Hmmmmnnn… so be it. My NEXT question is this…" Ravel's voice dropped, almost whispering. And suddenly, I had a strange feeling she did not want to hear the answer. "Why did you wait so long to *return* to me? Ravel grew a-lonely without you, precious man." I felt the moment of peril slip past, and again could comfortably make a flattering answer.

"The way to this place is difficult, beautiful Ravel. Efforts have been made to insure you have little company, and many were the trials I was forced to undertake in order to stand before you. Yet I am glad to see you once again, Ravel — time has not dulled your beauty, I see."

"Your answers…" Ravel's eyes glinted, and her lips peeled back in a grotesque smile. "Your words are *soothing* and have not been heard in such a time… they stir even my black-brambled heart. No matter where your memories be, your charms remain, pretty thing…"

"Nay, it is *your* charms that persist, beautiful Ravel."

"Of charms, enchantments, beguilements… all these Ravel has mastered… yet, there is much it seems you could *teach* I…" She paused in thought for a moment.

"Ahhhh, yessss. The third and last question… is *this*…" As Ravel opened her mouth to speak her final question, I was suddenly gripped with the terrible realization that this final question had murdered many others to whom it had been asked. I knew what it was, and I felt it welling up within me, and I felt compelled to ask it.

Echo: "What can change the nature of a man?"

"I see you have not forgotten…" Ravel smiled, her yellowed fangs gleaming. "What is your answer?" I wasn't sure if it could change the nature of a man, but there was something I had felt almost from the time I first learned of the actions of my previous lives.

"Regret."

"And that is your answer…?" The veins in Ravel's eyes began to shift slightly, and she gave an evil smile. "Be certain before you say."

"It may not be *your* answer, but it is *my* answer."

"And that is all I wished for, my precious man." Ravel's smile relaxed. "A simple answer, and in the end, many are the men have I laid low while they sought MY answer."

"That's it…? I thought…"

Ravel cackled. "Countless times has the question been asked, and not ONCE did the pathetic shells who came a-fore me answered with THEIR answer, but always sought to creep inside my mind and find what *I* thought… tchhh! There is no truth in that." I knew she was lying.

"I… don't believe you. In fact, I don't think they ever could have answered you true, even if it was true to them." Ravel fell suddenly, strangely, silent. She was watching me warily.

"You *never* cared about any answer other than mine. Ever. Did you? Yet still you asked the question, knowing that no matter what the answer they gave, they would die by your hand."

"Of COURSE your answer was the only one I sought, for you were the ONLY reason I asked the question! Did you think I cared for them…? Tchhh! Did you think I even cared a *fraction* of the amount for them that I cared for *you*, my precious man? Answer me that!" It was obvious she already knew her answer. I instead asked another question.

"Why did you make me immortal, Ravel?"

"It's what you *wanted*, seedling, and you asked so sweetly… now how could Ravel say 'no' to one such as you? Immortality was *your* solution and your challenge to me."

"*My* solution? But why?"

"I don't know, seedling. Time has chipped away at my memories as well, it would seem… seam? If you remember, tell me… I'm a-curious myself. It must have been something important… isn't it in the nature of a man to want to live forever?" Dak'kon quietly spoke, replying to her question.

"Only if what lies on the other path carries greater pain." I glanced at him, surprised he had said anything, that turned back to Ravel.

"Ravel… this is VERY important: do you have any idea why I asked you to do it?"

"Death was a thing you needed to dodge. An easy thing to say, mayhap, but to DO, it is not! Immortality, even with its flaws, was the best solution this withered mind could untangle… Lead is not easily a-changed to gold, but it is possible, thought the unwise… un-whys? …Ravel. If water can be drawn from blood, mortality can be taken from a mortal, peeled back like a sticky film…."

"The gulf between man and unman is great. You traveled the distance. I provided the means, but you crossed on your own." Ravel slapped her head and raked her hand through her hair. "Bad Ravel! Mortals are too flawed to be made to last. Still they break! They must be dragged kicking and screaming into an unhealthy new mold."

"Unhealthy…? So the ritual was flawed?"

"Shortcuts must be made, and they can *break* the molded… for it is not always the mold that breaks, but the substance poured within it. Force something into a shape it was not meant to be, and it breaks! I thought the material was of stronger stuff, but you have been broken."

"But I *am* immortal — surely that was a success?"

"You have survived long, immortaled one, but you have become the prey of the creature that is life." She cupped her

hands, then reversed it, forming a canopy with her hands. “The body is but a hut for the soul. But now no one dwells in your hut.”

“What went wrong with the ritual?”

“Puzzle-fleshed broken, beautiful, beautiful mortal man, the ritual was not… knot? Knot… not a finished thing.” Ravel’s brows wrinkled, and her talons picked at her hair, tugging on a lone strand. “The ritual gave you what you wanted, but *great* were the costs… the casting of shadows, the quiet, violent deaths of the mind, and the pain-taking emptiness… these things, a-dangerous were are in such a fragile vessel, no matter how strong a mortal man. Regret them and the ritual do I.”

“Ungrateful shades… but ungrateful without cause? The shades… they hate you, Nameless One, for they are fathered by you, your children, once forsaken, they will never forgive. They will do everything they can to destroy the parent… such is the way of children.”

“How do I father shades… these shadows?”

“You cast shadows on existence, Nameless One. With every death, a shadow arises fresh from the fields of your flesh. They a-wander for a time, but always they a-return, looking to murder their parent. Such is the way of many offspring…” Ravel pursed her lips in disapproval, then suddenly poked me in the chest with a talon. “…and thankless young men such as yourself.” I felt a numbing despair at her words. I had been treating death almost as a game, a brief interlude that was little different from sleep for a mortal man. Instead, each death had consequences. Ravel must not be telling me the whole truth, or had forgotten it. These shadows couldn’t spring solely from my substance, something else was involved. I brought my attention back to her words.

“A thousand deaths, and you recover from each. Not so the mind, the mind is much more fragile. Its scars run deep and do not heal. The brain is encased in a hard bone shell, difficult to breach, but with no defense against that which eats at it from within. You have a whole where… wear? Wear your mortality once lay within your shell.” She made her hand into a fist and shook it. “*Rattle-rattle* goes the hollow man, a baby’s plaything, with naught but a tiny stone that a-clatters and clacks in your frame.”

“Despite these problems, it seems like the ritual worked…”

“Do you doubt Ravel? Of course I delivered on what was promised! Not long after the spell a-drew to a close, I killed you

to see if it had worked. You struggled so, but I kept my grip *tight* and watched you die your first of many deaths." Ravel *clacked* her teeth. "Then was I a-learned in its flaws… Ego enwraps us like a prison. Forgot I did that it ofttimes serves as a shield." Ravel clicked her tongue. "My pretty, pretty thing, there is much wisdom and understanding in the truth that life is a preparation for the ultimate goal: death. Our life is a means by which we learn *how* to die. If we FORGET such things…"

"So that's when you discovered I lost my memories when I died…"

"Yess…" Ravel nodded. "Unfortunate… without the mortality to hold such memories tight, the shell a body is…"

"So you took my mortality from me, Ravel… is it still intact?"

Ravel seemed surprised, then alarmed. "Yes, yes, *yes!* Fear not for a broken mortality… if you are here… hear? Hear a-talking at me, intact your mortality must be. Such a thing can not… knot… not be destroyed as long as you exist. You are an *anchor* of your mortal soul. As long as *you* are intact, so shall it be. Made to last are you…" Ravel smiled and gave a wheezing laugh. "For life swallowed you and spit you out!" Morte couldn't resist that line.

"It swallowed him, but I don't know if he came out of *that* end."

RAVEL PUZZLEWELL, PART II

"Enough of this, Ravel. You took my mortality from me, and it has caused more harm than good. I would take it back now — you have had it overlong, I think."

"Ravel *cannot* give such a thing to you, my precious man, for Ravel has *nothing* to give… I never possessed *you* or your mortality… though I wished to keep them both in my garden as selfish affection's keepsakes, trace the patterns of your flesh… but such things Ravel could not bring herself to do…"

"Why not?"

"Yeh *loved* him!" Annah broke her silence — she sounded astonished. "Yeh *loved* him, yeh did!"

Ravel gave a low, wide smile. "Is that so hard for you to believe, fiendling…?" She cackled softly to herself. "Does Ravel being Ravel, and thus, a myth, not *deserve* to carry such a feeling in her black-brambled heart…?"

"No creature is undeserving of such a feeling, Ravel." Grace spoke softly. "The histories do not paint such a compassionate picture of you, however…"

"Tchhh! The past is past, and histories care little for a-speaking the truth of it…" Ravel frowned, then her voice dropped slightly, threateningly, as she studied Grace. "The feeling *brushed* me, yes… and now *hold* your silvered tongue, Abyssal daughter. I need not your soft words to cloud the air here — the man and I shall speak, and you shall bow out of this. I shall attend to you shortly."

"Enough, Ravel: If you don't have my mortality… where is it?" I had found Ravel, but now I needed to find something else. I had a feeling it was not going to be easy…

"*I* don't know, sweet thing. But if I were you, I'd get it back quick-quick. No telling what horrible things someone could do to you if they held your mortality for RANSOM." Ravel *clicked* her talons together. "It would like be holding someone's sweet, succulent soul… a puppet dancing on someone's strings, would you be, and a most sad puppet, too… two? Know where it is, I do not."

"Hold a moment… you say YOU don't know where my mortality is. Do you know someone who DOES know where it is?" Ravel smiled horridly, her tusks gleaming.

"Clever, clever, *clever* you are… yes, there is ANOTHER who might know the things that Ravel does not…" Ravel's eyes dimmed, as if she stared at something in the distance, and her voice slowed. "A… fair-skinned one… must you ask. An angel, a deva, one who soars on the wings of morning and with his hands, is the architect of horizons. He lies, lies beyond my keeping, in another cage, in another prison… in his knowing is the knowing of what you wish to know. Ask him your questions, listen to his answers, use them as guides."

"Where can I find this angel?"

"In a-leaving this prison, to *another* cursed prison will you arrive… though it may not appear as such to casual glances. Step a-lightly, and find the golden link in the ever-shortening chain. The light shall give the dark of the matter, and new paths shall open to you."

"Delightfully cryptic… though not surprising. Thanks."

Ravel cackled. "Of the past I am not held to particulars… you are fortunate to receive *anything,* o caustic one!"

"Oh, am I? It's just that the chain of who knows what and where they are never seems to be a smooth series of links."

"Ahhh…" Ravel smiled, holding up one of her talons. "And that is why you must keep each link safe, for if they are not smooth now, imagine what the chain will be like when MORE links shatter… time and death are not as *patient* with others as they are with you."

"What are you saying?"

"What if one of your precious links was to *die?* And what if you forgot yourself again? What would you do then? Where would your stolen mortality be, then… it would be LOST forever, for there would be no one left to ASK how to reach it. Tracing your path would become harder… mayhap IMPOSSIBLE…"

"I have some questions about YOU, Ravel… Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"I? Ravel am I, a maker and breaker of puzzles, a solver of what *cannot* be solved, a mind raveling and unraveling until the threads of thought are tied up like knots in a drunken man's hair." Ravel picked at one of her jagged gray hairs, wrapping it around her finger. "It is enough, enough it is."

"But *what* are you? Some have called you are a 'night hag,' whatever that is."

"Night hag…?" Ravel gave a ghastly smile, her yellowed teeth like needles. "I am but a *woman* who has sorely… soarly? Soarly missed her beloved creation. Some have named me crone, gray lady, Yaga sister, night hag — but MYSELF is my name, Ravel, Ravel who puzzles well, providing conundrums to decipher and laying impossibilities low."

"MANY things are said about we gray ladies. A race are we 'night hags,' but an *individual* am I. Some call us evil of Old, stalkers of mortal dreams, the kindly ones, ugly, hideous things whose homes lie in the dark places of men's minds." Ravel's eyes narrowed to reddish sparks. "But that means NOTHING to me… what would one such as YOU call one such as I, pretty thing?" My answer was flattering, but not without truth for all that.

"I find you beautiful, Ravel. Not perhaps to the eye, but your mind seems sharp and vibrant."

"Tchhh! Do you think I care for such truths?! A hex on inner beauty, no matter how long it may last the flesh. Think you ugly am I…?"

"Ravel, you are *not* ugly…"

"Yet ugly I need *not* be, pretty thing. My shape is but water to my will, and I may re-weave its fibers to a more pleasing tapestry…" Ravel glanced at Fall-from-Grace, then smiled and licked her lips. "Yes…"

Ravel had… melted into Fall-From-Grace, taking on her demeanor, her features, her clothes… "Is this shape more pleasing?" Ravel smiled, her teeth now a brilliant, perfect white, the lips with just a *hint* of red. "So cultured and breathtaking?" She motioned me to come closer. "Come, my precious man, *my* lips do not burn with Abyssal torments. Lay your lips upon mine." I looked around me, at my companions, but I was committed. I would do much more in order to reveal the secrets locked in Ravel's mind.

I touched my lips to Ravel's. Despite her new form, her lips were dry, like sand, and as my lips touched, I felt a sharp pin-prick, like kissing a row of barbed seeds. I drew back, licking the blood from my lips. Ravel mirrored my gesture, made even more horrifying in her new form. A drop of my blood remained on the edge of her mouth, and she smiled evilly.

"You… bit me."

"And you bit me, so long ago, 'twas not a kiss then, but a bite to the heart…" Ravel smiled. "Do not be surprised, my precious man. There is no harm done… except, mayhap, to the

ones you travel with." She chuckled lightly, and I suddenly became aware of Grace's and Annah's gaze upon me; outwardly, Grace seemed composed, but I had a strange feeling something had *changed* between the two of us. Annah's eyes had narrowed to slits and her tail was flicking dangerously back and forth.

"Resume your normal shape, Ravel." She flowed back into the form of the hideous night hag.

"A difficult man to please are you! Pah! And wonder do they why there are no males of our kind!"

"What other shapes can you… *have* you turned yourself into?"

"Maybe some, Mebbeth none." Ravel seemed confused by the question. "I've not a-membered such, I've neen, I-vene, Ei-Vene, mayhap? Neither smarta nor Marta… so many threads and branchings, so many Ravels… always stitching and mending and growing are my forms."

"Mebbeth? You were Mebbeth?"

"That may have been one of my names… yes?" Ravel looked more confused, her black-veined eyes becoming misty. "Names are *difficult* to remember…" Her voice became faint. "Like calling across a great distance…"

"Mebbeth was kind to me and helped me, Ravel. That means YOU helped me. I thank you." As I mentioned Mebbeth, all the color seemed to bleed out of Ravel's face until she was gray and ashen — literally. It was like the color just… vanished.

"And who might ye be, hmmmnnn? Does yer path bring you back to Ol' Mebbeth's door, child…?" I echoed the reply I had given to old Mebbeth, only a few days ago.

"Yes, it does… Mebbeth… I, uh, came to learn more of the Art. Can you teach me any more?"

"Pah! I am but a midwife, child, such power as the Art commands is much beyond me…"

"I… don't think so. I think you may have more to teach me than you may realize. Much more."

Then came the question like an echo: "Ye want to learn the Art, ye do? *Why* do ye want to learn such things?"

Echo: "Because I may need it to solve the mystery of who I am."

After a moment, Ravel… Mebbeth… nodded. "The Art may help, it may not, and ye must not rely on it ta solve all o' yer problems." She sighed. "Child, it's most like only going to add

another chip to yer pile o' questions…" She leaned in close. "But if ye'd know, then listen…"

Mebbeth… Ravel… whispered something, and I felt *different,* changed somehow. She told me something horrible, something about how the Planes worked, but my mind had shut out her words, and I could not recall them. Just thinking about them set my heart pounding… Ravel told me something I was not sure *anyone* was ever meant to know. She was watching me, studying me.

"You were Ei-Vene? In the Mortuary? Ei-Vene helped me, Ravel."

Almost unconsciously, Ravel's hand reached out for me, and just for a moment, I swore they were Ei-Vene's talons…

Ravel's left hand plucked a hair from her head, hooked it around her talons, and lightning-like, she jabbed another talon into the skin near one of my scars. It was barely more than a pin-prick, but it looked like she was about to start stitching me up. As it was with Ei-Vene, the sensation was curiously painless, but the thread and stitching seemed to be going much deeper, almost INSIDE me, without actually going beyond the surface of the skin. In moments, Ravel's talons drew back, and I felt… better, stronger. Ravel muttered in Ei-Vene's voice, "Dum zomfie…"

"You were that barmy seamstress in the Buried Village? Marta? Marta was barmy, Ravel, but she was not unkind and not unhelpful. If you were her, then you mean me no harm. I thank you." As I said her name, Ravel's face seemed to *shift*… her blue skin sagged, until she was wearing the same sour, curd-faced expression I saw on Marta's face.

"C'mon, now… don't be all-difficult on Marta…" She raised the talon of her index finger like a scalpel and advanced upon me. "False, nasty, corpse." Ravel's filthy talon jabbed into my abdomen, then pulled it brutally downwards in a saw-like motion… but there was no pain. I watched as my skin peeled slowly back from her touch — no blood issued from the wound. "Look at this, Marta… look at this…"

Ravel's free hand dug into my chest, where she looped my intestines up like yarn, and *plucked* them from my stomach… as she did, my stomach sealed up, as if time was going backwards. Marta… Ravel… held up my intestines like a trophy. "Pretty, pretty, eh, Marta…? One shouldn't swallow such a thing, no, no…"

"Uh… can I have those back, please? I might need them later." Marta… Ravel… nodded slowly.

"As well he should, shouldn't he, Marta? Yes… yes, he should, Marta. Powerful magic to be found the guts of an immortal, yes… not like teethies… or eyes…" Ravel's features shifted, moved, until I could no longer see Marta's face in hers.

"Why did you help me, Ravel?"

"I cannot help BUT help you, my precious man… and that will always be true, no matter how many Ravels there be… on this, they will agree."

"What is this place?" I asked, curious about the brambled garden she had created.

"Once a maze of lifeless stone it was, featureless, but a small black seed was wound in my hair when I came to this place, and it grew strong amongst the stone, flourishing, flourishing, until it ran thick throughout the maze like the unraveling hair of a crone… and so this maze of another becomes MY garden."

"Why were you imprisoned, Ravel?"

"I tried to help a Lady and a-kindly she did not take to it." Fall-From-Grace broke in with a question.

"The Lady of Pain? You tried to *help* her?"

"My offering of help was unwelcome. I *tried* to set her FREE; Sigil is the CAGE, a City of Doors and Locks, is a prison for her. It must be, mustn't it be? Why else call the city of Sigil 'the Cage?' And who is caged? The Lady! A prison so small for one so great. Unjustness, wrongness, intolerable to torment a woman thusly!" Morte added his own comment.

"I think I know who should be in a cage…"

"I tried to break the Cage, let the Lady go free." She made a shooing motion, her expression becoming pained as she scattered invisible birds. "Shoo, shoo, o pained woman, let Sigil's ring be broken so you might fly far from its filthy streets and the stupid dabus that dare not speak in words for fear their thoughts would be overheard!" Ravel's hands slowly stopped their 'shooing' motion, and she gave a slow sigh.

"Before I could finish, I a-found myself here, and my memories none the better for the trip… much has slipped away, much forgotten, yes it was… is? Was?" Ravel smiled with her yellowed teeth. "The dwindling of memory has become a comfort to these old bones. Much have I forgotten… I am fortunate in that I still remember you."

"Ravel, but… WHY did you try to free the *Lady of Pain* from Sigil?"

Ravel's voice dropped, almost reprimanding. "I resent anyone, even a Power, being imprisoned and think that all, everyone …whether stones, shores or quiet bladed ladies… should be FREE. Some have said more fool, I. Why risk such a thing, they said?" I had heard many reasons why Ravel attempted to break the cage that was Sigil, but none had suggested this motive. I wondered if Ravel had always had a capacity for compassion within her blackened soul, or if somehow the improbable love I had awakened inside her had made room for other, kinder, emotions.

"There are some things I cannot bear, and no apologies will I make, my precious half-man — yet… when I cannot let matters well enough alone… many are the lives and dreams that are a-left in pieces on the ground. If I had let you be, mayhap much better would your life be…"

"Is that what you were trying to do when I met you so long ago? Were you trying to set me free?"

"Quite possibly, possibly quite. Life's chains and fear-of-death may have gripped too-tightly on the man I new… knew? Knew then, hmmmm-hmmmm?" Ravel picked at one of her jagged gray hairs, wrapping it around her finger. "No liking for chains and cages does Ravel have…"

"Ah, so I was caged somehow? Or chained? It sounds to me as if your memory is stirring, Ravel…"

"Yess…" Ravel blinked for a moment, and her black-veined eyes became duller, as if she had been struck with a heavy weapon. Her talon tightened around the gray hair, so tightly it looked like she was about to tear it from her skull. "Mayhap… you were a-trapped? But it was no normal cage that held you…"

"Do you have any idea *what* held me?" Ravel looked confused, and her face *twisted*, as if she was fighting an unpleasant thought.

"I have forgotten… mayhap a promise…? No, no…" Her finger tightened around the gray hair, and to my surprise, there was a *snap* like a twig breaking, and Ravel tore the hair from her head. A trickle of black blood wormed from beneath her skull cap, and she hissed in anger.

"Ravel…? Are you all right?"

"No MORE will I say…" Ravel's face wrinkled in pain, the talon covered with the blood-tipped gray hair — even plucked from her head, it looked jagged and stiff. "I do not know, and no

knowing shall I share!" She stared down at the gray hair wrapped around her talon, and then she hissed, and flicked it to me. "Take this, and leave the past where it lies, half-man!" If she could help me no more in the mystery that was my past, perhaps there were others things I could learn from her.

"The legends claim you are a powerful mage, Ravel. Can you teach me some of the Art?"

"Does Ravel know the *Art?!* Is your mind gone a-way of the mortality, a thing all up-and-lost?! I have forgotten more of the Art than *you* shall…" She jabbed me with one of her talons. "Ever." She jabbed me again. "Know."

"Can you teach me some of the Art, then?"

Ravel narrowed her black-veined eyes, studying me. "Mayhap I could be persuaded by one such as you… though any other would NOT have such a chance, nor the boon I offer. Are you a rudimentary student in the arts or am I facing a tried-true-and-tired… attired? A-tired master?"

"A master in the arts, beautiful Ravel."

"Flatterer… and yet your words warm me." Ravel's voice changed, alternating in pitch, like someone plucking a stringed instrument. "Much have I learned tending this garden. Charms and incantations, distilled from the barbs…" She began to hum slightly to herself. "…rhyming, swaying ways of the consonants constants and motions that bring the briars to your aid… listen, the branches will speak of it."

As I closed my eyes and listened, a great trembling passed through me, as if dozens of barbed snakes were burrowing beneath my flesh. Just when I thought the pain was more than I could bear, I suddenly, instinctively, began humming, the same tune that Ravel did… and the pain ebbed. In the distance of the maze I could hear the clicking of the tree creatures, as if responding to my call. Ravel watched me with a curious light in her black-veined eyes.

"Such *power*…" She gave a soft hiss, as if in wonder, and her lips peeled back in a smile. "It a-touches all that hear it. You are powerful, my precious man, so powerful… one day even the Planes may bend to your will…"

"I do not wish such a thing, Ravel. There are many who would walk that path, but not I." Ravel nodded, then nodded at my hand, which to my surprise, held a number of black-barbed seeds.

"Take those seeds. Use them as you will… and to this, I grant an additional boon." She plucked a hair from her head and

took a handful of the seeds, placed them in her palm, then crushed them. A small trail of blackish blood ran from her hand, but when she opened it, there was no wound… only a necklace of black-barbs, woven around a lock of Ravel's gray hair. "Take this; it is *of* me, and it will serve you well." I appreciated all Ravel had done for me, but my quest was still unfinished.

"Thank you for the information you have given me, Ravel; I must leave now."

"Hold…" Ravel's voice dropped to a low hiss, like that of a serpent. "The most important question you have YET to ask, my precious man. Has it occurred to you yet?"

"Yes… I need to know how to leave this place. Do you know the answer to this question?"

"I know the branchings of this place, the twistings and bendings and burrowings. Though there are no leaves here, one may take their leave when they wish it."

"So you DO know how to leave?"

"Wrap your hands about you like branches, make them encircle your chest like a cage. Step from the edge of the maze into the darkness, and into another cage your body shall go — a simple leaving, but there is NO return when that final step is taken, so TAKE heed and TAKE what you need before you take the step. Which edge, which? One of the edges knows, not I. The remembering of which has failed me, and the edges of the maze have had little to say on the matter."

"You've known how to leave? All this time? Then… why don't you leave?"

"Why stay when one can leave is your question to me?" Ravel broke into a crooked smile, displaying a row of fangs. "I turn the question upon its head and send it a-scurrying back to you. The answer lies not in the staying or leaving, but in the causes and reasons, my precious half-man."

"Don't you *want* to leave?"

"It is *a* want, a once-want, but not a now-want, and more and more a not, naught, knotted-want. What do I need that lies beyond my brambled walls? It is a cruel, jagged world beyond the edges of this maze, and Ravel has pulled *enough* of its shards from her skin."

"You have done me a great service, beautiful Ravel. Thank you for hearing my request and sharing your knowledge with me." Ravel gave a crooked smile, all tusks, and then gave a soft cackle.

"Ah… it is *I* who thanks you, my precious man. Long has it been since such sweet flattery has been brought to this maze… I wish to grant you a boon, my songbird." I attempted to speak, but she put out a hand. "Shhh… I would tell you a secret… Close your eyes, and I shall let you see the nature of the multiverse…"

I closed my eyes, and as I did, I felt a sharp, stabbing pain in my right eye. My eye… *one* of my eyes… opened… and I saw Ravel before me, her blood-red eyes gleaming with delight; one of her talons was extended, and was tipped with my blood… and an eyeball. Mine.

"What… did… you… do…?"

"A boon I have granted, songbird. A twist of perception, a tap into the branches of the mind, a tap into the roots of Ravel's knowing have I granted you… a piece of me…" She took the eyeball, and I watched in disgust as she pulled forth a black seed and placed them both in her left palm. With a grotesque smile, she crushed the two of them with a sickening *crunch.* "Ahh…"

"Give… it back…"

"Of course, precious man…" Ravel opened her palm and my eye lay there, seemingly untouched, staring at me. She placed it between her thumb and forefinger, then before I could react, she stabbed it into my empty eye socket.

"Erhhkkkk…"

"A piece of me lies in your good eye, precious man. When you see the Planes through that eye, you will understand MORE than you once did… wiser you will be, and more experience of the Planes and their turnings will you understand… and that is all."

As I was about to utter my farewell, I suddenly felt a crawling sensation in my skull — and I noticed that Ravel's black-veined eyes had taken on a strange, predatory fire.

"You're not going to let me leave, are you Ravel?"

"A perceptive question — yet it not the real question." Ravel's voice took on a strange whisper — very sad, that sent a faint echo through my mind. "The question is do you *wish* to leave me, half-man?"

"Fair Ravel, you helped me when I came to you so long ago, and you have done so again. I shall not forget what you have done. But now I must leave — I have to know more about myself."

There was a terrible *shimmering* in the air around Ravel — and the sound of snapping twigs and cracking tree limbs, and the horrid sound of the trees *bending* and *splintering*… Ravel's lips peeled back and her voice became shrill, like a howling wind.

"What do YOU know of KNOWING, half-man?! KNOW this: KNOW you will stay here until the END DAYS in my brambled garden, never to leave, and you shall LOVE me, as you were MEANT, as you PROMISED!"

"I'm afraid I would be poor company, Ravel. And I cannot stay in any event. I'm afraid you must allow me passage."

"I shall NOT let you leave — I have the power to KEEP you here, and I shall USE it. My black-barbed maze shall NOT allow you to travel beyond it while I LIVE, my precious, *precious* man…"

"Ravel, I don't want to fight you… don't do this. Allow me passage, and I shall return to visit you. You need not be alone in this place."

" RETURN?! RETURN as you CLAIMED you would so LONG AGO?! No… no, you shall not LIE to Ravel TWICE! No more CENTURIES will I WAIT for you…" Ravel's lips peeled back, and her talons seemed to grow, grow into fiendish claws. "Here in my garden you will STAY, and a-wander the Planes you will NO LONGER…!"

"Ravel, calm yourself, there's no NEED for this…"

"You have forgotten your PLACE, HALF-man. Humility is in order."

Some of Ravel's tree-creatures appeared around us, and she herself began chanting a spell. The mystical understanding of her maze Ravel shared with me allowed me to twist some of her servants to my will, setting them against those who remained under Ravel's control. This left me and my companions free to deal with Ravel herself.

I suspected that Ravel had been weakened by her long centuries immured in this black-barbed tomb, for her spells, although potent, could not fully shield her from my magic and my companion's weapons. After a short, brutal fight I stood over Ravel's body. I had searched for a legend, and found a much more complex person than the evil hag of the tales. I also realized my search had become that much more urgent, for if I lost my memories no future incarnation would be able to benefit from Ravel's wisdom.

I also realized something new had entered the maze while we battled Ravel. Shadows surrounded us; somehow my enemy

had found me even here. I quickly snatched a few items from the body before me that might be of use, and then we turned to fight the shadows about us. Even as we slew the formost, more moved in from behind. I led the others in a mad dash to an edge of the maze, and then along the edge until we found the portal Ravel had mentioned, slaying more shadows along the way. We reached the portal, entered, and in an instant were transported somewhere else…

* * *

Ravel's corpse lay upon the ground, surrounded by what looked like a tangle of tree limbs, but which a short time before were woody creatures. A barbed specter glided forward, stopping by the corpse. Not-corpse, as it spoke.

"Off with ya. Dead I am." The specter replied in a booming voice, as though reverberating across the planes.

THEN DEATH'S KINGDOM HAS SEALED ITS GATES TO US BOTH. ARISE, CRONE!

"Sh. Sh. Sh. Away with ya. I'm dead and no traffic with the living may I have."

I CARE LITTLE FOR HOW YOU DIE. BUT I WARN YOU FOR THE LAST TIME, ARISE OR I SHALL SLAY YOU WHERE YOU LIE. The crone that was Ravel staggered to her feet.

"I had thought that dying at his hand would fulfill the requirements the past put forth."

YOU CANNOT HAVE THOUGHT THAT ONE WOULD HAVE A CHANCE. YOU WERE INDULGENT TO LET HIM THINK HE WAS SUCCESSFUL.

"Powerful this incarnation is. And kill me he could of, but for a few tricks which I posses. Fortunate was I."

FORTUNE ABANDONED YOU THE MOMENT I FOUND YOU. HAS YOUR LIFE PREPARED YOU FOR WHAT IS TO COME, HAG?

"I am not afraid. Not of the likes of you, ragged thing. Weak Ravel may be, but a few tricks has Ravel learned over the years. And I have known you would come." Ravel prepared a spell. "Witness Ravel's anger."

Both beings cast spells at one another, but Ravel had already been severely weakened, and soon she slumped to the ground again, this time broken beyond repair.

NO LONGER SHALL YOU TROUBLE EXISTENCE WITH YOUR PRESENCE, WITCH.

UNBROKEN CIRCLE OF ZERTHIMON, PART III

We appeared in a city, obviously not Sigil. There was a grey sky overhead, not the city curving back upon itself. The buildings around us were made from stone and rusted metal, and the dried, cracked mud of the street hinted at infrequent but heavy downpours. We stood next to a closed gate in a wall, and two bored guards were looking at us.

I turned to one of the guards, and asked where we were. He explained we were in Curst, which I recognized as a border town in the Outlands. When I asked what else he could tell me about the city, he replied in a laconic voice.

"We're under lockdown right now because of the plague. Don't know what's causing it, but we're quarantining sections of the town 'til we find out. You want something else?"

"I'd like to see the person in charge."

"What, the Burgher? He's in the administration building. Good luck getting to him, though. He don't see *anyone* these days. His mind's definitely going someplace else…" I wondered if there were any rumors about town of the deva Ravel had mentioned. Something like that would be hard to keep quiet.

"I'm looking for a deva."

"Then you're looking at the wrong end of the Great Ring, berk, because even if there were one here, you'd not be finding it. It'd be locked away like a miser's gold."

I turned away, to look for an inn. It looked to be getting on towards dusk here, and after the events in Ravel's maze I figured we all needed a rest. Fortunately, an inn was only a few steps away, and we soon obtained rooms for the night.

Once in the inn, I visited Dak'kon in his room. He and Annah were sharing it, but she was out scouting Curst, so I was able to talk to him alone.

I was actually more interested in the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon Dak'kon carried. I borrowed it from him, for I was interested in re-reading Zerthimon's sayings for any new

insights. I looked at the stone, ready to unlock one of my previous readings.

As I examined the rings of the Second Circle, I found a strange link in the plate that mentioned the laboring of the Gith people to achieve the Rising. A new circle emerged from the link, and I unlocked it, pulling the plate forth so I could study it. I had, I realized, found a seventh circle, which I began to read.

"*Know* that the Rising of the People against the *illithid* was a thing built upon many turnings. Many were the People who lived and died under time's blade while the Rising was shaped."

"The Rising was shaped upon a slow foundation. Steel was gathered so that it might mark *illithid* flesh. A means of *knowing* the movements of the *illithids* was established, at first weak and confused, then stronger, like a child finding its voice. When the movements were *known*, then the *illithids* were observed. In observing them, their ways of the mind were *known*."

"When the ways of the *illithid* were *known*, many of the People were gathered and taught in secret the means to shield their minds, and the way to harness their will as weapons. They were taught the scripture of steel, and most importantly, they were given the *knowing* of freedom."

"These things were not learned quickly. The *knowing* of much of the ways was slow, and in all these things, time's weight fell upon all. From the *knowing* of one's reflection in a steel blade, to the *knowing* of submerging the will, to the *knowing* of seeing itself. All of these things and more the People built upon. In time, they came to *know* the whole."

Dak'kon had been silently watching me all this time. I told him I had found a seventh circle, and told him what it spoke of.

"It speaks of time as an ally, not as an enemy. It says that patience can sharpen even the smallest of efforts into a weapon that can strike the heart of an empire. Your victories may be small, but over time, a greater victory may be achieved." Dak'kon was silent for a moment, then he spoke.

"Will you make this Circle *known* to me?" I showed him how to unlock the seventh circle. There were also two plates containing githzerai 'spells' for us as well. Dak'kon looked at the plate I gave him, then shifted his gaze to me.

"There is much you have come to *know* of the Circle, and your *knowing* carries a greater weight than mine." Dak'kon matched my gaze. "*Know* that your path is mine, and it shall

come to pass that as you *knew* the Way of Zerthimon from me, I shall *know* the Way of Zerthimon from you."

I studied the circle for more hidden texts. I suddenly become aware of a pattern in the way the links were formed… I hooked my fingers into the sides of the Circle, and unlocked a hidden segment, pulling the plate forth so I could study it.

"*Know* that a mind divided divides the man. The will and the hand must be as one. In *knowing* the self, one becomes strong."

"*Know* that if you *know* a course of action to be true in your heart, do not betray it because the path leads to hardship. *Know* that without suffering, the Rising would have never been, and the People would never have come to *know* themselves."

"*Know* that there is nothing in all the Worlds that can stand against unity. When all *know* a single purpose, when all hands are guided by one will, and all act with the same intent, the Planes themselves may be moved."

"A divided mind is one that does not *know* itself. When it is divided, it cleaves the body in two. When one has a single purpose, the body is strengthened. In *knowing* the self, grow strong."

I spoke to Dak'kon of what I had learned in this eighth circle.

"It speaks of focus and discipline… about how not *knowing* oneself can physically divide the man. It also speaks of the weaknesses that division causes. It seems to me that it tells one to not only *know* themselves and take strength from that, but that your focus can reveal weaknesses in your enemy." I then showed Dak'kon how to unlock the eighth circle, and again gained two plates with 'spells.' I looked into Dak'kon's black eyes.

"There are two plates here… we should both study them, you and I. I think when you *know* the Eighth Circle, perhaps then you will *know* Zerthimon's heart when he made the Pronouncement of Two Skies. His words were not those of the *illithids*, but of the People."

Dak'kon stared at the plates, his eyes flickering over the geometries upon them, then looked up and matched my gaze. His blade bent, shifted, until the shimmering I noticed before had become a silver glow. He seemed *stronger* somehow.

"*Know* that when death comes for you, *know* that I shall meet its blade with mine. *Know* that when all dies around you, *know* I shall live for your sake."

“When we die, Dak'kon, it shall be the same death. It shall be the Pronouncement of Two Deaths As One.”

My discovery of the Eighth Circle brought Dak'kon to a greater understanding of himself and removed the *doubt* that had afflicted him. I literally watched him shed the coat of years when I told him of the Eighth Circle. In hearing my words, Dak'kon made the Pronouncement of Two Deaths As One, where he swore that when death came for me, he would meet its blade with his.

I felt as though I had finally accomplished something worthwhile in this incarnation. Dak'kon was no longer the tormented slave; although still bound by his words, I believe he now thought of himself as my companion, and that he would have continued to travel with me even without his oath.

CURST

Annah came into the room. She had finished wandering about Curst picking up local information. I thought to see a smile begin to form on her lips as she saw me in her room, but her eyes traveled to Dak'kon and a frown turned down her mouth instead. She brusquely told me what she had learned of Curst.

"Don't yeh trust anyone here. Yeh got me?" She then abruptly turned me out of her room.

I awoke the next day in the room I shared with Morte, who was already awake. This wasn't too surprising, since he seemed to need very little sleep. Seeing I was awake, he bobbed over in my direction, seemingly anxious to impart some advice.

"Chief, you watch your back here, OK? This place is filled with back-stabbers."

We assembled in the main room of the inn, for a meal. Grace addressed me, but she obviously meant her words for everyone.

"Curst is a prison town filled with betrayers in both words and deeds. We must take care, and watch each other."

I looked at Nordom, wondering if he had any advice to give me, but he wore his usual demeanor which made it hard to tell if he was taking any notice of his surroundings.

Last night I hadn't been interested in talking to anyone in the inn, but this morning I needed to gather some information about Curse. I entered the common room, and approached the man standing behind the bar. I saw a haggard, grim man. His coarse face was lined and weathered, and his eyes were red-rimmed. He straightened as he saw me.

"Welcome to the Traitor's Gate. I'm Tainted Barse, the innkeep."

"What kind of a name is that?" I was not in a good mood; Ravel had raised more questions than she had answered, I still didn't have a line on my enemy, and now Ravel was gone. If I fumbled my mission, no future incarnation would ever be able to ask her questions again. The innkeeper, meanwhile, hadn't taken my question well. He glared at me as he bit off an answer.

"Barse is my given name, berk. I got the Tainted later because of some former friends spreading baseless chant." He

looked *very* angry. “What the hell do you want, anyway? You an adventurer or something?”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is that my daughter got herself kidnapped by slavers, and now the place is going to fall behind on its bills and I'm going to lose the place to one of those rich pikers in the first circle.” He looked at me more closely. “You’re the fellow asking about the deva, ain’t you? Tell you what. You help me out, I'll help you.”

“What do you know about the deva?” He smiled craftily as I asked my question.

“You’re looking for him, ain’t you? I can tell you that he’s hidden far beneath the prison. I can tell you how to get there, too, apart from being arrested or trying to bribe your way in — which wouldn’t work anyway.”

“Go over there and talk to Marquez. He’s the ex-Harmonium fellow. He knows about these slavers — and he holds the first part of the key that'll put you on the path of seein’ the deva. There are five parts to the Key, but it ain’t a physical key. When you've got the parts together, you come tell me — and it unlocks knowledge in my mind. ‘Til then, though, it stays secret. You got to satisfy the keyholders.”

I was willing to agree — for now. I didn’t have a problem with rescuing his daughter, assuming he told the truth, and while I was looking about town I might stumble across another avenue to the deva. I asked what was going on in the town.

“What this place is, is a hotbed of rumors and innuendo. No one trusts no one. Y'don’t do favors for someone without makin’ sure they’re in your debt. Everyone hates everyone else, and everyone’s looking for a hold to get on everyone. Someone like you… you’re a ripe target of opportunity for people, because you don’t know the politics. And I guarantee you'll be sucked in.”

“Heh. Troubles a-plenty, as always. First, they keep digging holes in the ground to make the prison bigger — and they discover this deva, wrapped up in a big obsidian bubble, chained to the floor. They take his sword and use its power to keep the criminals in their cages. They’re busy debating what to do about the celestial, tearing their hair out trying to figure out how they can make a profit off its discovery and cross their ‘friends'… and then the plague hits.”

“The plague. Something that lays folks low. Makes people all ornery and bad-tempered — and too weak to do anything

about it. The guards've closed off portions of the town, and they're all tight-wound. They'll take you into jail on the slightest pretext these days. I don't know how you got in to town, but you ain't getting out unless you find a portal."

I talked to Marquez, a burly blond man, who was a former Harmonium officer. He told me where to find the slavers, who were Harmonium members. His reasons for helping were outlined in a few sentences.

"I found out that the Harmonium — a group I'd believed in from the start — was buying people, kidnapping them, taking them against their will and ruining their lives. It was sucking the life out of people for daring to be different, and I couldn't take it anymore. The slavers you'll be fighting are old comrades of mine." He spat on the floor. "Berks. Liars. You can't trust anyone anymore."

The Harmonium slavers were not hard to find; evidently the town was so corrupt they had felt no need to hide their activities. We easily defeated them. The innkeepers daughter was freed, and I obtained the first part of the verbal key from Marquez when we returned to the Traitor's Gate. He told me the person to talk to for the second part of the key, named Kitla.

I talked to the tall, striking woman. She wanted me to settle the question of an inheritance between Crumplepunch the smith and Kester the distiller. She was willing to accept any resolution, even their deaths. I didn't see why that would be necessary, and agreed to her demand.

I talked to the two feuding men. Crumplepunch was poorly educated, and seemed glad to let an outsider settle the details of the inheritance. He gave me a crumpled sheet of vellum on which his father had written to him. Kester was more reluctant, but I managed to talk him into allowing me to mediate as well. He too had a document written by his father. The documents were poorly written, and unclear, but based on what I could puzzle out I split the inheritance between the two brothers. Crumplepunch was satisfied, but predictably Kester was not.

I returned to Kitla, who gave me the second part of the key, and pointed out the holder of the third part, one Nabat. He was friendly enough, and asked me to prevent a group of ruffians from roughing up Kyse, the caretaker of the town dump, and taking his money. When I asked why this was so important to him, he would only answer my question with another question.

"Does it really matter? What if I said he was my grandfather? What if I said I wanted revenge on the people who

are going to try to attack him? What if I said that I wanted that money for myself? Does the motivation matter? You're getting what you want — the Key — and I'm getting something out of this for myself."

The dump was easy enough to find. I saw a scruffy old man who reeked of garbage. He seemed somehow more vital than most of the people of this town, more vibrant, as if he didn't quite belong here. He looked up at me as I approached, and straightened his back.

"Come to see Kyse? Heard stories of wisdom and righteousness? Examples to be set and lived by?" I asked who he was.

"I am Kyse, caretaker of the town's refuse. I tend to their garbage, and in metaphor I have seen a fair number of souls float this way as well. I am the voice that urges them to goodness — and I fear they ignore me." I then asked about the thugs who had threatened him.

"Wernet is the man, a leader of lice, a collector of sins. He tells me I have coin, that I should give it to him, but my wealth lies solely in my heart and my faith. I have told him this. I fear he does not believe. Go, convince him of this. Please. He stands in Inner Curst, on the southern side, near the wagons."

I tried talking to Wernet, but he, not surprisingly, refused to listen. I was forced instead to fight off the thugs Wernet sent to the dump. Kyse seemed stupefied that anyone in Curst would save his life, but I was glad to have helped him.

I returned to Nabat to get the third part of the key. Now that I had done his job, he was willing to admit that he wanted revenge on the gang that had threatened Kyse, and that he himself had started the rumors that Kyse was hiding a stash of gold.

I talked to the next key-holder, Dallan, a tall man with shoulder-length black hair and piercing blue eyes. He asked me to settle a… situation involving a city leader, a githyanki named An'izius, but he refused to say what outcome he preferred.

I found An'izius near the town's gate to Carceri, the prison plane. He requested I frame his enemy, a woman named Siabha. I talked to Siabha, to get her side of the story. She barely listened to what I said, immediately offering to double any money An'izius offered if I would double cross him.

I was disgusted by the double-dealing I had found in Curst, and told the captain of the city guard that both An'izius and Siabha were attempting to frame one another. He eagerly used

my testimony to arrest the two, not from any sense of civic duty, but because it served to further schemes of his own.

When I returned to Dallan I considered asking why he was interested in An'izius, but I didn't bother. It was undoubtedly another design for personal gain. I was already heartily sick of Curst, and couldn't wait to leave it. I got his part of the key, and moved on to the last key-holder.

Dono Quisho was a red-haired woman, short and plump. Her request was simple. Use the scroll she gave me to summon the fiend Agril-Shanak to a pentagram, and then free it when it appeared. I resolved to follow her instructions exactly.

The pentagram was located in an old grain elevator. I used Dono Quisho's scroll to summon Agril-Shanak. Then I ordered my companions to attack the fiend. As we attacked, our feet scuffed out portions of the pentagram, which 'freed' it to leave the pentagram. Our attack, which had come as a surprise to the fiend, shortly freed it from its body as well. I doubted whether we had permanently destroyed it, but it wouldn't be bothering anyone for quite some time.

Dono Quisho was upset that I had killed the fiend, but her word never the less bound her to give me the fifth part of the key. I returned to Barse the innkeep again, telling him the five part key.

"Such place eternal justice had prepared for those rebellious…

Here their Prison ordained in utter darkness…

…their portion set…

As far removed from Gods and light of Heaven…

As from the Center thrice to the utmost pole."

Barse opened his secret tunnel for us, and we went down it, under the streets of Curst.

TRIAS

The tunnels under Curst were thick with fiends and other nasty creatures. We fought trelons, nupperibo, lemures, abishai, even a gehreleth.

We also encountered a fiend which named itself Tek'elach, a cornugon, a greater Baatezu. The creature seemed to feel that my actions were actually serving its purpose. Whether or not what I was doing would benefit the Baatezu, I wondered at its faith in talking so openly to me. I resolved that whatever happened, Tek'elach would not be around to see it.

I ordered my companions to attack the fiend. By itself without any support, we rapidly dispatched it, or at least removed its form from Curst, since I doubted we could permanently kill it.

We also, unexpectedly, met a human in the tunnels. I saw a dirty man, hunched and crabbed with age and darkness. His lank, greasy hair flew from his shoulders as he spied us, and his eyes went wide with fear. His fingers began twisting through arcane patterns… After what we had been through, though, I didn't fear any spell he might get off, and just grinned at him. He dropped his hands, and gave me a peculiar stare.

"Ach, another visitor, eh? You'll all be wantin' to scare the ol' hermit half to death, eh? These tunnels're no place for a casual spring walk, y'know. What d'you want from me?"

"I'm looking for a deva," I asked him, getting right to the point.

"Heard rumors about it, but this ol' hermit ain't seen it. I thought it might be underground, since this place locks up all good things, but I still can't find it. If I could, I'd ask if it'd heard about my god." He rattled off a sigh, and looked down the hallway. "Somehow, it feels like it'd be off to the west there. But I still haven't found it. It must have a guardian." He winked at me.

"What are you doing down here, anyway?" He sighed again noisily, caught himself, and looked around wildly for a moment.

"I came to Curst because my god was exiled to Carceri. I've been movin' closer to him alla the time, but I'm not goin' into the prison plane after him. I'm tryin' to find a way to get him

out. Since he's a power o' good, he shouldn't even be there, but that's how exile works, I guess."

"How long have you been here?"

"Too long, too long, in the service of a god who's all but forgotten. I remember him, though… I'll find him, if I have to duck all the monsters around forever. I'll find him." He stared off, mumbling.

He refused to say any more about himself, or his god. He might possibly have been another fiend, but if he was he at least had the sense to hide himself in the form of a man, thereby preventing my ordering his destruction.

The tunnels past here led into the underground prison level of Curst. After fighting through a score or so of Curst guards, I finally found who I was looking for. I saw a being with skin of the purest ivory and hair of blinding white. His wings were charred, the feathers destroyed, yet he still radiated peace and love. He stood as if in meditation, taking no notice of my presence, holding his arms out to either side. Chains held his forearms tightly, attached to the dais on which he stood. Though I did not recall having ever seen a deva, I knew in my heart what this was.

The deva raised his head and rested his gaze upon me. His voice was pure and melodic. "What is it you wish of Trias, mortal? Speak your mind and leave me to my memories of paradise." Before I could answer, the deva's face tightened and changed to a frown. The deva turned its head and rested its gaze upon Morte.

"The stench of Baator lies thick about you, skull." Morte immediately shot back a reply.

"You don't smell any better. When was the last time you bathed?"

Meanwhile, Fall-From-Grace had been closely examining the deva. She moved close to me, so that only I could hear her comment.

"A deva… yet those chains do not seem to bind him so much as smother his mind…" Dak'kon, however, had overheard, and chose to add his own observation, founded in personal experience.

"The chains do not hold him. Belief chains him."

I was curious about the deva's comments, and decided to question him about other matters before asking for help for myself. I also wished to learn something about this deva before committing myself.

"Memories of paradise?" A shadow passed over his face at my words.

"Never again shall I see them, I fear, the ordered beauty of Arcadia, the vistas of Elysium, the Seven Mounts of Mount Celestia… all the ugliness contained in these Lower Planes is effaced there, where it is truly possible to believe in redemption. Too many look only to the Lower Planes for their inspiration and aid, I fear… That is all I have left to me in this place. Now what is it you wish of me, mortal? Speak your mind and then leave."

"How did your wings get burnt?" I asked, curious how he had been injured, but not destroyed.

"It was part of the grand betrayal — they seared my wings as they manacled me, that I might not flee them even through the earth. It is the nature of this place that things of beauty are not tolerated."

"Why were you confined?"

"The people of this town — traitors all — know nothing of truth and beauty. They cannot tolerate it. They lured me here and chained me. Mortals do not possess the perspective that allows them to grow the strength of character to rise above desires, as I sought to teach them."

"I disagree, Lord Trias," Fall-From-Grace interjected. "You simply had an overabundance of trust in your spirit for them." A sneer twisted his beautiful face.

"Surely, mistress tanar'ri, you don't believe that mortals can ever gain that perspective? Not when you are what you are — your very nature cries out to subdue any chance mortals might have to rise above their base instincts." I was surprised by his strong reaction, although interminable imprisonment might sour even a deva. In any case, I needed to find a way to remove the chains holding him if I wished to learn anything of value.

"How can you be freed?"

"An act of kindness done to me shall set me free. My sword — my soul — is an agent of such kindness. Fetch the blade for me and strike my chains off. It is kept somewhere in this prison, in a locked and guarded chamber. I know the combination to the entrance." He spoke three arcane syllables that burned into my memory. "Free me, and I should be… in your debt. Perhaps I can aid you in what you seek." It was as Grace said, he seemed to be hesitant in what he said, as if confused. I was therefore surprised to hear him speak as though he knew of what I sought.

"What do you know of what I seek?" He smiled, sadly.

"You wear the marks of it upon your face and carry it within your heart. Should these chains be lifted from me… then I should be able to divine your purpose more deeply, guide you more truly. Until then…" The deva shrugged. "Until then I cannot even give you the benefit of good advice. These chains smother memory and instinct."

"Ravel the hag sent me to you. She said you had knowledge for me about my stolen mortality."

"Ravel… the night hag… a stolen mortality… this all seems so familiar to me, yet I fear I cannot dredge up the knowledge while these chains confine me."

There was no further point in questioning him until I had found his sword. Unfortunately, that meant penetrating to the heart of the prison on this level. We had to penetrate several circles of cells and passageways, fighting another score of guards along the way.

The final guardian was a being known as Cassius. It made the mistake of challenging me to a game of wits, at which I readily defeated it. I quickly grabbed the sword it had been guarding. The heavy blade was warm to the touch, and flames had been carved across the surface of the blade. The intricacy of the carvings was breathtaking; they were done with such skill that the sword seemed to be burning with metallic flames… someone must have spent several centuries rendering them. The metal of the blade was unfamiliar… it was heavy, but it shined like silver. I quickly wrapped the sword in a cloth and thrust it into my pack; the sword might literally have a mind of its own, and I didn't wish to risk prolonged contact with it.

The Curst authorities had switched over the prison to use the sword to power its magical wards. With the sword's removal, every door in the prison was unlocked, and the prisoners swarmed the halls seeking freedom. The remaining guards, summoned to stop me, now turned to slaughtering the prisoners rather than let them escape. I aided the prisoners as best I could, but many died nonetheless.

The prisoners themselves did not trust me or my companions, so once we had driven off the remaining guards I left them to seek freedom on their own. I returned to the chained deva, and showed him the sword I had found. Trias looked shocked for a moment.

"Celestial Fire? You have recovered my blade? Will you free me? Then strike a blow against the chain!"

Rather than answering, I took its cloth-wrapped hilt in hand and stuck a blow against the chain holding him. The chains sundered easily under the blade, and the sound of a thunderclap resonated between my ears. Everything went black for a moment, and I felt the blade vanish from between my fingers.

"I thank you for freeing me. I owe you much." His charred wings fluttered. "What would you ask of me, mortal? I'm afraid I can offer little in the way of boons."

"My mortality has been stolen from me. I wish to reclaim it."

"You speak foolishness. Yet… there is one who might be able to help you with what you seek. It is a fiend, named Fhjull Forked-Tongue. He shall aid you." The deva's lips quirked in a small smile. "He is under an obligation to do charity."

"How do I reach him?"

"There lies a portal to the north of this prison. Its key is a broken chain link." He peered at the shattered links around his feet, stooped, and pressed one into my hand. "An appropriate key for one who seeks to leave Curst."

"Farewell, mortal. I have… business… to attend to." He looked meaningfully at the ceiling of his prison, and leaped into the earth above him like a diver into an ocean.

VHAILOR

I opened the portal the deva had mentioned, ready to enter another plane through it. However, a figure was in the room beyond the portal, standing against the far wall. The figure gave no sign that it had noticed our entry; curious, I approached.

Before me was a towering, empty suit of armor — but the plates were suspended in space, as if secured over an invisible frame. Red veins ran across the length of the metal greaves, and a huge, double-edged executioner's axe rested in its hand. Engravings decorated the surface of the armor, the most prominent of which was a crimson serpent with its wings outspread. From behind the 'wall' in my mind where fragments of memory lay, a name slithered forth.

"Vhailor…?" I didn't know where the name came from, but I knew it *belonged* to the armor. I had barely whispered it, but it echoed strangely in the chamber. The air stirred, just enough to send a crawling sensation swimming through my skull and a knot to tighten in my heart.

As I stared upon the suit of armor, the shadows beneath the visor took shape… coalescing into the features of a powerful, ebony-skinned man. His eyes were like fires, and he bore numerous scars… was this 'Vhailor,' when he wore flesh? He seemed hauntingly familiar… both as a suit of armor AND as a flesh and blood human. Almost as if I were reciting a spell, more words came to my lips.

"Vhailor… awaken." There was a flare of brilliant red light from beneath the helm, lancing out in a blinding flash; I shielded my eyes from the glare — when I uncovered them, I saw two embers burning within the shadows of the helm. The figure spoke.

I have AWAKENED. The voice was spectral, hollow, and echoed within the suit of armor. It was not a human voice… it felt more like a *force*, a presence. It didn't sound like anything *alive*… or like anything that ever lived.

"Who are you?"

I am VHALIOR.

"*What* are you?"

I am a MERCYKILLER. As Vhailor pronounced the word 'Mercykiller,' Annah and Morte stiffened.

"Mercykiller?" I echoed.

Mercykillers serve JUSTICE. *Justice* PURGES *evil. When* ALL *have been cleansed, the multiverse achieves* PERFECTION.

"Why are you called 'Mercykillers?' "

Mercy is a shield used by the WEAK. *Mercy is* WEAKNESS. *Mercy is* DEATH. NO ONE *is innocent. Mercykillers slay mercy and its* WHORES *wherever their plague has carried them.*

"I disagree. Mercy is strength — and there are times when even justice can be unjust, especially when carried to the extreme."

MERCY *eats at the heart of* JUSTICE. NO ONE *that lives is* INNOCENT.

"How long were you imprisoned?"

Time FLED *as I lay imprisoned. Time bears no* MEANING. *Only* JUSTICE.

"Do you know *why* you came to Curst?"

Much is lost of my journey. I traveled in search of BETRAYERS. *They found me and imprisoned me. An act of* TREACHERY.

"What betrayers?"

Curst is a CITY *of* BETRAYERS. *It is a city that defies* JUSTICE. *I came to* CLEANSE *it.*

"How were you imprisoned?" Vhailor was silent. The embers in his eyes flickered. "Vhailor? Do you recall how they imprisoned you?"

I do not KNOW.

"How does justice lend you her strength?"

The STRENGTH *of* JUSTICE *depends on the harm the* INJUSTICE *has caused.*

"So… the greater the injustice — the greater the crime — the more strength 'justice' lends you?"

When the INJUSTICE *is great enough,* JUSTICE *will lend me the* STRENGTH *needed to* CORRECT *it.* NONE *may stand against it. It will* SHATTER *every barrier,* SUNDER *any shield,* TEAR *through any* ENCHANMENT, *and lend its servant the* POWER *to* PASS SENTENCE. As Vhailor intoned the words, a crawling sensation passed through my body — so strong it made me shiver. I had *heard* these words before, and I knew them to be *true.*

KNOW THIS: *There is nothing on* ALL *the* PLANES *that can* STAY *the hand of* JUSTICE *when it is brought against them. It may unmake* ARMIES. *It may sunder the thrones of* GODS. *Know that for all who* BETRAY *justice, I am their* FATE. *And fate carries an* EXECUTIONER'S AXE.

"And how do you know *when* to dispense justice?"

JUSTICE sees through my eyes. The EYES of a MERCYKILLER can see the CRACKS of WEAKNESS, the FRAILTIES, the wounds of MERCY upon the HEART. In SEEING, I KNOW the guilty. I KNOW their FEAR. I wondered at this power he claimed, and, turning, picked out the first of my companions that I saw.

"What do you see when you look at Morte?"

The skull knows MUCH. Yet it knows nothing of justice. Many with hearts like the skull's now lie within PRISONS and GRAVES. My full curiosity now aroused, I wondered what the figure saw in my other companions. I asked about Dak'kon.

This githzerai's heart lacks the PREJUDICE that poisons his KIND. Yet he exists in CONFLICT with himself, for his WORD is his WILL and his LAW. Where the githzerai thrive in chaos, this one suffers.

"Prejudices? What do you mean?"

The githzerai race burns with PREJUDICE. There is no place for PREJUDICE in JUSTICE'S eyes. By its nature, prejudice TAINTS justice. Githzerai are prejudiced against the githyanki, their racial cousins, and the illithids, who were the OWNERS of the gith peoples. Hatred for BOTH the githyanki and illithids burns in the githzerai heart. I asked next about Nordom.

The MODRON is of no consequence. It can DEFINE justice, but it does not UNDERSTAND it. It is not satisfactory. But it is ENOUGH. Next was Fall-From-Grace.

TANAR'RI are BORN from chaos. They care NOTHING for JUSTICE. The SUCCUBUS knows of JUSTICE, but she has TURNED from it. MERCY has POISONED her heart. Fall-From-Grace stiffened at his words; her voice when she replied was even, without a trace of the tension she must have felt.

"I know of justice, Vhailor. I temper it with experience and wisdom, and when justice is tempered with those two truths, it becomes *stronger*. I know of mercy and forgiveness as well, for without them, the Planes would be a much crueler place."

MERCY eats at the HEART of JUSTICE. MERCY devours all that is PERFECTION. COMPASSION and FORGIVENESS are MERCY'S POISONS.

"No, Vhailor they are not. They are instruments by which another soul may be redeemed, elevated and strengthened. In so doing, the *multiverse* is strengthened. Therein lies the perfection you speak of."

You are WEAK, SUCCUBUS. You are as WEAK as all your KIND. Where your KIND seduces with the FLESH, MERCY has SEDUCED you. You are MERCY'S WHORE. You are NOTHING.

Fall-From-Grace drew herself up at this. "*Am* I, Vhailor? Then *judge* me with your sight, see if you find me wanting. See if you can find the weakness that you claim eats at me."

Vhailor's eyes flared as he stared at Fall-From-Grace, the two embers burning like torches. Fall-From-Grace met his gaze steadily, her eyes crystal and determined.

The ROOTS *of* WEAKNESS *are there. You* BELIEVE *yourself* STRONG*, but* MERCY *will feed upon the roots. It will* DEVOUR *your* WILL." Vhailor paused for a moment, and his next words fell like a hammer. *Yet…* OTHER *weaknesses do you* HOLD *in your* HEART*, succubus. That is what* MY *eyes see. You* CARE*. In* CARING*, you have become* WEAK*.*

"On that point, we are divided, Vhailor." Grace replied.

"What do you see when you look at Annah?" I asked.

The tiefling is TAINTED *by the Lower Planes. Her blood leaves no* ROOM *for loyalty to* JUSTICE*. She understands* JUSTICE*, but she* IGNORES *it.* Vhailor's eyes flared to torches. *She will not* IGNORE ME*.* Annah's eyes narrowed at his words.

"Yeh best be keepin' yer blind eye off me, spirit! I'll have no dealin's with yeh, so I won't."

Tiefling, ANSWER *me: Have you ever committed an* INJUSTICE? As Vhailor's eyes fell upon Annah, she flinched, as if burned.

"Nay, spirit, and yeh've no business a-questionin' me, yeh don't."

JUSTICE *gives me the* RIGHT*.*

"Aye? An' what justice might THAT be?! Yer justice is not MY justice — it's as hollow as yer suit o' armor! Yeh make yer OWN justice which yeh blindly ignore when it comes tae judgin' yourself!"

Mercykillers ARE *justice. Our actions are* ABOVE *question,* TIEFLING*.*

"Oh, aye? Well, yeh and yer *Mercykillers* swung many o' me friends from the leafless tree in the name o' justice when the inclination struck yeh! Burn in Baator's fires, yeh cursed half-dead thing, and may the Powers water on yeh fer good measure! I wish yer armor ta be dropped inta the Foundry's vats an' melted down so that not a plate remains!"

For the LAST *time, tiefling, have you ever committed an injustice?* REFUSAL *to answer is an admission of* GUILT*.* His badgering of Annah had made me angry; how could anyone who lived in the Hive and refused to be a victim not be guilty of some crimes?

"Vhailor, stop this. Now. I won't have you questioning her."

JUSTICE gives me the RIGHT. Guilt CLOAKS her like a second skin.

"I told you to stop, Vhailor, and I meant it."

So the whore that is MERCY shows itself. WEAKNESS has poisoned your heart.

"Has it? Then judge me, Vhailor — if you find me wanting, then pass sentence on *me.*"

WHO ARE YOU TO QUESTION A SERVANT OF JUSTICE? YOU ARE NOTHING. YOU ARE A SHELL. I WILL NOW SEARCH YOUR HEART. WE SHALL SEE IF YOU ARE FOUND WANTING. As Vhailor's burning red eyes fell upon me, I felt them tearing at my skin, blistering it, then peeling it back — but there was no pain, just a wash of dizziness and a sense of *drowning.* As his eyes burned into me, I felt a memory stir…

The burning red eyes grew brighter, to almost blinding, then I was FACING Vhailor, but where there was hollow space before there was *flesh* — a scarred, ebony-skinned man glared from beneath the helmet, his eyes like fires as he regarded me. The armor was gleaming, and his face was locked in fury. He had *come* for me.

"You have found me, Vhailor. You have traveled a long way… I imagine it was not easy finding me."

"Justice led me to you. Where you walk, you leave a trail of SUFFERING." The man's voice rumbled, but there was no echo, none of Vhailor's spectral voice, just anger and fury and flesh and blood… he was dangerous, but this was no spectral force, only a man, and I had defeated many such men. "I will see you brought before the Sigilian courts and punished. If you deny it, then SAY it, and I shall judge you."

"I deny it. Judge me… then I shall judge you."

"Judge ME?" Vhailor's eyes *burned* and he gripped his axe tightly, the muscle cords in his neck and arm tightening as he began to swing it, slowly, menacingly. "You have no RIGHT to judge me."

"Yes, I have, Vhailor, for I know your heart — and my power gives me the right to judge you. But I shall not judge you now: You must rest within this cage until the day I can set you free to walk the Planes once more." As my incarnation said the word 'cage,' Vhailor's gaze suddenly turned from me to the surrounding walls — it was the walls of the Curst prison cell where I found him — many years in the past. *Many* years, enough for a man to die many deaths. Or perhaps just one.

"I eluded you up to this point, Vhailor… why do you think I agreed to meet you *here?* Did you think I was surrendering? Or wished to fight you? No… this is the gate town of Curst, Vhailor. It borders the *prison* plane of Carceri, where even *Gods* are held prisoner. You are powerful, Vhailor, but the energies of this place allow even the mightiest to be caged here."

Vhailor turned, but some of the fire had died in his eyes. "This is *treachery.*"

"Treachery runs through this place like veins, and it is that treachery that lends me the strength for this enchantment — that is why I was forced to meet you here in Curst. I can leave this cell, Vhailor, but until I come for you, you cannot. Your crusade for justice is truly remarkable, but it will be forgotten, and perhaps in time — even justice will forget you."

"You go beyond denying yourself justice, but you are denying my *crusade…"*

"I know of your mission. But that will have to wait until I am done with *my* mission, and this is the second time you have found me and attempted to judge me. I will not allow it to happen a third time." Vhailor said nothing — never had I sounded so FINAL. I was pronouncing a terrible judgment on him, a judgment that carried no justice at all.

"I am immortal, Vhailor — but you are a… strange one. Justice has *touched* you, and that justice may be more powerful than whatever it is that sustains me. Still, take heart: I do not wish you to die… perhaps one day I will have need of someone who has the power to kill me. So here you will remain until I come for you."

The memory blackened, running into darkness, and suddenly, I was facing the spectral Vhailor again, his armored visage empty of flesh — only the burning embers.

You shall be JUDGED. As Vhailor's burning gaze fell upon me, I suddenly felt a strange sense of detachment, almost as if I was stepping back outside of my body. There was a faint whisper, a crawling within my skull, and suddenly I knew that no matter what Vhailor *claimed* to see, he would only see what I WISHED him to see. I knew that even the simplest of deceptions he must accept — I was a closed book to him.

Have you ever MURDERED another? I, however, felt no desire to lie to him, instead I picked one of the many crimes which I had committed.

"Yes… it was my hand, but not my mind, Vhailor. In one of my previous incarnations, I murdered a man named Fin Andlye because of the knowledge he possessed."

You have ADMITTED to the crime. Vhailor's eyes flared within his helm, and I had a sudden glimpse of the terrible *force* lurking within this spectral armor.*The GUILTY shall be PUNISHED*.

"But I have already *been* punished, Vhailor." Vhailor fell still.

I will HEAR of your punishment.

"Every time I die, Vhailor, I have lost my memories. I have no sense of self, no sense of who I am or WAS, and I bear thousands of scars in the mind and body from wounds I cannot remember. Death rejects me, and I fear I shall never be able to be at peace."

Vhailor stared at me, his eyes burning brightly. I felt the same *stare* as before, the tearing and peeling back of the skin, as Vhailor seemed to dissect me. I felt a wave of nausea swim through me, and a sense of *drowning*, deeper this time… until my vision almost faded to black…

You have been PUNISHED. The mark of JUSTICE is upon you. I SEE it upon your FLESH. KNOW THIS: There is MUCH that cannot be seen in you. I shall WATCH YOU. YOU HAVE BEEN punished. But it will not save you from FUTURE punishments for CRIMES to come. Once again I had come across refuse left by one of my previous incarnations, the 'practical' one. Of the man Vhailor who had been imprisoned, only a trace was left in this purified avatar of justice before me. But what little I could do for the man I would do.

"What *defines* justice, Vhailor? What IS it, really?"

JUSTICE is defined by LAW.

"And what is law, Vhailor?"

LAW is the tool by which JUSTICE is served.

"And what makes the laws, Vhailor?"

LAW is defined by JUSTICE.

"That's a circular argument, Vhailor — it's meaningless. You say justice is defined by law, which is defined by justice."

LAW — IS — defined by JUSTICE.

"Living men and women make laws, Vhailor — are the laws they make 'just?' "

LAWS are JUST.

"But if these laws are made by living men and women — who, as *you've* said, are NOT innocent, then haven't the laws been tainted by their hands?"

NOTHING that lives is INNOCENT. Yet LAW rises ABOVE the flesh and blood. FROM IMPERFECTION PERFECTION MAY BE MADE. UNJUST laws may be REFINED. BLED OF THEIR EVIL.

"Then you admit laws are not always perfect — but if these same laws define justice, then isn't *justice* imperfect as well?" Vhailor was silent.

"Vhailor — there is Know NO justice. All you do in the name of justice is meaningless — your Know LIFE is meaningless."

My words seemed to echo, gathering power as I spoke them. As I did, the embers in Vhailor's eyes flickered — and then guttered out. His armor collapsed, the axe and the metal plates clattering to the ground with a *crash.* As they struck the ground, however, they raised clouds of dust — ash and rust particles rising from the metal as the plates and axe aged, decayed, and disintegrated right before my eyes. All that remained were a few pitted metal plates as gravestones that Vhailor ever existed.

In a way, my words had been a greater betrayal than what my previous incarnation had done, for my action had little of justice in it, but much of mercy. I turned away, and led my companions through the portal.

ANNAH, PART II

We stood in a wind-swept, barren landscape. Nearby a huge skeleton of a four legged creature dominated the surroundings. I could easily have curled up and gone to sleep in one of the eye sockets of the towering skull. A few of the local fauna attacked us, but were quickly beaten off.

I pulled Annah aside to talk to her about something that had bothered me since seeing Ravel in the maze. I tried to explain about what happened when I kissed Ravel, but she cut me off.

"Aye," Annah snarled, "don't be comin' and dredgin' up that wash. If yeh want tae lock lips with a fiend, kissing that hag was probably the *safest* thing yeh coulda done." She spat. "Now stop rattlin' yer bone-box: I donnae want tae hear another word about it, I don't." I asked another question, regarding something Ravel had said.

"In the maze, Ravel said you were tormented… what did she mean?" Annah frowned.

"She meant *nothing*, she did. Barmy hag talk, it was."

"Are you sure?"

"It was NOTHING. If yeh donnae know what she was sayin', I don't either."

"Well, if you want to talk about it, I'm lis—"

"I…" Annah's gaze dropped for a moment. "I donnae why I'm travelin' with yeh! I donnae know why I went with yeh tae find Ravel!" She frowned, but she seemed more confused than angry. "It makes no *sense*, it does, and I donnae like it."

"I…" Annah took a deep breath. "I think I have *feelings* for yeh. It feels strange, it does… I don't think I've ever liked *anyone*. But yeh…" Annah gave a half-hearted shrug without meeting my gaze. "I donnae know what it is about yeh, I mean — yeh're *daft* a lot of times, yeh walk like yeh're hips are broken, yeh're clumsy, yeh smell like a zombie, but…" She sighed. "I *like* yeh."

I hesitated, torn. How could I explain to her that it would be much better if she did not want me, that I feared for any who followed me, that especially any who cared for me were doomed? As I stood in indecision, Annah continued speaking.

"It's cause I think yeh're *doomed*." Annah suddenly met my gaze. "I think yeh walk with chains, but yeh don't know it yet. So I… feel for yeh, but I'm afraid for yeh… an' that's *killing* me, it is. I donnae want yeh come tae harm, but I donnae know what tae do to stop it!" Her concern, which so neatly mirrored mine, pierced me to the heart. I said nothing, but leaned forward.

I grabbed the back of her neck with my free hand, and I watched Annah's features go stone as I pulled her to me and kissed her on the lips. At first, it was like kissing a wall, then she started slowly kissing me back, hesitant at first, then with more confidence, her teeth lightly biting my upper lip. I heard her snarl in the back of her throat, and her tail started snaking around my leg, then *squeezing*, each squeeze matching one of her bites.

We had, of course, forgotten our companions who were standing nearby. Morte reminded us in his own way.

"Would you two cut it out before I have to get a dabus over here to separate the two of you!" Morte *hmmphed*. "Or at least allow me to cut in."

As I kissed, I suddenly noticed that Annah's skin was becoming warm — it was radiating heat, like hot coals. I pulled back, Annah's teeth giving one last bite, and she looked at me in confusion, then anger.

"What is it, then? I'm not good at it, am I?"

"No, it's your skin — why are you getting so warm all of a sudden?"

"Aye?" Annah frowned, and looked down at herself; I noticed small wisps of smoke were trailing from the edges of her jerkin. "Fiend blood, it is…" She raised an eyebrow. "Never had *that* happen before, though."

"What? No one's ever kissed you before?" She shrugged.

"No one ever *dared* tae. An' even if they did, I doubt it woulda been like that."

"I'll take that as a compliment, then."

"Aye… eh…" Annah glanced around, and her tail was flicking erratically. "Are we gonna keep movin' on now or what? We don't have time tae be standing an' chattin', we don't."

"Well, *I'm* not done kissing you yet. Come here." To the Abyss with my companions presence, I thought. In fact, at that moment I willed to the Abyss all worry about the future and Annah's probable fate if she stayed near me.

Annah stepped back, alarmed. “Nay — who knows what would happen next — maybe my body'll turn tae *flame*, it will! Yeh and your lips keep your distance!”

The moment broken, I lead the way to investigate the giant skeleton. I was done with Annah, at least for now.

FHJULL

Beneath the skull of the giant skeleton I found an entrance leading underground. Entering, we found ourselves on a spiral ramp leading down into a large room. Tables lined with alchemical apparatus stood against the walls, and a furnace lit the chamber from the far end. In the room, I saw a broken-winged fiend, with one tattered wing, covered in scars. He was muttering to himself as he worked at one of the tables.

"Distill, else a chamberpot you'll be! Feh!"

We continued down the ramp. We had reached the bottom before the fiend took note of our presence, especially Fall-From-Grace. His voice was clenched, angry, and despairing, issuing from behind gritting teeth.

"A tanar'ri in my home! Of all the indignities! Why don't you invite your whole filthy species in?! Feh! The fetid stench of a tanar'ri! I can smell it for leagues! Show some respect for my home! Can't you find some fumes or acidic vapors to try and drown your scent? Feh! I'll never get that tanar'ric stench out of the place. It'll draw baatezu from all over the planes." Morte spoke up in Grace's defense.

"I *like* the way she smells. It's pretty." Fhjull swung his gaze at Morte, and then looked more closely at Grace.

"Oh, and it's not just any tanar'ri, but a tanar'ri whore who's just walked into my home… things can't get any worse. Come in! Come in! Please, my home is your home!" He waved his hands in the air in despair. "Why don't you invite all the rest of your Abyssal harpies into my home to torment me?"

"I extend my greetings to you, Advocate Infernus Forked-Tongue," Grace nodded with a slight bow. "I will take your suggestion under consideration."

"Have you come to kill me?! Torment me? If so, know that I still have much power at my disposal!" I thought it was time to take control of the conversation.

"I have not come to kill you."

"Feh! We shall see, we shall see! If you do not intend to kill or inflict pain upon me, I fear that the torment is of a subtler nature… by far, the worse of many such pains." I was curious of

this Fhjull, and his relation to the deva Trias. I asked him about Trias.

"Feh! Years of service as an Advocate Infernus! Painstaking detail and organization. I never questioned my superiors. I did ALL that was asked of me. I punished those below me with the cruelest and most inventive punishments when they failed."

" THEN… one slip, and it all comes crashing down! All due to CHANCE. CHAOS. RANDOMNESS. And the lesser races wonder why the baatezu wish the multiverse to be an orderly construct." He paused, hissing in anger. "The deva lied. It *lied*. Trias the betrayer tricked me into signing a contract, and I, blinded by the possibility of capturing him, walked straight into his trap."

"If he dies, the contract is over… but I have not been able to find him, and if I did, how would I harm him?! What am I to do? Even these treacherous thoughts make my mind burn in pain. I was *so* sure I had that paragon of self-righteousness. That short-sighted greed cost me the rest of my centuries of glorious conniving and entombed me in this sinkhole of good will. Bleh."

"And now I am cursed to do good deeds, to aid those in need of aid. Feh! An eternity of curses on Trias! A pox on his blessed aid! May all the dung heaps of Maladomini rain down upon his head!" He ranted for a few more moments, and then turned his attention back to me, and spoke through gritted teeth. "My contract with the deva now bids me ask what I can do for you." I was not yet finished with questions about Fhjull, however, and I was relieved to hear his contract with Trias would force him to answer, although I was troubled by the questions it raised about the deva.

"How did your wings get that way?"

"Oh, yes. Aren't they beautiful… ? Feh! They were the first things to be stripped from me before my exile. Before I was forced to flee the burning halls of my people, the wings were taken as trophies by the lowly *abishai*, for banners in the Blood War. My horns were snapped from my skull, and one was hollowed out as a drinking horn for my Lord Bel, accursed be his name across the Planes."

"What can you tell me of the Blood War?"

"Feh! Have you drummed your skull against every rock that falls from the mountain of ignorance? In the Lower Planes rages the Blood War. There is not another plane that is not touched by this conflict. Think of the most hideous war imaginable, magnify it a billion times in time and scope, and you have a

fraction of the battlefield for which the Lower Planes are fought. It is a war of ideology, to define one of the most basic concepts of multiverse!"

"It gives research a prod… more horrific creations have come about because of the Blood War. Why? Because it's pain, and death, and evil. The tanar'ri fight for chaos and evil… evil through brute force and sudden flurries of whim and hate. Their 'evil' is the evil of the horde, a mob mentality of whirling evil. They kill and plunder."

"And the other sides?"

"The baatezu wish only strictly regimented evil, promoting the cause of evil in a precise, orderly fashion. The tanar'ri murder. The baatezu exploit. The two are determined to exterminate the other."

"Part of my assignment… and I was the best, mind you, was drafting new recruits, mostly planar warriors and mages from other worlds to serve as fodder and front-line troops in the war. Word has it that I caught the eye of Lord Bel himself. Even he saw my worth! Feh! Now my humiliation is complete."

"Do you recognize me?"

He scrutinized me closely for the first time. "Memories run like hollow canyons through my mind, almost-human. Many creatures have I met in an immortal's time… though I do not believe you were among them." Forked-Tongue shrugged. "You all look alike to me… and I think I would have remembered the scarred flesh of your body… it is much like the breathing paintings that bedeck Bel's gallery of skins in Baator, except with less grace and more passion in the scar strokes."

"The violence is great, nearing acceptable levels, but the scars are applied with almost tanar'ric crudity, without any care for maximizing the pain of the recipient. A baatezu artist would be much more devoted to the following the paths of pain across the body. Some of these wounds look to be clean kills, others look as if a blind butcher were carving up human steaks. Feh. Human art makes me ill sometimes. Such potential, wasted."

"Is Advocate Infernus Forked-Tongue implying that we tanar'ri are a crude people?" Grace sounded bemused.

"Feh! To say that tanar'ri are crude is to insult crudity. Any lesser race that revels in chaos, allows itself to be pulled and drowned in its stagnant tides, and calls it 'evil' are not a race at all. They are beasts."

"Surely you simply object to the implementation of evil, rather than the degree. Many among the tanar'ri would claim

that the closer one is to the primal nature of evil, the more true they are to the ideal." Grace continued to debate him.

"Feh and double feh! The tanar'ri beasts want to strip law and order from the face of evil! Inexcusable! Intolerable! I cannot —"

"From a baatezu point of view," Grace said, "it may indeed seem intolerable. However… Advocate, many tanar'ri philosophers would argue that the baatezu are to be no less excused for excising passion from violence, excising passion from the very essence of evil. The baatezu would replace rage with cold methodical cruelty. And thus, the old debate continues: Which is the greater evil? Efficient evil or passionate evil?"

"Feh! You say that simply because you are… what you are." He waved his hand dismissively. "At least I am still allowed to be cynical."

"Where is this place?" I asked, drawing his attention back to me.

"Feh. A blasted crater in the Outlands that reflects the emptiness and hollowness of my life. Feh. I need little. Marrow from the creature supplies me with food and the peculiar energies of the place prevent scrying fools from finding me… though idiots apparently can still find their way here."

"What is this creature?"

"This is the skeleton of Ul-Goris, the father of the goristro. They're living, bearlike siege-towers, juggernauts of chaos, huge, practically unstoppable, highly resistant to magic… and Ul-Goris' bones, in the crater where he fell to his death, radiate much enchantment that prevents magic to spy me, keeping this pitiful frame alive for a few more desperate years. Feh!"

I decided I had spent enough time on the preliminaries. I asked what he knew of my stolen mortality.

"Very well, very well." He scratched his head. "If I recall correctly — and there is so much I do not, thanks to that accursed deva! — I have heard of a case such as yours. It makes you immortal, does it not?" At my nod, he went on. "If so, then death itself is no longer sacred. Feh. In my day, mortals remained so and knew their place… now everybody and their mother has the disease of eternal boredom. We should have a gathering and invite everyone across the Planes and offer them immortal contracts… it would save all of us hard-working baatezu a great deal of effort. Feh."

"You know that if everyone was immortal, this entire petitioner system would be up the famed fecal creek. Feh. Immortality is not a trinket to be given to unruly children such as you." I urged him to tell me what he knew of my mortality.

"Feh… as I was saying, I recall hearing somewhere about a place called the Fortress of Regrets." He thought for a moment. "Yes… yes, that's it."

"What do you know of the place?"

"I am pleased to inform you that I do NOT know. Not at all! I cannot help you to get there, and that chills my heart in such a delightful way. No. I. Cannot. Help. You. Oh, how I have longed to say those words. How sweet they tas—"

"Do you know someone who does?"

"Eh? Enough of your cross examinations! Yes, yes, I know *somebody* who might know… on Baator lies a pillar of betrayers, liars… and sages. Despite their nature, their knowledge is considerable. They might know where you can find this Fortress of Regrets."

"How do I get to Baator?"

"Hold on, chief…" Morte suddenly broke in. "Baator is BAD news. This fiend is probably holding out on us… and even if there is a 'Pillar of Skulls,' we can probably find somebody else who knows how to reach this Fortress *without* going to one of the most dangerous planes in the multiverse." At Morte's words, all my suspicions of him suddenly rushed to the forefront of my mind. I knew Morte was lying about some things, but I had thought what he chose to keep hidden harmless, at least to me. Now he was arguing against going to the one place that might hold the answers I needed.

"Why don't you want to go there, Morte?"

"It's a dangerous place, chief. I'd rather not go. I've been, and it isn't pretty. All right?" An answer that answered nothing. I would consider Morte later, but now I needed information from Fhjull. I asked what the pillar of skulls was.

"Feh… what it is, is a massive pile of heads, the spirits of those dead who got there by telling lies that led to the deaths of others. It's a collection of sages and cheats, all rolled together, with some of the most extensive knowledge of the planes." I asked how to get there.

"There is a portal outside my home. It lies in the hand of this giant creature. Go through the arch formed by the left arm of the creature and you will be taken to the Pillar of Skulls. The

portal will be active for you now." I also asked how I could return.

"Eh? Return? Why, I hadn't thought of that. To return from Baator, you need knowledge and a piece of jagged obsidian to cut your tongue. That knowledge you will gain from the Pillar. But there is no reason for you to return here. And no desire on my part to see you again."

I decided we needed a short time to rest before we moved on. I took the chance to talk to Fall-From-Grace.

"When we were in Ravel's maze, Ravel said you were tormented… are you in pain?"

Fall-From-Grace was silent for a moment, her gaze becoming distant. When she turned back to me, her eyes were a strange shade of azure, a shade that spoke of sadness and tears.

"Ravel sees much with her black-brambled eyes, some things which are hidden to other's eyes, even things about their own natures." She shook her head slowly. "Sometimes… sometimes, the pain makes itself known. I have learned it is a *difficult* thing to turn on one's nature."

"Are you going to be all right?"

"Yes… you are kind to ask. The pain still makes itself known, but I came to terms with my nature many centuries ago."

"Very well, th—" Grace stopped me before I could continue.

"I thank you for asking about my well-being. Your concern is not unwelcome."

Grace had firmly shut off my concern. I stared at her, seeking to see if she truly had her torment in hand. Her self control was perfect, and she met my gaze with a slight smile.

Time to go. I gathered the others; together, we passed through the portal to Baator.

PILLAR OF SKULLS

A blood-red sky; gritty, bare hills surrounding us. Somewhere nearby I hoped to find this pillar of skulls. Hopefully this time I would get some final answers, although I didn't expect it.

We started combing the terrain; almost immediately, we ran into the first of many fiends. The numbers we faced were not sufficient to be dangerous, but I pushed the pace, knowing more opponents would show up shortly.

As we walked down a narrow canyon, I could hear the sound of tens, no hundreds of voices ahead. We passed under a natural arch of stone. I had found what I sought. The sight of this thing — this horrible, towering, pulsating *thing* — filled me with nausea, unfounded loathing, and a faint sense of familiarity. The innumerable rotting heads which made up the vast pile seemed to constantly shift and throb, alternately bickering, weeping, conversing, shouting and whispering to one another. Heads constantly bubbled to the surface of the stack from somewhere within its foul core, while others sank back into the grisly pillar. As I made to step closer to the Pillar, Morte hissed to me.

"Pssst! Chief! Chief… listen, I can't let that thing see me. You've got to get me out of here… drop me off somewhere, pick me up later or something…"

"Why, Morte? What's going on?"

"Eh… I don't really like to talk about it. Let's just get moving, yeah?" Morte's voice trembled with fear; his eyes flickered back and forth between me and the massive pillar of heads.

"I can't have you keeping so many secrets, Morte. You've got to tell me what's going on here." Morte sighed, unable to meet my stare. At last, he relented.

"Fine, fine… I'll tell you. There's this pillar on Avernus, the first layer of Baator, built of the heads of all those who've led others to their deaths through lies. Well… that's it right there. See, that's where I ended up. Go figure."

"So… you were one of those heads?"

"Yeah. I told an… exaggeration or two. It's just that one of my suggestions—"

"Yeh mean *lies!*" hissed Annah. Morte continued, unperturbed.

"… one of my *suggestions* led to your death. One of them. Maybe others. I don't really know; those memories are gone, now."

Morte stared at my feet — I'd never seen him look so miserable. "Those memories, they… look, chief, I don't even remember *being* human. I don't remember what life was like before the Pillar…"

Dak'kon, staring into the distance, spoke quietly. "It is like cupping water in one's hands."

Morte glanced at Dak'kon, then me. "Yeah, I guess. And that's pretty much the way of things when you die. You… forget. I figure I wasn't a sterling member of the community when I was alive… but hells, who is?" Morte sighed again. "It's just that I can't help it. Nothing's worse than being honest all the time. But look, chief: if that pile of heads sees me, it'll want me back — *bad.* You can't let that happen!"

"Hold it… why didn't you tell me you knew me back in the Mortuary?" Morte suddenly became defensive.

"Because I never *know* who you're going to be! Some of your incarnations have been stark, raving mad! One time you awoke obsessed with the idea that *I* was your skull, and chased me around the Spire trying to shatter and devour me… luckily, you were crushed by a passing cart in the street. Another, 'good and lawful,' you tried to thrust me back into the Pillar, because 'it's where I belonged.' " Morte smirked. "*That's* why. Besides, no harm's ever come of you not knowing…"

"How'd you get free of the Pillar?"

"Well… you pulled me off, chief. I fought my way to the front of the Pillar — you've been here before, you know — yammering and howling until you had noticed me. I begged to be freed, swearing that I'd follow you, sharing my knowledge until your final days… I just didn't realize how long that'd be until after you'd already torn me free."

"And all the Pillar's Knowledge…?"

"Oh, that… well, I also didn't realize I'd lose most of the Pillar's accumulated knowledge once I was out of it. Piking powers, did *that* ever set you off! But you kept me around just the same. And at first I felt 'bound' to you… that maybe your sorcery had turned me into some sort of familiar. But after a couple hundred years, I realized it was *more* than that… something deeper. More than just a debt of gratitude, too,

though that sure as the hells had something to do with it. I just felt drawn, *connected* to you, somehow. Maybe it's all your suffering, chief… your torment. I don't know. Maybe I likened it to my own, when I was in that pillar."

"Just how long have you known me, Morte?"

"Don't know. Ages, I suppose. I've done all I could to help you find your way each time, but…" Morte sighed, then lifted himself up to meet my gaze. "You rarely make it this far, chief. I mean it; only four or five times, I think. This could be the time… the 'you' that makes it, finds out what's going on."

I took another cautious step towards the pillar, and all their conversation abruptly *stopped*. The dozens of heads that lined the pillar's surface slowly turned to face me in unison. They regarded me silently, their breath fetid and moist upon me… until they noticed Morte cowering behind me.

Every head on the pillar's surface spoke at once to make the thing's voice — a terrible, burbling sound that bubbled forth while foul, stinging vapors and putrid corruption streamed from their mouths. "*YOU* AGAIN… TIS BEEN A LONG TIME, INDEED." Many of the heads began to gibber and drool, chanting "…skull, skull, skull…" gleefully, licking their lips, their eyes fixated upon Morte.

"What do you mean?"

"SILENCE! WE SPEAK NOT TO YOU, BUT TO THE SKULL. WELCOME BACK, LITTLE ONE. HAVE YOU AT LAST DECIDED TO RETURN TO THE FOLD, TO ACCEPT YOUR FINAL FATE, TO TAKE UP ONCE MORE YOUR SACRED DUTY?" Several heads burst forth from the Pillar's core, gnashing their broken teeth and wailing: "Yes, come back! Come back to us, skull! Skull…"

Morte shook with fear, his teeth rattling. "I can't go back, chief! I can't! I can't! I can't!"

"He hasn't come back to you. But I had some questions, Pillar of Skulls…"

"THE SMELL, ' TIS STRONG. IT SHALL CROSS THE PLANES, SOON, AND BEL WILL COME."

"The… smell? What do you mean?"

The heads' eyes turned wetly in their sockets to stare at Fall-From-Grace. "THE SMELL… HER MUSK… THE TANAR'RI *MUSK*. THE BITTERSWEET SCENT *CARRIES*, AND WILL ATTRACT BAATEZU, SOON. THEIR LORD, BEL, WILL BE ANGRY."

Morte added, "Oh, that's just *great*."

The heads turned their gazes back to me, though a few still snuffled noisily. "IF YOU HAVE *QUESTIONS* FOR US, YOU HAD BEST BE

QUICK." A few of the heads squinted and gurgled softly; I thought they might be laughing at me.

"As I said before, then: I had—"

Before I could finish, a portion of the pillar trembled as yet another head oozed its way to the surface. After some of the noisome slime had sloughed off, I recognized it as Pharod's. It spit out a mouthful of bloody cysts and croaked, "Annah, me darling child! Is that you?"

"Da! What yeh be doin' in this place?" Annah cried.

The other heads remained mostly silent for a time as Pharod's spoke… only a few whispered quietly to themselves, making wicked sidelong glances at Annah and her foster father's head. "I was wrong, my dear girl, about the Sphere. It wasn't enough, no, and now look where I've ended… I beg of you, lovely Annah! Save your poor father! Save me! Oh, please, save me! Save m—" But even as it spoke, Pharod's mewling head began to sink back into the Pillar's core…

Annah stared hard at the pillar, eyes narrowed, her fists clenched and tail rigid. A mixture of fury and anguish was smeared across her trembling face.

"I wish we could help him, Annah. It's a tragic thing to happen to anyone."

Annah smirked, spat, and turned away from the pile of rotting heads. She shrugged, but wouldn't look at me. "No matter."

"Did you love Pharod, Annah?" Annah turned, eyes blazing at me.

"He was my *Da*." She bared her teeth. "I *hated* him. He only saw in me a way to scarper more bodies, more jink an' more junk ta line his vault. 'Annah dear,' 'Annah lass, yeh're the most precious thing in me vault,' he'd lie. An' he'd lie. An' he was weak o' mind an' weak o' body. An' he smelled o' corpse rot an' had all the feelin's o' a vulture picking at a corpse." Annah's voice lowered, but the fire in her eyes burned brighter. "And he was the only one ever ta show me a scrap o' kindness. Is that what yeh *wanted* ta hear, is it? Yeh *pleased* now, aye?"

"ENOUGH," bellowed the pillar's stinking heads. "WE TIRE OF YOUR INSIGNIFICANT PRATTLE, AND WOULD KNOW YOUR BUSINESS WITH US."

The heads shifted sluggishly across the face of the pillar, nodding and murmuring before speaking in its ghastly voice.

"ASK A QUESTION OF US, THEN, AND BE PREPARED TO HEAR OUR DEMANDS — YOU SHALL RENDER UNTO US A SERVICE FOR YOUR ANSWER."

"How do I reach the Fortress of Regrets?"

The heads gurgled and croaked their reply through rotted lips: "WE WOULD ANSWER THAT QUESTION FOR A SERVICE…"

"THE SKULL… WE DEMAND THE SKULL AS TRIBUTE. RETURN HIM TO US, AND YOU SHALL HAVE YOUR ANSWER."

"Don't put me back in there, chief. Please!"

"CEASE YOUR FEEBLE PROTESTATIONS, SKULL! THE DECISION IS NOT YOURS!" The pillar's many heads swiveled slowly to face me, their eyes narrowed. "TOO LONG HAS HE CHEATED HIS FATE; HE IS *OURS*. WERE YOU TO RETURN HIM, WE WOULD BE MOST WELL-DISPOSED TOWARD SUCH A GIFT… WE WISH TO SAVOR HIS SCREAMS…"

I asked what other 'gifts' they would accept. They asked for the location of Fhjull Forked-Tongue, but I would not betray him, even though as a fiend he had obeyed only because of the strong compulsion laid on him by the deva Trias. The heads then demanded the modron toy, that allowed access to their experiment in Limbo, but there were still modrons inside the experiment; the pillar would doubtless soon trade the toy to some other fiend, and the toy would be used, betraying the modrons.

I asked them to name another gift. They wished Fall-From-Grace, to devour her alive, bathing themselves in her blood; failing that, they wished Annah's fiendling blood. There was no chance of that, even if the pillar held the last scrap of knowledge about my condition in the multiverse.

There was something the pillar wished which I could agree to, a taste of my immortal blood. I agreed to this demand.

"APPROACH US, THEN… YES, COME CLOSER…" The heads seemed to draw back within the Pillar as I approached it… Though I drew only a single step nearer, I suddenly found myself much closer to the pillar's writhing surface than I had imagined. Before I could react, it pressed forward into me like a wave of broken bone and rotten, worm-infested meat. As the rancid darkness enveloped me, the pillar's heads began to consume me alive…

I found myself standing before the Pillar of Skulls, aching and unsure of what, exactly, had just happened. What I was certain of, though, was that my body was somehow *weaker* for whatever ordeal it just suffered through. The grotesque heads leered down at me, grinning and smacking their lips… When

the heads noticed I was again aware, they gave me the answer to my question.

"ALREADY YOU POSSESS THE KEY, AND NEED ONLY THE LOCATION OF THE PORTAL THAT SHALL LEAD YOU THERE. WE KNOW NOT WHERE THE PORTAL LIES, BUT MIGHT TELL YOU ITS KEY: 'REGRET.' " Many of the pillar's heads began to weep and moan. "Yes, regret! Regret!"

"Regret?"

"YES... YOU MUST HAVE EXPERIENCED REGRET TO BREACH THE FORTRESS. WRITE IT UPON A PIECE OF YOUR FLESH AND YOUR PASSAGE THROUGH THE PORTAL IS ASSURED."

"And the portal… you say you *don't* know where it is?"

"YES... ONLY THREE HAVE KNOWN THE WAY. THE FIRST ONE WAS YOU... THOUGH YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN, NOW. THE SECOND LIES BEYOND THE PORTAL, AND SHALL NOT EMERGE. THE THIRD ONE YOU HAVE ALREADY MET. THEY KNOW OF YOUR CONDITION, THE FORTRESS AND YOUR NEED TO REACH THERE... BUT THEY SHALL NOT HELP YOU. THEIR SHIELD IS ONE FORGED FROM THE COLD METALS OF LIES AND DECEPTION, A THING YOU CANNOT HOPE TO BREAK WITH MERE WORDS. YOU MUST DO BATTLE WITH THEM."

"Who is it?"

The heads remained silent for a time, giving me naught but smug smiles. Finally, they spoke, "YOU HAVE *MET* THE LIAR — AND NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME. THE LIAR KNOWS... BUT DID NOT TELL YOU. A *PETTY* BETRAYAL BETWEEN IMMORTALS…" Some of the decomposing heads rolled their eyes and snickered at me.

"Trias?" Who else but Trias, who had sent me on this pointless errand, who had thought nothing of betraying Fhjull Forked-Tongue?

"OH, YES... THOUGH WE KNOW HIM BY HIS *FULL* NAME: TRIAS, THE BETRAYER!" The pillar shook with mirth, the pile of rotting heads tottering back and forth as it laughed at my distress. A few of the heads chanted mockingly, "Betrayer… Betrayer… Trias, the Betrayer…"

"Why would he lie to me?"

"THE ANSWER IS NOT OURS TO GIVE. YOU MUST SEEK HIM OUT YOURSELF, AND ASK HIM."

"How did he come to know of this?"

"TRIAS EXCHANGED WORDS WITH YOU ONCE, LONG AGO, WHEN YOU KNEW THE WAY. YOU SPOKE YOUR HEART, AND TRIAS — IN THE WAY OF ALL GREAT BETRAYERS — LISTENED WELL TO BUILD YOUR TRUST. SHORT THE CONVERSATION WAS, THOUGH FILLED WITH *MEANING*. MEANING AND DEATH IS WHAT YOU SEEK... TWO SEPARATE THINGS THEY ARE FOR A NORMAL MAN. BUT FOR YOU... ONE AND THE SAME."

There were still some questions I wished the pillar to answer, for which I was willing to give more of my immortal blood. I asked if it knew who my killer, my enemy was.

The pillar remained strangely silent; some of its heads simply looked away, while others shuddered with pained expressions. Eventually, they gathered themselves and spoke once more: "WE… DO NOT KNOW. THOSE HEADS THAT ONCE CONTAINED SUCH KNOWLEDGE HAVE BEEN DESTROYED — REMOVED FROM US. WE CANNOT ANSWER YOU THIS QUESTION."

I had one more question. I asked the pillar who I was. The answer could tell me much, and I was determined to have it. To my consternation, the pillar refused more of my blood, but what other gift would be acceptable to it?

I considered, and came up with a gift. One I was sure, well almost sure, I could reclaim. After all, I had done so once before. I told the pillar it could have Morte. The awful truth was, I considered him the most 'disposable' of my companions. I had never been able to bring myself to completely trust him. A thought had also wormed its way through my consciousness. If Morte was working for someone else, if he had some hidden agenda, surely he would admit it rather than return to the pillar.

Morte, not surprisingly, didn't like my idea. I couldn't explain my plan to him, either, without alerting the pillar of skulls.

"Whoa there… wait! Not so fast! Pillar… I could tell you where Fhjull Forked-Tongue is! Come on, don't you want to know? So what if he gives you that, instead of me? Eh? What d'ya say?" I had considered this, but was unwilling to sell out the fiend.

"Hold it, Morte. We're not selling out Fhjull."

"What? Are you *barmy?!* You'll sell *me* out, but not that *fiend?!* The only reason he helped you is because he's bound, cursed! What about *me?* Who got you out of the Mortuary, pal? Who's gonna stand — er, float — beside you when you face down whatever's waiting for you at that Fortress of Whatever?! Huh?! Huh?! NOT FHJULL FAT-ARSE, THAT'S FOR DAMNED SURE!"

"YESSSSS…" The stack of heads began to writhe and boil, heads thrusting to the surface to howl and babble before sinking back down. They drooled and chattered, "I cannot wait to savor his screams!" Another, "Screams be damned! The *torment* is what's best for one so annoying as he! I shall yank his teeth out, spit them into his brain pan and shake him like a babe's rattle!" And another, "Oo! Oo! I'll eat his eyes out!" I grabbed Morte

and thrust him into the Pillar of Skulls. My companions were frozen; none could believe what I had just done.

The pillar heads cackled and sputtered with unholy glee as Morte was sucked screaming into the thing's awful core, doubtless to suffer endless torment at the 'hands' of the other severed heads. As the commotion began to die down, its heads began cooing and whispering to one another. Suddenly, Morte burst howling to the surface: "Aiieeee! Get me out! Please! Please! I swear I'll never lie ag-!" …and just as quickly as he arose, he was pulled back beneath the pillar's surface. The pillar was now ready to give me my answer.

"NOT *WHO* — WHAT. YOU HAVE BEEN DIVIDED. YOU ARE ONE OF MANY MEN — ONE IN MANY MEN. EACH ONE — WHETHER GOOD OR EVIL — A MONSTER, WHO CASTS A SHADOW UPON EXISTENCE."

"OH, YES." The pillar's heads narrowed their eyes and smiled grotesquely. "EACH TIME YOU DIE, 'IMMORTAL,' YOU CAST A SHADOW… EACH TIME YOU DIE, *ANOTHER* DIES IN YOUR STEAD. THESE SHADOWS… THEY GATHER, HUNGERING FOR YOU, WITHIN THE FORTRESS OF REGRETS. HOW MANY TIMES *HAVE* YOU PERISHED, NAMELESS ONE? HOW MANY HUNDREDS… THOUSANDS… HAVE DIED, BECAUSE OF YOU?" The pillar trembled with wicked glee; its heads pulled faces and gurgled mockingly at me. I had begun to suspect that each of my deaths had consequences, but now I knew the worst. Each time I died, an innocent suffered. I needed to end my unnatural condition; indeed, I needed to see I died no more deaths as long as I could cause such random grief.

"Is that all you have to say, Pillar?"

The heads abruptly ceased their laughter. "NO. YOU BEAR MANY NAMES; EACH HAS LEFT THEIR SCARS ON YOUR FLESH:"

"LOST ONE… IMMORTAL ONE… INCARNATION'S END… MAN OF A THOUSAND DEATHS… THE ONE DOOMED TO LIFE… RESTLESS ONE… ONE OF MANY… THE ONE WHOM LIFE HOLDS PRISONER… THE BRINGER OF SHADOWS… THE WOUNDED ONE… MISERY-BRINGER… YEMETH…"

"YOU ARE AS SILVERED GLASS THAT HAS CRACKED… SHATTERED, AND THE PIECES SCATTERED ACROSS HISTORY. ONLY ONE PIECE IS OF IMPORT. REGAIN THAT, AND YOUR LIFE SHALL BE YOURS ONCE MORE. THERE WILL BE A PRICE. THIS PRICE WILL BUY YOU A CHANCE. WITHOUT THE CHANCE, YOU ARE DOOMED…"

"YOU HAVE LOST THAT WHICH IS NEVER MEANT TO BE SEPARATED FROM MAN. YOUR MORTALITY HAS BEEN STRIPPED FROM YOU… LOST. IT EXISTS, BUT YOU MUST FIND IT BEFORE YOUR MIND IS LOST TO YOU AS WELL."

The ‘paranoid’ incarnation had written these words in his journal; I had seen some of them in a tomb beneath the streets of Sigil. It all turned on my mortality. As I considered the pillar’s words, with a horrid scream, Morte burst howling to the surface.

“Gaaaah! Chief! Get me out! Please! Please!”

My hands shot out and grabbed Morte before he could be sucked back into the pillar’s core. The heads cried out in rage: “NO! NO! STOP! YOU SHALL NOT TAKE HIM AGAIN!” The heads began to lash out at me, biting at my hands and wrists with cruel, jagged teeth…

Seeing the pillar prepared to put up a tremendous battle, I pretended to back off. Just as Morte started to sink and the pillar began to speak again, I leaped forwards and grasped Morte. Only a single head managed to strike before I pulled Morte away, biting deep into my forearm… I jabbed it in the eye with my thumb and pulled my old companion free at last. The foul head’s bite, however, left me drained, exhausted… somehow, I knew I was now weaker than before.

“See, Morte? Nothing… to worry… about…”

The pillar’s heads gnashed their teeth and spat bile at me, bellowing with rage. “HE IS OURS! OURS! OURS!” Abruptly, they calmed themselves. “ FINE. REVEL IN YOUR VICTORY, ‘IMMORTAL.’ WE SHALL HAVE HIM AGAIN, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.”

I had found out all I wanted to know from the pillar. We hurried off; behind us, the pillar cried out in a loud voice that intruders were present. Fiends, attracted by the cry, began to attack us. Fortunately, the portal we needed to exit this plane was quite simply opened, and soon we were back in Fhjull’s hideout under the skeleton of Ul-Goris.

MORTE, PART II

I needed to talk to Morte, after the experiences of the Pillar of Skulls. I took Morte aside, and asked him again how he ended up on the pillar. Morte had already regained his insouciant manner, despite what I had just put him through.

"See, well, there's this *pillar* on Avernus, the first layer of Baator; it's called the Pillar of Skulls, but it's more like the pillar of heads. To hear some bashers tell it, it's *supposedly* made of the heads of berks, mostly sages and scholars, who used their knowing of this and knowing of that when they were alive to stretch the truth a little… so much they might have hurt, or uh, killed someone by doing it. Well, when I *died*, I ended up there. Funny, huh?"

"Not really."

"Eh…" Morte went silent for a moment. "Yeah, you're right; it's not funny at all. You see, I think I knew a lot of things when I was alive. And maybe when I did know something, I didn't always tell the truth about it. I'm thinking that when I bent the truth once or twice, I may have led to someone getting penned in the dead-book sooner than they should have."

"It was me, wasn't it?"

Morte looked at me for a moment. "Yeah. I can't say *how* I know it, chief, but I think so. I think you were the one that got me sent there; the last twig in the bundle before the whole load snaps. Thing is, I can't remember what happened — I don't even remember being human, or what my life was even like before I woke up on the Pillar."

"Why did you forget?"

"That's pretty much the way of things when you die, as I'm sure you're no stranger to. You just… forget. I figure I wasn't a sterling member of the community when I was alive… but hells, who is?" Morte sighed. "It's just that I can't help it. Nothing's worse than being *honest* all the time."

"Except being sentenced to the hells. That sounds a lot worse than telling the truth."

"Yeah… you're right. *Again.*" Morte clicked his teeth; the way he did it reminded me of someone drumming their fingers. "I guess just all that good and evil and lying and cheating

catches up with you — and when I got penned in the dead-book, it was my turn to pay the ferryman."

"So how did you escape the Pillar?"

"Well… you helped me, chief. When you showed up at the Pillar of Skulls, I pushed my way to the front. My obvious know-how and charm attracted your attention — you knew that *I* was the head that knew the most. So I cut a deal with you."

As Morte spoke, my vision seemed to bleed into a fiery red, and I heard a howling, a horrible *screaming* tower of voices, chittering, screeching, hammering, ALL of them begging, screaming to be freed, and Morte's voice… faint, almost lost in the horde. He sounded desperate, frightened, and… pathetically, tragically *lost.*

Echo: "You. Skull. Speak."

The howling voices fell silent, and I watched the tiny, red-lined skull, its cracked features cast in a hellish light, turn its eyes up at me. Blood and ichor had streamed across its features, and its teeth chattered, as if cold. "I… I c-c-can help you. I know w-w-what you seek… all these heads… all their knowing… just please, I *beg* you, free me. Let me *help* you. I'll tell you anything, *everything.*"

Echo: "*Will* you? SWEAR it, skull. SWEAR you will serve me until my End Days, or here you will remain."

"I swear. I swear… just please, *please* free me… I…" I watched as Morte sickeningly swallowed, his pride almost a tangible thing. "I… *beg* you. Let me *help* you. Please."

Echo: "Very well. I shall free you."

My vision slid, as if I was moving, and the howling, screaming cacophony began again, a nightmarish horde of howls and cat-calls and taunts and insults… the feel of my hands sliding into the filthy quagmire of the pillar, the biting of fangs, mandibles, and my hands locking around the tiny skull and ripping, tearing it from the pillar like an old scab…

Echo: "It is DONE."

I looked down at the bloody skull in my scarred hands, its eyes covered in ichor from the pillar, and its teeth chattered, once, twice. It reminded me of a wailing newborn, helpless — and in the eyes of the man I once was — pathetic.

Echo: "I have freed you. Now your life… and your death is mine… Morte."

My vision swirled, the mists of the past drifting away, and Morte was still chattering on. "We talked for a while, chief, you and me, seeing whether the arrangement would work, and I

think we both were really impressed with each other, so you invited me off the Pillar, and I've kind of been with you ever since."

"Uh… what happened then?"

"Well, I didn't know I'd lose most of the Pillar's knowledge once I was out of it… I mean, how was I to know, I'd never been off the damn thing… but you were pretty understanding about it…"

"You lost all the knowledge you said you had…?"

My vision swirled again, making me dizzy, and I felt my gut churn — I heard the cracking, snapping of bone, and Morte's howls — howling in pain, screaming for someone to stop, to stop *killing* him… and my hand, lashing out, again and again and…

Echo: "DAMN you, skull, you LIED to me. I'll THRUST YOU BACK IN THAT DAMNABLE PILLAR AND LEAVE YOU TO *DIE* THERE."

There was the clatter of bone against what sounded like metal — a floor or a wall, and the skittering of teeth knocked free. I could hear Morte, mewling like a beaten dog for me to st-

Echo: "KNOW THAT YOUR SUFFERING ON THE PILLAR WILL BE *NOTHING* TO THE TORMENT *I* WILL MAKE YOU SUFFER."

My vision swirled, and Morte's cries ebbed, fading into his chattering rhythm. I had doubted Morte, but he had been the most faithful of all my companions. All those years with the 'practical' incarnation, and then the incarnations that followed, those that didn't reject him outright must have always been suspicious. He could have left at any time, but he hadn't.

"So, you realized I still had my uses, so I took up with you and I've been with you ever since."

"Morte, what did I want from the Pillar? And how long was it that I freed you?"

Morte thought for a moment. "Well, as for how long, I don't know the exact count, chief — ages, I suppose. I've done all I could to help you each time, but…" Morte sighed. "It's not easy. And as for what you wanted at the Pillar, I don't know — once you pried me off, I couldn't remember."

"So you've stayed with me all this time?"

"Well, yeah, chief. I said I would. Morte always keeps his promises." He paused. "Well, most of them. Heh-heh. There was this one chit on Arborea who —" I suddenly realized that Morte's tone had changed — past the joke, I realized he was trying to hide something. Something about why he was with me.

"Morte, seriously, why are you still traveling with me?"

"Chief, I said it's because I promised, all right?" He looked irritated. "What else could it be?"

"I don't know. You didn't need to stick around after I freed you."

"Well, of course not, chief, but I—" And suddenly, his tone of voice struck a chord in me, and I knew *why* he had remained with me, all this time.

"You feel *guilty*. Because you led me to my death so long ago, isn't it? And you've been suffering ever since."

"Aw, c'mon, chief. Me, feel *guilty?* I'm Morte."

"No, I think that's it. When I came to free you from the fate you deserved, you couldn't *help* but try and help me. And when you could have left after I freed you, you remained. Because you felt indebted." Morte was silent for a moment, looking at me.

"Maybe. You know what's funny? At first, I don't know what the feeling was — it kind of slowly eats at you, y'know?"

"I mean, at first I thought it was a side-effect of some enchantment that 'bound' me to you… but after a couple hundred years, I realized it was *more* than that… something deeper. I just felt drawn, *connected* to you, somehow. Maybe it's all your suffering, chief… your torment. I don't know. Maybe I felt… I don't know, *responsible* for whatever it is I did. What if something I did brought you to this state?"

"Thing is, I don't think me — or whoever I was — really ever had to *see* the consequences of all the lying and cheating I'd done, and when I saw you for the first time when I was trapped on the Pillar, somehow, I *knew* that you were the one I'd betrayed. Once… long ago." Morte sighed. "And that's all I know."

"I see. Thanks for coming clean, Morte."

"Nah, don't thank me…" Morte sighed; and to my surprise, his voice seemed stronger somehow, more confident. Some of the cracks and fractures in his skull had vanished, as if healed. "Nah, the thanks is all to you — I feel like I just had a Plane moved off my shoulders… so to speak."

Whatever else happened, Morte had repaid the debt he felt he owed me. More, I think that his telling me this allowed him to believe the debt had been paid, or at least the final payment would come due at the end of my quest.

I now turned my attention to Fhjull. I approached where he was working at one of the tables holding his alchemical equipment; he turned to me, and spoke.

"Feh! So you've returned! And what did the Pillar speak of? Did it answer your insipid questions?"

"Tell me about Trias."

"That skulking pseudo-child of light! That contemptible… aggh… I mean no harm to him and his treacherous, lying, no-respect-for-the-law ways! Feh! He is a deceiver, mortal, and you should trust him in nothing. I mean this, of course, with all due charity and…" Forked-Tongue spat on the ground, "… kindness. His deception has cost me an eternity… unless he should die." His toothy grin was surprisingly hopeful.

"How do I get out of this crater?"

"Feh… does this mean that you shall leave me to my solitude once again? Then I proclaim, with as much delight as possible, that the portal lies under the arse end of this creature's bones. It will return you to that groveling hovel town of Curst, from whence you came, and I can think of few more befitting ways for you to travel."

Fortunately for Fhjull, I was as anxious to leave as he was to see me gone. As we hurried from his home, I could hear him talking to himself below.

"Feh! No matter… Something familiar about that one."

CARCERI

We appeared back in Curst, but all that was left was ruins. Oddly, the rubble that was lying around could only account for a tiny fraction of the buildings that had made up Curst. Even more strangely, there were no bodies, not even of animals.

The gate to the prison plane of Carceri still existed, as I found out as we wandered through the ruins. As I approached, the rotting heads on the gate began to speak to me, chanting words back and forth between themselves to form coherent sentences. “Gone, gone. Lost to the betrayer, lost to the light.”

“What happened to the town?”

“Gone on the wind, swept on a tide of evil. Through the gate, gone, gone. The town, gone, lost to its own hatred. Through the gate, into the Red Prison, the prison plane… Carceri.”

“Do you have any idea how to get there or get it back here?”

“Through the gate, into the prison… no return from the prison, no return. Go through the gate, go through the gate… your destiny awaits you there.”

“What do you know about my destiny?”

“The deva awaits you.” The heads fell silent, and did not react to further questions.

We passed through the portal, into Carceri. We stood in the new home of Curst; I could hear people near by, but only because of their shouts and screams. A scruffy old man walked around a corner, and hailed me. I recognized him as Kyse, the former keeper of the Curst town dump.

“Stranger! Bide a moment! I must tell you what has happened to this place!”

“What happened?”

“You have returned to a town of calamity, stranger. The deva rises triumphant above the wreckage, having dragged us here to our dooms. There is only one way to return — and that is to strike the deva down, to cause the town to recant its treachery and deceit. The stronger the belief of the town in forgiveness, the weaker the deva.”

“Trias did all this?”

"The deva rose from the ground and condemned the town's iniquities. A great confusion arose as the buildings tumbled around us — and then we arrived. There is only one way to combat Trias — and that is to weaken him by good deeds and turning the townsfolks' minds away from chaos and evil toward goodness. Otherwise, he shall surely triumph." He looked about himself. "I have work to attend to. Should you require resting, seek the old barracks or the distillery."

We moved about town. The citizens blamed one another for what had happened. I tried to convince any we met that they had to work together, that it was their only chance for Curst to return to the Outlands. A few gehreleths had already entered the town, sensing victims. We destroyed those we found. We were also forced to kill those citizens of Curst who refused to stop fighting one another.

As we approached the administration building, a figure approached, a hermit who I had last seen in the tunnels beneath Curst before freeing Trias. The dirty man, hunched and crabbed with age and darkness, his lank, greasy hair flying from his shoulders as he looked around, blurted out, "Kyse the caretaker told me you'd be along. You've done a fine job of weakenin' him… the town's chaos is subsidin' and his plan ain't workin' so well. Head up and finish the job." He was referring to the administration building.

"How do you know this?"

"I can *feel* him up there, waxing and waning like a burning moon. I can *hear* him wondering when you will come. He aches for confrontation."

TRIAS THE BETRAYER

We entered the administration building, climbing ever higher once inside. We ran into Sohmien, horse-like creatures, looters, and scattered fiends, but nothing that hampered us too much.

On a balcony on the top floor of the building we found Trias, looking out over the city he had doomed. Not even bothering to turn around, his voice drifted back to me.

"What do you hope to accomplish here?" Trias raised his arm, gesturing over the city. "Much good you have done in such a short time, mortal. It shall not be enough to keep these traitors from realizing the depths of their folly."

"Why did you lie to me?"

"You were in need of direction. The price of your need was betrayal. How is that you believe that you have earned the right to any truths in this life or the next? Such arrogance. Indeed, it was your duty as a lesser being to free me. I owe you nothing, and it is what I have given. I gave you more than you deserved. You freed me to help yourself."

"Then why have you dragged Curst into the Outlands?"

"A city of betrayers have been betrayed and received what they have deserved. There is no 'why'. It seals my compact with the Lower Planes. The greater good is served."

"The greater good? What greater good is that?"

"The blood spilled by an army of fiends will be redeemed by the righteous wrath of the Hosts of Heaven. Those who fall do so in the name of a greater good. This town falls in the name of the greater good — the expunging of evil. A small sacrifice, considering those who are to be sacrificed."

"No good comes of evil roots, I fear."

"I will not be judged by you, mortal, not when you have lived the lives you have. Let me tell you of betrayal: Betrayal is cowardice, selling weapons to your adversaries out of fear that they might stop killing each other and turn upon you. Betrayal is refusing to lead by example. Betrayal is letting the fiends run rampant through the Planes until evil has corrupted all hearts. Ask not therefore why I scale Mount Celestia and seek to set fire to its slopes with war."

"You would taint the essence of good with evil incarnate. That sounds like betrayal."

"There are many definitions of betrayal. One must live long enough to experience them all. Even your life, were it not fraught with forgetfulness, does not have the range of centuries necessary to appreciate them. Such a betrayal is no betrayal at all."

"What really happened to your wings, Trias?"

"Baator's fires burn hot indeed, but they are candles compared to a father's anger." He fluttered the burnt shreds of his wings. "There is no pain like being cast from Mount Celestia."

"So you're fallen, then? Why should I believe any of your words?"

"Speak not to me of treacheries and falling, mortal. I am willing to sacrifice even myself that Good might triumph."

"That's noble, Trias, but what gives you the right?"

"I am *here*. I see the evil. I am willing to act on it. My *will* gives me the right."

"One's will does not give one the right, Trias. Stand down, and we will not come to blows."

"Is your foolishness so great that you wish to test your pseudo-immortality against a true immortal? Step aside, human, or we shall test this claim of yours."

"Bring it on, Trias."

"It has been a long time since I have wielded my blade against another. We shall duel, you and I."

It was a difficult combat. Not because Trias was so powerful; in fact, he was weak, the work we had done bringing the citizens of Curst together proving effective. But I needed to be sure I did not destroy him, since there was knowledge he had I could get from no other source. Finally, Trias conceded he was beaten.

"I yield to you this hour, mortal. My imprisonment has weakened me… in my state, I am no match for you."

"I still require knowledge from you, Trias. Tell me how to reach the Fortress of Regrets." Trias coughed bloody spittle before answering.

"Before I tell you, I must exact a promise from you. You must vow to spare my life." I didn't like the thought of leaving Trias free to betray others, but I needed what he knew. I also thought there was still a chance he could redeem himself.

Besides, Ravel was already dead. I could not afford to lose any more sources of information in case I forgot again.

"I vow to spare your life if you give me the knowledge I seek."

"The portal to the place you seek lies within the torus above the spire, in the city of Sigil, the City of Doors. In that city, there is a place where the dead of your kind are taken…"

"You mean the *Mortuary*?"

"It is where you awoke of late, is it not? The planes seem filled with such ironies of late. So *close* you were, then…"

"What is the key?"

"The Fortress of Regrets is mortared with tears, and like calls to like. To enter the Fortress, you must contribute something to it. When you pass near the portal, should you carry regret in your mind, you will feel the presence of the portal, like the cold embrace of death."

"While this chill bathes you, you must tear off a scrap of your own skin, and write a regret upon it with blood from your left index finger. The portal will open, and you can discover the truth behind the Fortress of Regrets — and perhaps meet its keeper."

"How do you know this?"

"Many alliances have I sought across the Planes. My search brought me to the Fortress, where I spoke to its lord and keeper of its shadowed halls. No doubt you should wish to return to Sigil now. The blood you have on your hands shall act as the key to this portal; simply step through the door by which you entered, and you shall return."

"What can you tell me of the Fortress?"

"Its halls are dark and seem empty — but like you, it draws tormented souls to it like a lodestone. Like you, it is empty and yet full of time's cast-offs. Like you, it is a monument to torment. Shall I tell you of these souls, wanderer?" At my nod, he continued, his bloody smile widening.

"They are the souls of those who died in your place. They have become shadows that you may live. They are *your* shadows, the shades you cast upon existence, and they will find you, wanderer, and they will make you suffer for their torments. You will receive your due at their hands, you and those who are foolish enough to accompany you." I had already learned this trifle of information from the Pillar of Skulls, as had my companions if he sought to drive a wedge between us.

"I'm sure. What can you tell me of this keeper?"

"Powerful is that one. You shall not best him, and you shall not be able to wrest your mortality from his cold grip. It is lost to you. You have embarked on an errand undertaken only by fools."

"Foolish I may be, but I will know more about this keeper."

"A man's mortality is a compass that points his way in life. If it may be grasped like an object, much can be learned about the nature of the man it was torn from. Your adversary knows more about you than you will ever know. He has watched you and studied you across many of your half-lives. I know his heart. He will not return that which you seek."

"What will you do when I have left you, Trias?"

"I shall once again attempt to levy a host against the gates of Paradise. They will not have me back, and there is no other purpose to my existence."

"Trias, have you forgotten the face of your father?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Upper Planes are the home of justice, beauty, and goodness. They are also home to forgiveness. Go home. Admit your error and beg forgiveness."

He opened his mouth for an angry retort… and paused, reflecting. He bowed his head. "You speak convincing words, mortal, and their wisdom pierces me. I shall seek the forgiveness of my fathers, and accept any retribution they choose. If we meet again, it is my hope that I will be redeemed."

Trias meant what he said now. Whether he would follow through, or convince himself to betray his word as he had betrayed so many others I did not know. I had a pressing engagement; we returned through the portal to Sigil.

SIGIL

We were back in Sigil. There were still tasks I needed to complete before I attempted to reach the Fortress of Regrets.

In particular, I remembered that Ravel had 'branchings' here in Sigil, that I had already met. It was possible that she was not actually dead. I hurried to old Mebbeth, in Ragpicker's Square, who I knew to be a piece of Ravel.

As I entered, Mebbeth looked up, her face ashen… she looked ill. As I watched, creases spread across the folds of her face like cracks, and her gray eyes flickered, as if having trouble focusing on me.

"Mebbeth, are you all right?"

"Aye…" She smiled weakly, and her voice was scratchy, as if trying to force its way past layers of dust. When she spoke, it was like an echo. "I have… a little longer…"

"Mebbeth… did you *know* you were Ravel?"

She took a deep breath… her words came slowly, her voice rattling in her throat. "Mayhap… Mebbeth has forgotten herself many times over… I have dreamed that I was someone else…" Each word was heavier than the last, as if centuries of weight were pressing down on them. Her body seemed to shift slightly, as if wanting to *relax,* let go.

"How could you not know who you are?"

"How is it *ye* do not know yerself?" Mebbeth licked her lips. "Many things… even bits of the self… they fall through memory's cracks, shadows of things forgotten, these memory thing-pieces, maybe bad… maybe good."

"But why Mebbeth? Why the disguise when you could have been Ravel again?"

"Here, in this place, all I did was the mendin' of things and bodies, settin' bones, deliverin' babes… in all these things, I was content." She sighed. "As for being that *other,* that Ravel…" She licked her lips again. "I think… ye take for granted what a comfort it would be, oft times, to misplace a memory or two."

"I wasn't sure if you would be here, Mebbeth, after what happened…"

Mebbeth nodded — every movement was pained. “Aye, my precious one…” She winced as she took a breath. “Seeing ye here… it is like an echo. Little time remains… the threads, these Ravels… they are unraveling as we speak.”

“Are you in pain?”

She nodded. “Yes… yet it is the irony which hurts the most…” She gave a sickly smile. “An act of kindness, thrice repaid… it is the way of the Planes that my few acts of kindness should be the death of me.” She laughed softly. “Yet I have no regrets…”

“I have questions, Mebbeth. Can you t—”

She held up her hand to silence me. “Precious man… I would have ye hear me, this last time…”

“Very well…”

“Precious man…” She sighed. “All’s I wished to do was set the Lady free of her Cage… for ye, all’s I wished for ye was to *live*… and for me daughter, I…” She sighed. “There is a saying on the Planes… that a hag’s kindness is crueler… than her hate, and poisons all it touches…” I thought to myself, that we had seen the truth of that. But that was only a momentary thought, and unworthy of the Ravel I had come to know. I shared my true thoughts with the sliver of Ravel before me.

“I'm sorry things turned out as it did. If I could have saved you, I —”

“I am dying now…” She blinked her rheumy eyes. “My end… it’s traveling from all of time’s directions, all of Ravel’s threads are unraveling…” She coughed. “Yet…” Her gray eyes locked upon me. “Mayhap not all is lost… one of my black-barbed seeds from the maze… did ye bring one with ye?”

“Yes. Here.”

“Ah…” She took the seed gingerly, and she slipped it into her graying locks. “So the Unity-of-Rings is served…” With a flickering glance, she raised her hand and beckoned me to come closer. I stepped close to her, kneeled down.

She whispered something softly under her breath, then clasped my head in her hands and placed a paper-thin kiss upon my forehead. I closed my eyes as her lips touched my skin…

“May the Planes receive you kindly, Mebbeth.” I murmured.

When I opened my eyes, Mebbeth was gone. The tears I did not know I had when I stood over Ravel’s body flowed freely now, running down my cheeks.

I still had one more errand. I returned to the Clerk's Ward, to get permission for Iannis the advocate to experience the sensory stone his daughter Deionarra left at the Festhall. When I saw Iannis, to tell him he had permission, we had little to say to one another. I left as quickly as possible.

As I was leaving the advocate's home, someone I saw standing across the street brought a thought to mind. There wasn't a lot I could do for Morte, but there was something…

I walked over to the beautiful, seductively attired prostitute, a far cry from those I saw in the Hive. She smelled of expensive perfumes, and the lines of her face were subtly accentuated with lightly painted lines of soft, warm colors. She smiled as I approached her and curtseyed gracefully. "Greetings, good sir. Seeking to quench a lust Mistress Grace's Brothel cannot satisfy, I hope?"

"I'm not, but I think Morte here might be…"

The young woman examined Morte critically for a time, then nodded.

"Yes… yes, I think I could do that. Well, I could certainly come up with… something. All for the same fee, of course — a petty five hundred commons."

"Of course. Here you are…"

"All right! Thanks, chief!" Morte turned to follow the woman away.

I led the rest of the group to get rooms at a local inn. Somewhat later, Morte came bobbing dizzily into my room. He was coated with a glossy sheen — as if he had been waxed and buffed — and had a red smudge on his crown in the shape of a pair of lips. Morte seemed only dimly aware of my presence, and alternated between giggling to himself and sighing pleasantly.

The next day, it was time that I faced my enemy, for what I hoped would bring an end, one way or another, to my immortality.

MORTUARY PORTAL

I had entered the Mortuary, seeking a portal. I was now near the site of my first memories, of awakening on a slab here. There was something about the arch in front of me… something hauntingly familiar. A bone-numbing chill blanketed the air between these two black pillars, as if the arch itself bordered on some other, colder space. For some reason, I KNEW this was the portal to the Fortress of Regrets… now all I needed to do was open it.

I clenched my teeth and dug my fingernails into my left forearm; with a dry, tearing sound, I peeled off a strip of skin. The chill between the pillars became stronger, almost hungering, as if the portal had opened a crack…

I pricked the tip of my index finger; before the wound could heal, I squeezed forth several drops of blood. As I prepared to scrawl my regret, a series of images floated across my mind… I whispered the words to myself, but the regret echoed through my mind.

"I regret the deaths I've caused, here and across the multiverse."

I scrawled the regret onto the scrap of flesh… but my rapid healing forced me to stop often to re-open the cut on my finger and squeeze forth more blood. Several moments later, I had finished, my blood glistening on the scrap of skin… a combination of my flesh, my blood, and my regret.

As I watched the bloody regret dry, a wave of cold washed over me. I looked up; the black pillars to either side of the arch were glowing softly, motes of misty blue light drifting from their sides to form a shimmering curtain between them. Beyond the curtain, I could barely make out a weathered stone causeway leading into darkness. I asked if Nordom was ready to proceed.

"Query: Received. Response: Nordom is readied and waited. Awaiting to profess further directives."

"Actually, it's 'process'… never mind. Fall-From-Grace?"

"I have come this far, and it would be rude of me to retire before the final hour." She smiled slightly. "Even if you were to ask politely, I would not permit it."

"It seems I have no choice, then… Annah?"

"I…" Annah glared at Fall-From-Grace, then turned to me, fires in her eyes. "If *she* goes, I'll go, so I will. I'll not turn stag on yeh here, I won't."

"Very well. Dak'kon? You with me?"

"Your path is mine."

"Morte? You ready?"

"Eh…" Morte hesitated, glanced at the portal, glanced at me, glanced at the portal again, then gave a rattling sigh. "Look, I'm not going to say *too* much here, but uh… well, there's something I need to tell you…"

"What is it, Morte?"

"Well, it's about where we're going… or eh, actually where… we've… *been*."

" 'Where WE' VE been?' What are you talking about?"

It was so subtle, I almost missed it — Dak'kon's blade flickered, the edge dulling. As I glanced at him, his hands dropped to his sides, as if he was preparing for battle.

"This… uh, this isn't the FIRST time we've been through this… you see, we've been to this 'Fortress of Regrets' before… though, we… I… didn't know it then."

"Morte, I expect an explanation… no more lies or deceptions, not now."

"It's hard to explain until you've *been* there… besides, you didn't know the, uh, *other* you — he wasn't exactly the kind of basher to SHARE the chant with us. I mean, I knew he was looking for SOME place, but I didn't know why, where it was, or WHAT it was, so I couldn't say ANYTHING to you, because I didn't know ANYTHING! I… just know what happened when we GOT there…" I realized Morte was talking about my 'practical' incarnation, the one who had freed him from the pillar of skulls.

"And… what happened?"

"Well, we went to this — this FORTRESS, and even before we land foot in this place, we're all SPLIT up, fighting for our lives…" He shuddered. "So the *first* thing I want to tell you is if you're determined to go through with this, there's a good chance that anybody who goes through that portal is going to end up somewhere *far* away from everybody else. Thing is, even split up, we may be your only hope…"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because whatever was waiting in that Fortress for you, chief, it already defeated you once… to this day, I don't know how you managed to survive, but if you fall again, you're going to need someone there to pull you out of that Fortress…"

"Morte, I need you to tell me everything you can about the Fortress… it's important."

"This 'Fortress of Regrets'… it stretches on for LEAGUES, chief. It's a Fortress, but it feels more like a PLANE in itself, all stone, all darkness, and shadows — everywhere, shadows. You go there, and… you better be prepared."

"What happened when we first went there?"

"Chief, I don't know what happened to YOU, but I know what happened to ME… I spent my time running from vault to vault, those shadows crawling all over me, trying to bring me down… then, I just… suddenly, we were 'out,' like someone had pulled us back…"

"Hold on a moment. When you say 'us,' it doesn't sound like it meant just you and me." Morte fell silent, but Dak'kon answered in his stead.

"*Know* that I have walked your path many times." Dak'kon spoke slowly, as if measuring each word; his blade had become a misty gray, as if Dak'kon's mind had drifted. "A portion of your path is *known* to me. Five walked the path to the Fortress. Each died their own death."

"But… who were they? How did they die?"

"I died the death of faith. The skull died the death of courage. The woman died the death of grief. The blind archer died the final and most merciful death, the death of the body. You… you died the death of memory." I recognized who he had described, the same ones Fell had described to me. The skull was Morte, the woman Deionarra, the archer Xachariah.

"Yeah…" Morte rattled, as if shivering. "Chief, at this Fortress — there's shadows *everywhere*…"

"There was darkness there, and every shadow was Shra'kt'lor." Dak'kon's voice was a whisper, and his dead black eyes seemed to be staring at something just beyond me. "They are tormented creatures. The wounds in your spirit are *known* to them. They will attack you through them."

"They spoke to me like the Pillar of Skulls…" Morte's voice dropped. "They *knew*…"

"All right; look, you two: I need to know all you can tell me about this Fortress…"

"The shadows *suffer*. They *know* of torment. They *know* how to torture you with that which has wounded your heart. When you face them, *know* that you face that which has killed you once."

"Dak'kon… Morte, you, and I survived. What happened to the archer and Deionarra?"

"The archer died the death of the body. The woman died the death of the spirit. I could not save the woman because it was not your WILL that she be saved. Her grave was dry of tears. No one *knew* to mourn her passing."

"But… why did I not want her saved?"

"Your will was *known* only to you," said Dak'kon

"I can't tell you anymore, chief," Morte said, "except we're bound to be divided as soon as we arrive, it's a HUGE place, and it's crawling with shadows… and somewhere in that Fortress is something more powerful than *any* of us. There's nothing more to say…"

"Nothing lives there. The walls are darkness." Dak'kon added.

"All right — before I step through this portal — is there ANYTHING ELSE you feel like sharing that you think might HELP me?"

"Well…" Morte paused. "Yeah, there's one other thing you should know — the YOU I knew before, the YOU that led us here, he wasn't like you. At all."

"What do you mean?"

"The other YOU, he… he didn't care very much for anybody. For anyone. We could have ALL died in the Fortress, and he wouldn't have blinked. So… I just want you to hold on to your differences, because… well, I like this *you* better. A LOT better."

"But that's not all you want to say, is it?"

"No…" Morte paused. "There's one other thing — I may not have liked that *other* you very much, but he was one smart basher — the smartest basher I've ever known; he always had every angle covered. If he died at the Fortress, that means… well…"

"You don't think I can succeed, do you?"

"No…" Morte shook his head. "It's not that, chief. Because it's not always who's smartest, or who's the most powerful, or who's the toughest… sometimes it comes down to who you are and what you *really* want. I mean, once you wanted to become immortal — but in the end, is that *really* what you wanted? Just be sure of what you want this time, is all I'm saying."

"Fair enough. Look, Morte… we haven't really talked about this, but you know you don't have to come with me to this place, right? I'll understand if you don't want to."

"Yeah… I know, chief. And I can't lie to you… I don't want to go… but I will. Just know that once we step through that portal, it isn't going to be just about *you* anymore. This is our lives you're playing with, and we don't get back up when we die."

"Then why are you…"

"It's because of what Ravel said in the maze." Grace's voice was soft, so soft I almost missed it. "Isn't it, Morte?"

"What Ravel said, in the maze — she said you draw people who suffer to you, like a lodestone." Morte shook his head. "Maybe it's because *you've* been suffering all this time. Maybe when you end up settling things… maybe *we'll* know a bit of peace, too. Maybe."

"Maybe so. Then… are you with me, Morte?"

"Why not, chief?" Morte shook his head. "I mean, we've gone to every OTHER horrible plane in the multiverse I can think of. Why not take that extra step over the cliff?" He gave a rattling sigh. "Are YOU ready? Because if you're not…"

I said I was, and together, myself and my companions, my friends, we entered the portal.

FORTRESS OF REGRETS

I found myself standing on a walkway, alone, outside an enormous building, only a small portion of which I could see from where I stood. A gray nothingness filled the sky. A single movement caught my eye, on a section of the walkway some distance away, in a direction that would take me away from the building. But my curiosity, always my curiosity, had been aroused. I expected to find enemies enough inside the building, but outside?

I moved away from the building. After a few dozen paces I could see a figure ahead of me. Someone I recognized, who I had been avoiding since the first time I met her in the Mortuary. Before me was the ghostly form of Deionarra; her spectral gown seemed stirred by some ethereal breeze. She was standing at the edge of the black stone causeway, staring out into the emptiness of the Plane.

"Deionarra…?"

"My Love! You should *not* be here! You must leave at once!"

"Deionarra, what is this place? Is this the Fortress?"

"This is the Fortress of Regrets. It is the place that holds the moment of my death prisoner, and I may not stray far from its halls. If you can find a way back to Sigil you *must;* if you stay here, my Love, you shall die."

"I'm immortal, Deionarra; I don't think I have much to worry about, even here."

"No, my Love. There is something about this Fortress — the shell that surrounds it cuts it off from the rest of the Planes. It is that shell that acts as a barrier to your immortality."

"A shell? The Pillar told me that when I die, another dies in my place. And if it can't find someone to die for me —"

"Then if you die in this place, it is the end, for there is nothing that *lives* here — so you must be careful. Return back to Sigil and leave this cursed place!"

"But — my allies are here: and that means they are inside this shell. What happens to *them* if I die?"

"My Love, if you have brought *anything* that lives with you to this place, then it is in terrible danger — both from the

shadows and from you. Should you die here, your immortality will hunt for the closest living thing in the Fortress, and *that* is the one that shall die in your place. You must leave here, now!"

"I can't *go* back. So can you tell me *anything* else that might be helpful? What waits inside the Fortress?"

"There is no natural darkness within the Fortress, my Love, only the shades of those who have died in your place. The energies of this Plane feed them, and their hatred for you is beyond all reason. They will not permit you to leave." She threw a glance at the walls of the Fortress. "Do *not* enter, I beg you!"

"But — my allies are in there. I cannot leave them. Do you have any idea where they might be?"

"If you brought others, then they were cast from you when you arrived — it is the nature of this place to divide living things… then kill them." She looked distraught. "The Fortress is a thing of many miles — finding your friends here will be difficult."

"I have to find them. There is no choice in the matter."

"Very well, my Love… if you intend to go on, you must know this — past the entrance to the Fortress is a great antechamber with countless shadows. You must move swiftly and not let them gather about you, or you shall surely be slain!"

"One thing more…" Deionarra paused, as if trying to catch a fleeting memory. "Within… within the chamber are great clocks…" Her voice became steadier, more certain. "Clocks which you spoke of once as having been the key to you escaping that chamber… when you were trapped there once before." She looked at me. "I know I cannot stay you from your course, my Love — I shall watch for you, and help you if I can."

"I brought your ring, Deionarra. I found your legacy to me."

"The ring still holds a part of me within it, my Love. When you carry it, you carry my heart with you." She closed her eyes for a moment, and I suddenly felt a warmth pass through me. Deionarra opened her eyes, then smiled. "I knew you would return to me with it in your keeping. Carry it now with my blessing, and keep it close to your heart. Through it, I will defend you."

"You have my thanks, Deionarra. I must go now." At my words, Deionarra faded from sight.

I returned the way I had come, and then continued past the spot at which I appeared. The walkway ended at a circular

portal, a portal which opened as I approached it. I entered the fortress, arriving in the ‘antechamber’ Deionarra had mentioned.

I had to dodge shadows, and trigger mysterious devices, before I could open the portal which would take me further into the fortress. There were footsteps in the dust of that chamber, and markings left on giant clock faces. I recognized them; I had been here before, the last time I had visited the fortress. Finally, I stood before the exit portal, and passed on, into a another portion of the fortress.

COMPANIONS' FATE

Ignus appeared in a shadowed hall. He looked around, not knowing where he was, but sensing his surroundings. He spoke out loud of what he had found.

"*Great power isss here."* A spectral, barbed form had glided forward as Ignus stared about himself.

I HAVE NEED OF YOU. THERE ARE CREATURES THAT MUST DIE. Somehow, Ignus knew those the figure had mentioned included the master he respected/hated. Ignus followed the spectral figure as it moved away, his laughter echoing about him.

* * *

Morte looked around. There was no sign of the chief, or of anyone else. From his previous trip to the fortress, Morte knew it was impossible to find the chief on his own. He would have to wait for the chief, or someone, to find him. In the meantime, his best defense would be to play dead. Morte had a lot of experience being almost dead, and he thought he could give a convincing performance.

* * *

"Shadows." Dak'kon identified the forms about himself. One, more barbed and less a hole in the light than the others, addressed him.

AH, THE GITHZERAI. I REMEMBER HIM WELL… SUBMIT.

"I may be bested in battle, but I shall never be defeated."

YOU CANNOT HOPE TO DEFEAT ME.

"I have been here before. This time I shall never leave."

SO BE IT. The speaker moved off, but the other shadows flowed inward, until it seemed as though the darkness itself had moved to cover Dak'kon from view.

* * *

"Its so cold here," Annah muttered to herself as she walked down the dimly lit passageway. The shock of finding herself alone in this place had thrown her normal skills into hiding. She did not notice the barbed shape until she nearly ran into it.

AH... THE FIENDLING GIRL. WHERE IS THE ONE WHO BROUGHT YOU HERE?

"In a place where *yeh'll* never find 'im. If yeh think to be taking him, yeh'll be needing ta get through me, first."

YOUR WORDS HAVE PASSION'S STRENGTH. AND PRECIOUS LITTLE REASON.

"If it gives me the strength ta gut yeh, I donnae care!"

CURIOUS... YOUR REASON FOR FOLLOWING HIM HERE IS BECOMING CLEAR —

"Enough of yer chatterin'! If it's a *fight* yeh want, then c-!"

COULD IT BE THAT YOU SOMEHOW PERCEIVE YOURSELF AS *special* IN HIS EYES?

"If — if yeh're gonna try an' get *past* me then go on n' do it! I..."

FIENDLING, I HAVE WATCHED THE ONE YOU FOLLOW ACROSS MANY LIFETIMES. I KNOW HIS HEART, AND I KNOW THERE HAVE BEEN COUNTLESS OTHERS WHO HAVE FELT PASSION FOR HIM. OF THEM ALL, YOU ARE CERTAINLY THE *LEAST*. YOU ARE A *THING*, BASTARDIZED BY YOUR PARENTS AND THE PLANES...

"*Shut* yer bone-box, yeh hear me?! Shut y—"

ANSWER ME THIS, AND YOU WILL KNOW SILENCE, CHILD. DOES THE ONE YOU FOLLOW *MATTER* TO YOU?

"He matters more ta me, than mae life."

THEN DIE.

Annah attacked the shadowy figure, but alone, she was no match for the magic that was called forth.

* * *

"It is difficult to separate shadow from the darkness here." Fall-From-Grace stared about herself. "This is not a place meant for the living."

AH, THE TANAR'RI. The voice came from behind her. She whirled, to confront the spectral presence in its barbed armor.

"So. You are the spider that lies in the center of it all. I have many questions that you could answer. Your goals in this matter have not been entirely clear."

MY GOALS ARE NOT FOR YOU TO KNOW, FALLEN TANAR'RI. MY INDULGENCE IS ALL THAT KEEPS YOUR BLACK HEART BEATING IN YOUR CHEST. YOU MAY LEAVE WITH YOUR LIFE NOW, IF YOU WILL.

"My heart is neither black nor do I fear for my life. My companions, my friends, are here in your fortress. I shall not leave until we are rejoined and the man we follow has resolved this matter to a satisfactory conclusion."

THERE IS *NO* SATISFACTORY CONCLUSION TO THIS FOOL'S ERRAND. YOU WILL LEAVE THIS PLACE, AND YOU SHALL LEAVE YOUR UNDYING COMPANION HERE. FEAR NOT FOR HIS LIFE. THE ONLY PRICE HE SHALL PAY IS THE LOSS OF MEMORY.

"As gracious as your offer is, I must refuse your offer to abandon my friends. As for the 'small' price he will pay at your hands, it is the equivalent of death to him. I have traveled with this man for some time, and there are many things I do not wish him to forget."

HE WILL FORGET. IT IS HIS *FATE* TO REMAIN IGNORANT. HE WILL FORGET YOU, TANAR'RI, JUST AS HE HAS FORGOTTEN ALL WHO HAVE WALKED THE PATH OF MISERY WITH HIM. HE EXISTS TO DIE, FORGET, AND DIE AGAIN. HE IS *NOTHING*.

"That is *your* judgment. The fact remains that I do not wish him to forget me, nor all that he has struggled for to reach this place. He has suffered much, and I find my sympathies lie with him rather than the arrogant creature that postures before me and fights as a *coward* fights, preferring to kill from a distance where his opponent cannot reach him."

"You shall torment him no more."

TANAR'RI... PERHAPS YOU DOUBT MY POWERS HERE, IN THIS PLACE. A DEMONSTRATION MAY SILENCE YOUR DOUBT.

"You have done enough harm. Prepare yourself."

YOU ARE NOTHING. I CAN FORGE PLANES WITH MY POWER. I CAN UNMAKE YOU.

Magical energies played about the two figures, as they sought one another's destruction. Long moments passed before one figure slumped to the ground; the standing figure, a barbed shadow, moved off.

* * *

"Processing. Plane: Negative Material. Location: Fortress of Regrets." Nordom exchanged clicks with his crossbows, reassuring them; or perhaps they were reassuring him. A barbed, ethereal form glided out of the darkness.

AH, THE ROGUE CONSTRUCT.

"Sense of closure imminent."

YOU HAVE OVERSTEPPED YOURSELF. SUBMIT.

"You wish harm upon one who has aided Nordom at cost to his selves. Nordom will attempt to stop you. Prospect of success: slight." A bolt of magical energy impacted Nordom, directed from the figure he was facing.

THE BODY IS A SHELL. INTENSE PRESSURE MAY FRACTURE IT. SHALL I CONTINUE?

"You intend to harm him. Nordom will stop you." Several more bolts of energy hit Nordom, knocking the Modron down. Nordom did not stir; not even his crossbows made a sound.

TRIAL OF IMPULSE

I appeared in a smaller room. Five statues arranged in a semi-circle looked inward at a circular basin. Floating above the basin was a peculiar, glowing crystal. I had only a moment to take in the chamber, since I recognized the burning figure who was present. It was Ignus. The burning rage which he had felt at our last meeting had obviously consumed him, turning him insane. Perhaps not insane, precisely, but the elemental fire he worshipped had nearly burnt all the humanity from him. He immediately moved to attack me.

"*I will burn you, then sset fire to the planesss,"* he cried, casting spells of fire at me. I harnessed my own magical energies to counterattack.

"*The flamesss will consume you,"* he growled, and his growling was the sound of bonfires burning. But my spells drove him back, until he could retreat no further.

"The skies shall be flamesss, and all life shall be as torches," he whispered, just before my spell knocked him to the ground, and put out the last of the fire floating about him. I hurried over to the crumpled form of Ignus. He was dying, almost dead. I kneeled, and gathered his body in my arms. He spoke, so quietly I had to place my head next to his to hear him.

"Master forgive me. I have betrayed your teaching." I had to accept that some tormented figures from my past I could never help; indeed almost all were like Ignus, penned in the dead book and beyond my reach for good or ill. I gently laid Ignus' body down upon the ground again.

Now that I had a chance to look around the room, I realized the statues were of me. I examined each statue, wondering why they were here. As I did, I noticed a peculiar stone hidden behind one statue. The dark stone was covered in dust, as if it had been sitting there for years — it looked like a piece of one of the statues that was chipped away. A tracery of strange runes and markings covered the stone's surface.

It felt strangely familiar somehow. As I touched the stone, a mouth appeared on the side, and began speaking, in my voice; it echoed, as if speaking within a great chamber.

"Dak'kon, Morte, Xachariah, Deionarra — it is I. I have placed a minor messaging enchantment on this stone; listen to it fully, then do as I say." The voice took a breath; it sounded irritated.

"I don't know how we got separated, but I think the portal that brought us here divided us. It's only a minor setback — when you find this stone, stay with it until I can rejoin you. Based on my divinations, this Fortress is the size of several cities — the less you move around, the easier it is for me to find you." The voice took another breath, then became more detached, as if surveying something and speaking about it.

"I fought my way through the first of the vaults; this place is *filled* with shadows, way too many to keep fighting — if you encounter any, run before they swarm you; they're much tougher than the other shadows we encountered before; I think the energies of the Plane feed them somehow, make them stronger." The voice took another breath.

"There were a series of great war relics within the vault that shifted me from place to place; I managed to lure the shadows to each machine, then shift while they swarmed where I had been. It bought me some time, time enough to escape: Once I had tripped four relics, it opened a portal out." The voice paused, as if something just occurred to the speaker.

"It strikes me now that the vault I came from might be some strange sort of gatehouse — the relics seem to seal it off from both the inside *and* the outside of the Fortress. Whatever built this place likes keeping the shadows under guard so they can't run loose; the shadows don't have any substance, so they wouldn't be able to use the machines to escape the vault. Hmmm. I'll have to think about that some more…"

"No matter — I'm in a room with a great crystal in it, and I'm going to examine it more closely before moving on." The voice paused, as if the speaker was looking around. "There are five statues in the room, and they look like me — and they look *old*, too, like they've been here for some time."

"As for the crystal… it doesn't seem like it belongs in the Fortress, and its size and shape reminds me of something I've read in the annals, some sort of dimensional prison that segments the soul. I don't think it's a coincidence the portal from the main vault teleported me here: I think the crystal's a trap, so *don't* touch it until we're together again — I *mean* it, Morte."

"I'm going to try and find you all now. If you find this reader stone, do *not* move from this spot, or I may never find you. I have left some supplies for you in the base of one of the statues. Don't waste them — I don't know how long it's going to take for us to find our enemy and get out, and we may need those supplies later. I'll see you all soon."

I examined the room further. If this was a trap, it had been improved since the last time an incarnation of mine had been here, for I found no exit, or any means to trigger a portal. That left the crystal in the center of the room.

The huge crystal radiated a pulsating, spectral light as it hovered above the crater in the middle of the room. The rhythm of its pulses reminded me of a heartbeat, but slow and sickly. Light from the crystal touched the edges of the room like fingers, each ray of light casting a glow on the ruined faces of the statues surrounding it. I reached out to the crystal.

There was a moment of dizziness as I touched the crystal; then a slow chill passed through my body, and I discovered that my muscles had locked, my hand frozen to the crystal's surface. There was a moment of silence, then sharp pains splintered through my body like fractures — I felt as if my very BEING had been turned to ice, then *shattered*…

MAZE OF REFLECTIONS

I awoke on a slab, in an irregularly spherical room. The room was made of a faceted, grayish metallic substance; filaments colored red, purple and blue laced about the walls.

I levered myself up off the slab. There were three figures in the room, who I recognized, since they were me.

The figure to my right resembled me, but he carried himself more like a force than a man. I had seen him before in the sensory stone Deionarra had left for me. I had named him to myself as the practical incarnation.

The resemblance was there in the face of the figure directly in front of me, but hard to see. His back was hunched, as if he was perpetually afraid of being struck. He was watching me warily, and he hissed as I looked at him, his hands clenching, as if wanting to strangle me. His arms were horribly gnarled and scarred, as if they had been dunked into a stream of acid — and his left arm looked like it was holding on by a thread, literally. I had seen this incarnation before, in a trapped sensory stone left for me, or as he saw all other incarnations, a 'body-thief.' I had named him to myself the paranoid incarnation.

The man to my left also resembled me, but his face seemed… calmer somehow. He gave a slight smile when he noticed the direction of my gaze, and he nodded, as if in approval. I didn't think I was familiar with this incarnation, but based on his manner I decided to call him the 'good' incarnation to myself.

"He has awakened," said the good incarnation.

"*Finally.*" the practical incarnation exclaimed, "I thought I would die again waiting for him to rise." The paranoid incarnation eyed all three of us before speaking.

"Perhaps… perhaps you will STILL die. NEVER forget I WATCH you THIEVES, you KILLERS — KILLERS ALL, all THREE of you…"

"Have a care *how* you speak to me," hotly retorted the practical incarnation, "you deranged wreck. He was fortunate to reach here with all those traps *you* scattered throughout the Planes. I swear, if I could have crossed the years to put you out of your *misery,* I w—" The good incarnation cut him off.

"The two of you, be silent! Let us make sure he is all right and save the arguments for later."

"Wh… who are you all?" I asked. My lips hadn't caught up to my inner thoughts, since I recognized two of the incarnations before me.

"By the hells, he's lost his memories! Damnation! He's useless to us now!" The practical incarnation had been enraged at my words. As always his first thought of others was how useful they would be as tools.

"Calm yourself. He's only disoriented, as were we all. Give him a moment to get his bearings," the good incarnation calmly replied.

"You are all THIEVES… wearing MY body… MY body, and you will give it BACK!" The paranoid incarnation wildly glared at all three of us. The practical incarnation turned, unleashing his anger on him.

"I am at the limits of my *patience* with your howling! Be silent, or —" Once again, the good incarnation intervened as a peace maker.

"This arguing avails us nothing! Give him his space, leave him be." The practical incarnation turned to him, unwilling to give up any control of the situation.

"Time is no longer in our favor. I will not stand here and squander another moment while our adversary is no doubt hunting for us. We waited long enough for him to awaken — I will speak to him *now*."

The practical incarnation turned to me. His eyes were watching me carefully, and as I studied him, I felt him studying me. He spoke.

"So… it has come to this."

"Who are you?"

"I will not surrender my name to you or any man." The man's voice was rough, like mine, and it rang strangely in my ears. "As for 'who I am,' you should be asking yourself that — you are one of *my* incarnations. You made it here, with my clues to guide you."

"We — we are separate incarnations? How is that possible?"

The incarnation was silent for a moment, then his expression changed to contempt.

"If there is anything I have *hated* about you, it is your countless questions — your desperate fumbling for meaning and answers." The man's voice was like a hatchet, and anger

flickered across his features. “The time for questions is past. Now, you will *listen* to me. I was the first to breach this Fortress, and whatever it is that awaits us here was somehow able to defeat me. It will not best me a second time.”

“Who are these others?”

“Other incarnations — reflections of ourselves. I will have them merge with me after I deal with you.” He glanced at the hunched incarnation, who was howling when I first arrived. “Or kill them if they refuse; it is of no matter. They are not necessary.”

“You… sound as if you intend to fight whatever it is that lurks here.” The man gave me a strange look, then studied me.

“Of course. That’s the only reason we’re speaking now. I'll need you to be the shell — but your mind must be *my* mind. Do you understand me?”

“You mean you intend to possess me?”

“Yes.” He glanced around at the spiked walls, then turned back to face me. “We cannot leave this place in pieces. Only one may leave.”

“How are we to become one?”

“You must surrender your will to me — your knowledge and skills: whatever little you've managed to accumulate in your life may prove useful.” He sized me up again. “It ultimately will be but a fraction of my power, but it might have it uses.”

“Why won’t you merge with me?”

“With you?” He gave a short laugh, almost like a bark. “Because there is no gain in such a thing. You have lived a fraction of the life I have. I will not entrust my will to a neophyte such as yourself.”

“Yet you came here previously… and were defeated.”

The man frowned. “I was taken unawares. And I did not anticipate that my companions would be split from me upon my arrival… what happened after that… is confusing.”

“So even if I were to surrender to you, then we could still fail?”

“Unlikely. I'm the only one who possesses the knowledge necessary to succeed — this moment is the culmination of centuries of planning. Many have suffered and died for us to be here… their sacrifices must not be in vain.” The last sentence unnerved me — it was delivered like a speech, and there was no passion behind the words.

"You are the one who saved Dak'kon at Shra'kt'lor. The one who imprisoned Vhailor. And the one who led Deionarra to her death." The man's eyes narrowed.

"What of it? All of it was done with a purpose."

"You gave Dak'kon the Unbroken Circle of Zerthimon. Why?"

"The Unbroken Circle? That collection of lies? Yes, it was a week's work to forge such a thing — it was necessary to make it so he would cease doubting himself."

"You *made* it? But you told him —"

"Perhaps they carry some truth — I know not. I know that they were tedious writings, but the words were enough to give him faith." He must have taken the look of bemusement on my face for puzzlement about why he saved Dak'kon.

"Your ignorance astounds me." The man looked incredulous. "Can it be that you not know what he carries in his hand? That blade he carries is shaped by his *thoughts.* Such a tool, when used properly, could slay the multiverse itself…" The man looked lost in thought, then his face sneered in disgust. "Though obviously, the gith became separated when we arrived in the Fortress, and I was unable to make use of his blade." The man frowned. "Unfortunate."

"Are you the one who taught Ignus the Art?"

"Ignus?" The man stared at me, then frowned. "Is that a name? Who in the hells are you talking about?" Of course, I realized. This incarnation had 'died' over fifty years ago. Ignus had been taught much more recently than that. I must not have fully recovered yet from the trap which splintered me, and brought me here.

"What was the purpose of imprisoning Vhailor?"

The man shook his head, as if weary. "Vhailor was becoming… tiresome." He gave a humorless smile. "Those Mercykillers dogs will hunt you across the Planes themselves in search of 'justice' — and Vhailor was an especially persistent hound." The incarnation's voice dropped slightly. "And he was much too close to justice for my tastes."

"Why was he hunting for us?"

"Oh, any of countless reasons, some of which lie with me — and others, which lie in the *hands* of other incarnations." He flicked a glance over at the paranoid incarnation. "There have been many lives that have been blackened by incarnations with damaged minds. Some of us have created… problems. I believe in solutions."

"Was he a threat?"

"Oh, yes — or else I would have simply killed him." He nodded. "There is some link between him and justice itself, and that gives him power even over immortals such as us." The man gave a slight smile. "Especially if our injustices are great… and ours are of the blackest sort."

"Why did Deionarra have to die?"

"Deionarra? That girl had little sense of the Planes in her, and that was what I needed her for. You see, the Dustmen have it right — sometimes when you feel too much passion, you cling too tightly to life to let go. And neither did Deionarra — as I hoped she would." The paranoid incarnation interrupted at these words.

"That WOMAN — that GHOST?!" The hunched man's eyes welled up in fury, and spittle flew from his mouth. "She TORMENTED me for years, pursuing me, hating me, and YOU WERE THE ONE THAT KILLED HER?!"

The practical incarnation barely even glanced at the howling one, and merely sneered.

"*You* blaming me for anything is laughable." He turned back to me. "It wasn't out of malice — though she did become tiresome. It's just that when I arrived in the Fortress, I didn't intend to stay. I just wanted to get in, sacrifice her, then get out."

"Why did you do such a terrible thing?" The good incarnation had asked the question softly, sounding pained, but it could have been my voice, with the same pain in it.

"I needed someone to be my eyes here on the Negative Material Plane, to serve as a scout and try and find out who my killer was. Only the dead can survive here for long — so Deionarra had to be sacrificed so that she could become something other than she was. A tricky business, but it worked — she helped you, didn't she?"

"You didn't have to kill her."

He looked at me silently for a moment, then his sneer returned. "And that is why you will be defeated if you confront our killer. It is because you are WEAK. And you do not see that some things are NECESSARY."

"You *dare* call *me* weak?! You orchestrated all these 'grand' plans for defeating this invisible enemy, and you got your ass handed to you ANYWAY, and some poor girl was murdered because of it. Maybe if you'd done your job the first time you were here, this wouldn't even be a problem!"

"You *DARE* lecture me?! Women have always walked our path with us — whether Deionarra or Ravel or any other woman, and they have suffered, and it was always their CHOICE. Deionarra would have died for me if I'd asked her to. There was no CRIME." I wanted to yell at him more, but there was no point. I was looking at the ghost of this incarnation; his deeds were done, in the past, unchangeable.

"Tell me about Xachariah."

"The archer? Well, old sodden Xachariah could see things with his 'eyes' that I couldn't — and he could hit them with his arrows, too."

"So?"

"Well, I was walking into this Fortress blind in some ways — I didn't know what my killer was, so I needed someone who could see things I couldn't in case the enemy was beyond my visual range." He snorted. "Xachariah ended up dying too fast, though, so he wasn't any use in the end."

"You built that tomb beneath Sigil, didn't you? The one with the traps?"

"I'd almost forgotten — yes, what a waste that was." The incarnation seemed irritated. "Obviously, *that* didn't work. And it cost a lot of blood and coin, too."

"Worthless!" The paranoid incarnation broke into uneven laughter, but it was more gleeful than mad. "It was EASY to breach that child's trap. I found it… and CHANGED it. To make it HARDER. Changed the WRITINGS." The practical incarnation frowned at him; he looked like he was barely restraining himself from attacking the other.

"Yet *another* thing you will answer for…" He turned back to me. "Though I suppose it doesn't matter. It was shortly after the failure of the tomb trap that I decided to carry the battle to our killer rather than wait for him to show any longer."

"Were you the one who pried Morte off the Pillar of Skulls?"

"Is Morte still *alive?*" The incarnation stared for a moment in disbelief, then he started laughing. "Ha! That piking skull couldn't be trusted farther than I could throw him — claiming he had information when he didn't, *then* I had to go through the torment of prying him off the Pillar of Skulls, then he *feigned ignorance* once he was off of it." The incarnation scoffed. "I humored him, since he'd told me everything I needed from him."

"Feigned ignorance?"

"Oh, yes." The man smiled. "Once a liar, always a liar. It takes a stronger mind than the skull's to give me the laugh, though."

"Were you responsible for the tattoos on my back? The ones I read when I woke up in the Mortuary."

"The directions?" He nodded, irritated. "Of *course* I was responsible — I knew there was a *chance* I might fail here and lose my memories. I wanted future incarnations to benefit from some… guidance. So I had the directions stitched on my back, since such things – like *journals*…" He snarled, as if angry at himself. "Tend to be lost so *easily.*"

"The directions were kind of vague, though…"

"Are you a *fool?*" The incarnation looked exasperated. "The directions *needed* to be vague — I couldn't *spell* out exactly what was happening to us, so I left a signpost. What do you think would have happened if a Dustman had read them? Or someone even more barmy? How *quickly* do you think we would have been buried alive or cremated?"

"Were you the one who asked Pharod to get the Bronze Sphere from the catacombs?"

"Pharod?" The incarnation thought for a moment. "Oh, yes — the trash king with all the 'tough' bloods that thought I was easy prey…" He smiled slightly, as if recalling a pleasant memory. "After only a little bloodletting, I struck a bargain with him — he would see to it that if his men found me, they would take me safely to the Mortuary — and, of course, I needed the eyes and hands of his men to scour the catacombs beneath Sigil for me."

"A sphere made of bronze. Ugly. Feels like an egg to the touch, and it smells of rotten custard. Right?"

"Yes. I told Pharod it was the only thing that would save his miserable life… what a sniveling little dodger he was." The incarnation smiled at me. "You see, the old bastard was destined to end up on the Pillar of Skulls when he died, and he was desperately trying to weasel out of it. So I told him that there was an item beneath Sigil that would 'save' him from his fate, if he could only find it."

"But it *wouldn't* save him — it was just something you wanted him to find."

"Of *course* it was useless to him. One cannot dodge fate so easily." He looked at me, irritated. "However, nothing motivates a man faster than telling him what he seeks will save his soul from eternal damnation. I intended to take it from him after he

found it. It just that searching for it myself would have taken… too long." He smiled again. "And why should I do it, when I could have someone else hunt for me?"

"Actually, he ended up tricking *me* into finding it for him. Why was it so important?"

"Important? Do you not know?" The incarnation became silent for a moment. "Do you have it with you?"

"Yes, I do. I brought it with me."

"You *have* it?!" The incarnation's eyes flared. "Then your life had some use after all!" I watched his eyes flicker, as if thinking, calculating. "When we merge, I will see about finding a means to unlock it. Perhaps all is not lost…"

"What is the sphere? Why is it important?"

"It was a dead sensory stone." The incarnation was staring through me, as if seeing something far away. "Do you know what it contained?" He smiled ruefully. "It held the last experiences of the *first* of us. When we were one man, and not a string of incarnations." His voice dropped. "If there had been some way of unlocking it, I would have been able to see inside his *mind*…"

"And see why this all happened?"

"Yes…" The incarnation's face had become somber. "It is the answer I have always sought. Why this happened. Why we became immortal." He sighed. "And I fear we shall never know." The good incarnation interrupted.

"Perhaps there are no answers in such a thing. Perhaps there never was."

"*I* don't deal in the realms of perhaps and maybe." The practical incarnation sneered. "I seek answers. It is what has allowed us to get this far." He looked at the good incarnation with contempt. "If we had left life in *your* hands, we wouldn't have even a fraction of the truth we now possess. And in that truth, lies *power*." He turned to me. "You will realize that when we merge."

I turned away from him, to talk instead to the 'good' incarnation. A look of concern was on his face, and he spoke before I could.

"Are you all right?" I nodded to thank him for his concern, but asked a question of my own.

"Who are you?"

"Have we *ever* had a name? Or was it just the first of us?" The man chuckled softly. "Know that I am your ally in this — I,

like these others, have died my death in your mind, and this figment is all that remains."

"But who *are* you?"

"Ah…" His smile faded, and he looked at me with concern. "This must be disorienting for you. Let me try and explain — I am one of your incarnations. I was once lost, now I am here again."

"How is that possible?"

"I — do not know. Whatever you touched within the Fortress has brought pieces of yourself to the surface." He paused for a moment, thinking. "One of the others may know the means of how this came to be — but it is beyond me."

"If you are a part of me, there are things I must know."

"Ask."

"I have had countless lives. Why are there only three incarnations here?"

"I do not know. Perhaps we were the three pieces that were somehow still present in your mind."

"Present? How?"

"I do not know for sure, but I would guess that when we die, traces of the former personality may remain in your mind — and I know that sometimes we may make ourselves felt."

"How?"

"When you are about to place yourself in danger, or were close to a realization, for example, I found that I could stir, help prod you in the right direction."

"So *you* were that crawling sensation I kept feeling in the back of my skull?"

"I would be at a loss to describe how it felt to you, but it is possible, yes."

"I came to this Fortress with allies… but they have been separated from me."

"Then I fear your friends are already dead." The man looked pained. "This place bears a hatred for the living."

"Do you know why I wanted to become immortal?"

"No, I do not. I think it was done out of fear. Perhaps one of the others knows, but not I."

"What makes you think it was done out of fear?"

The man smiled slightly, but there was no humor in it; if anything, it was a sad smile. "What man wishes to die?" He shook his head slowly. "But only the first of us will ever truly know the reason that brought us to this state."

I considered asking him about merging back into me, but I hesitated. He was my only ally here; it would be better to try the others first.

I turned to the paranoid incarnation, asking who he was.

" KNOW that you will NOT last long in this place, THIEF!" Spittle flew from the man's mouth, and his face twisted in a maddening grin. " MAZES AND REGRETS AND DEATH are all that ARE HERE…" The practical incarnation glared at the paranoid incarnation, then turned to me, a sneer again on his face.

"You are wasting your time speaking to that one. His thoughts are all angles and spite and nothing more. Stop wasting time — there is much the two of us must speak of."

" THIEF!" The paranoid incarnation's hands twisted, as if strangling the other. "I will feel the bones of your neck SNAP beneath my fingers… take my BODY back." He turned to me. "You wear my body like a CLOAK, and you SHAME me…"

"I am no thief. I stole *nothing* from you." I replied.

" YOU STOLE EVERYTHING! I AWOKE ON THE STREETS OF THE RING CITY, AND ALL WHO SAW ME KNEW ME!" He took a rasping breath. "All that you had done, all that you had harmed — they were waiting for me, blaming me, hurting me, until I couldn't TAKE the voices any more…" His fingers grasped at the air. "And had to make them SILENT."

"What do you know of the other incarnations?" I asked.

" THIEVES. They are THIEVES — all of them. And THIEVES will DIE."

"Do not *threaten* me, you fool" retorted the practical incarnation, "I warn you. If anyone is the thief, it is you — you sought to steal our chances to settle this matter by sabotaging all my work!"

"You are the THIEF! You stole my body and my life!" This was going nowhere. I decided to ask about deeds I thought he had done, to confirm my guesses.

"The Sensory Stone trap — you're the one who left it for me, weren't you?"

"Yes…" He smiled, low and evil. "Simple trap. Trap for someone who can't die — MIND trap."

"You're the incarnation the Lady mazed, aren't you? I found your journal in the Lady's Maze."

"Simple escape, simple trap, broke her maze with ease, I did. I could have made it tighter, deadlier." He smiled. "She knew nothing of what it takes to trap ME."

"You're to blame for killing the Linguist Fin, aren't you?"

"There…" He seemed confused for a moment. "There were MANY that I killed. There were many that needed to be silenced." I felt pity for him at that moment, and I also thought I saw a way to sidestep his paranoia. I would speak to him in the language of the Uyo; he had murdered Fin to make sure there would be no other living speakers.

Language of the Uyo: (Let us speak in private, just the two of us.)

As I spoke the language of the Uyo, the incarnation's eyes widened, and he stared at me. After a moment of silence, he replied in the same language.

(Only I know the language of the Uyo. How do you know it?)

(You are correct: you are the only one who knows the language of the Uyo. So if I know the language of the Uyo, I must be you.) He was silent, staring at me.

(It is these *others* who are not you, for they do not know the language of the Uyo.) He nodded… slowly.

(I hear you.)

(This place confuses one's perceptions — we are both you, and now we must become as one.) He looked frightened.

"I…" To my surprise, he reverted to normal speech… and all the inflections to his voice were gone. It was calm, level, and much like my own. "I… no longer wish to live like this."

(You no longer have to. You have suffered much. You were born into a world where nothing made sense, where strangers claimed they knew you, they blamed you for things you knew nothing of, and they tried to hurt you… All the pain and worry and torment of your existence; I will wipe it away.)

He looked at me — and I watched as the incarnation lost its mad gleam, and his eyes became more like my own.

"Yes…"

(I will protect you now. You will know peace. For that is all you ever wanted, isn't it?)

The incarnation relaxed at my words, his eyes dimming as he locked gazes with me. There was the faintest of whispers, and he fell to the black stones — with his collapse, I felt a crawling sensation in the back of my skull…

And there was a FLOOD of memories, and strength, and emotions, and — I steadied myself, dizzy for a moment, then my vision cleared, and I was myself once more.

I turned to the practical incarnation. He affixed me with a stony gaze. He looked like he was sizing me up for weaknesses. I gave him a simple statement of truth.

"I intend to merge with you."

"So be it, then." His eyes became gray like mist, and he gave a slight smile, as if in anticipation. "We shall see what your mind has in store…" I was sure he felt I had recognized my own weakness, and surrendered. But I had found my own strengths on paths he would have sneered at. Besides, these other incarnations had had their day; I was the one who must meet the keeper of this fortress.

I locked gazes with him… his eyes were like stones, and they started to drag me down… but then I started to resist him.

As I swam in the corridors of his mind, the first emotion I encountered was surprise — and his eyes widened. He was not absorbing me; my will was stronger, and it was consuming *him.* I felt him desperately trying to pull back, but he could not — he was too weak, and my will blocked his retreat while drawing him deeper into my sub-conscious.

"This is the last time we shall ever speak. Return to death, where you *belong.*" He looked incredulous for a moment, then he disintegrated, and I felt a RUSH of knowledge pouring through me, fighting to the surface… it was almost too much to absorb at once, and I found myself disoriented. So much knowledge — so many experiences, that —

…and as quickly as it occurred, the rush subsided, and I steadied myself. The bits of knowledge swirled about in my mind, and I would have to make sense of them later. For now, only one piece of knowledge was important — that the incarnation did NOT know how to leave this place.

"Dammit…" I muttered. There was no longer any trace of the two incarnations I had absorbed in the room. I turned to the remaining incarnation, but I hesitated. Almost everything I had learned about my past lives had involved suffering, and torment. I desired to speak to this incarnation, to learn of pleasant things I might have done. More, I felt as though this incarnation were a friend, and I longed to pour my thoughts and fears out to him. But my friends doubtless needed me, and before me was only an echo of a past life, an echo I needed to merge back into myself if I ever hoped to escape this trap.

He smiled as he noticed I was done with my thoughts, and spoke, his voice carrying a faint echo. "Yes?"

"Before you said that when we die, traces are left in the mind. That's what caused you all to emerge. Right?" I continued before he could answer. "So, is it possible that the first of us — the real one of us, before all the incarnations, might still be buried somewhere in my mind."

The expression on the incarnation's face flickered for just a moment, but it was like a window, and I suddenly realized who it was I was speaking to.

"*You* were the first of us." The incarnation's eyes took on a haunted look, and his gaze turned away from mine.

"I know what you are thinking — but it is not the case. You think that knowing the mind of the first of us will somehow help you here, in this place. It will not."

"But why — I have so many questions that YOU can answer. Why did we become immortal? Why?"

"Because if we die, *truly* die…" The incarnation looked up at me, and his eyes were like steel. "Death's kingdom will *not* be paradise, not for us. If you spoke to these others that were here, know that a fraction of the evil of their lives is but a drop of water compared to the evil of mine. That life, that one life, even *without* the thousands of others, has given a seat in the Lower Planes for eternity."

"But you seem so much… calmer. More well-intentioned."

"I became that way, yes. Because for me…" His voice took on a strange echo. "It is *regret* that may change the nature of a man." He sighed. "But it was too late. I was already damned."

"I found that changing my nature was not enough. I needed more time, and I needed more life. So I came to the greatest of the Gray Sisters and asked her for a boon — to try and help me live long enough to rectify all the damage I had done. To make me immortal."

"And Ravel did. But when she first tested your immortality and killed you, you forgot everything. *Everything*." He looked broken at my words.

"And the Planes have been dying ever since. The crime is great, and the blame is mine."

"There are so many questions I have for you — who are you, what was your *life* like? Who—" The incarnation shook his head, cutting me off.

"When I become no more, when I merge with you, you will have the answers you seek. It may take some time to sort them out, but they are there." He smiled ruefully. "It is difficult to communicate a life with words."

"Very well, then… we shall become as one. Are you ready?" "One last thing… just this…" The incarnation paused for a moment, searching my features. "Before I return to oblivion — there is something I would know."

"I can spare a little time for this — what do you wish to know?" He studied my eyes, his expression somber, before asking his question.

"Did you *live* your life — the brief life you have had? In the end… was it worth it?"

"It seemed so…. short. What little I experienced, I enjoyed, and I do not wish to forget it." Despite the pain, I would never willingly give up the memories of my comrades, others I had met, even the streets of the Hive held a certain preciousness to me.

He nodded at my words, and I thought to see a slight lessening of tension in his features, as though my words had eased a burden he had carried; then he collapsed, the life running out of him and into me. As he fell to the black stones, I felt a crawling sensation in the back of my skull, making me shiver, and I knew the incarnation was no more.

ESCAPE

I had absorbed the ‘good’ incarnation, but he had been but an echo of my first incarnation, and doubtless not all of that incarnation’s memories had survived. But I had a record from the first incarnation, the sensory stone journal I had found for Pharod. It was time to make use of it.

As I held the sphere up this time and examined it, I felt the memories of the first of my incarnations stirring within me, but it was not an insistent or driving force — it was calm, like the thoughts of a man walking across a great distance to speak to a friend he hadn’t seen in ages. As I felt his presence in my mind, I saw the sphere in a different light — not as ugly, or hideous, but as something precious, like a newborn child — the sphere was the repository of my last moments, before I met Ravel on the Gray Waste and asked the impossible of her.

I knew why I asked her. And I knew that all I needed to do was touch the surface of the sphere with both hands and *feel* regret, and the stone would open itself to me.

The sphere wrinkled in my hands, the skin of the sphere peeling away into tears and turning into a rain of bronze that encircled me. Each droplet, each fragment that entered me, I felt a new memory stirring, a lost love, a forgotten pain, an ache of loss — and with it, came the great pressure of regret, regret of careless actions, the regret of suffering, regret of war, regret of death, and I felt my mind begin *buckling* from the pressure — so MUCH, all at once, so much damage done to others… so much so an entire FORTRESS might be built from such pain.

And suddenly, through the torrent of regrets, I felt the first incarnation again. His hand, invisible and weightless, was upon my shoulder, steadying me. He didn’t speak, but with his touch, I suddenly remembered my name.

…and it was such a *simple* thing, not at all what I thought it might be, and I felt myself suddenly comforted. In knowing my name, my true name, I knew that I had gained back perhaps the most important part of myself. In knowing my name, I knew myself, and I knew, now, there was very little I could not do. The first incarnation’s hand was gone from my shoulder, and he was watching me with a slight smile.

"That was my name all along? But if I was—"

The first incarnation held his finger to his lips, silencing me. He nodded at the symbol on my arm, as if indicating I should make use of it.

The symbol — the symbol of Torment — seemed brittle somehow, as if it was only barely holding itself to my skin. Unconsciously, I reached out and peeled it from my arm. It gave way with a slight resistance, like pulling off a scab. As I held the symbol, I knew I could harness its power. Holding it and invoking its power would summon all the pain and suffering from my past incarnations upon my foes. It no longer ruled me.

"I no longer wear the symbol. Does that mean…?" As I was halfway through my question, I realized there was a heavy silence within my mind — I could no longer feel the presence of the first incarnation within me.

I had faced three of my incarnations in this room. Following Deionarra's prophecy, I had also already faced shades of evil and good. I needed only to confront the shade of neutrality, the keeper of this fortress, to complete my quest. Curious, I thought to myself, how these two examples of the rule of three had dominated my journey.

I do not know how long I sat on the slab at the center of my prison, lost in thought, but when I became conscious of my surroundings again I was no longer alone. Before me was the ghostly form of Deionarra; her spectral gown seemed stirred by some ethereal breeze. Her eyes rested on mine, and I felt a strange, disjointed sensation, as if I was looking at several pairs of eyes at once.

"Deionarra…?"

"My Love, at last I have *found* you… I searched for you after you were divided by the crystal — this Fortress spans hundreds of miles, and I feared you were lost to me." Her ghostly eyes took my measure, searching my body for new wounds. "Are you well?"

"I think so — the crystal divided me, but I am one again. Now I am trapped here, however."

"I suspect trapping you here was the crystal's true purpose. But it poses no barrier for one such as I." She closed her eyes. "Much do my eyes see, and the halls of this Fortress are well known to me. If you are trapped here, my Love, I shall see to it you are set free. Where is it you wish to go?"

"I wish to speak to you for a moment, and tell you how you died… and why." I finally knew the full truth of how Deionarra

had come here. I had to tell her, even if the revelation were to cut off my only means of escape from my prison.

"What are you speaking of?"

"When I brought you to this Fortress, it was my intention that you die here. I needed someone to remain behind so that they would serve as a link to this place. I knew because you loved me so much, that your love would stave off death and allow you to become a spirit. And that is why you suffer now." Deionarra's face was a mask as I spoke the words.

"I am sorry, Deionarra."

"Do you *love* me? If you say yes, my Love, then nothing that has happened matters."

"Though I did not know you at first, I have come to love you. Your suffering has become mine, and I have found that I will do what I can to help you." This was the truth, just as it was true that I had come to love both Annah and Fall-From-Grace.

"Then I will aid you, my Love. Tell me how I can help you, and I shall do it."

"I am trapped here. Can you help me escape?"

"If you are trapped here, my Love, I shall see to it you are set free. Where is it you wish to go?"

"I wish to rejoin my friends."

"As you wish, My Love." She stretched out her hand. "Touch my hand, and the walls of this Fortress shall be walls no more." I touched her hand, and suddenly the walls around me faded to mist, then were gone. I was suddenly standing somewhere else, somewhere on the top of the fortress. I looked over knife-edged battlements, staring into the nothingness of the negative material plane. I turned back to Deionarra, but she was already fading. I was able to hear her voice, however, even after she had disappeared from view.

"I forgive what you have done. I shall wait for you in death's halls, My Love." It was all too likely the confrontation I was seeking would have me joining her very soon.

THE TRANSCENDENT ONE

I moved forward across the roof of the fortress, which was shaped like a cross. I had appeared at the end of one arm. As I neared the center of the cross, I suddenly cried out.

"Annah!" As I approached, I saw that the bodies of all my friends were neatly laid out about the center of the cross, like macabre trophies. Annah, Fall-From-Grace, Morte, Dak'kon, Nordom, they were all there. If my enemy had thought to weaken my resolve it was a fool's gambit. The only way I could justify my companions' sacrifice was if I completed my mission, either recombining with my mortality or seeing it destroyed.

Suddenly, a barbed, armored figure appeared in front of me. The figure spoke.

SO YOU HAVE COME. THEN YOU SHALL DIE AGAIN. YOU ARE UNWELCOME HERE, BROKEN ONE.

"What have you done to my friends?"

ARE THEY DEAD? YES. UNLIKE YOU, THEY HAVE BUT ONE LIFE, AND THEY WASTED IT FOR YOUR SAKE. THEY DIED FOR YOU AS THEY ALWAYS HAVE. SUCH IS THE WAY OF ALL MORTAL THINGS. IT IS THE FATE OF ALL THAT FOLLOW YOU, BROKEN ONE. YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN MUCH.

"Why did you do it?"

THEY TRIED TO HARM ME. *HERE*, OF ALL PLACES. I DEFENDED MYSELF. IN SO DOING, MORTALITY CLAIMED THEM. THEIR DEATHS WERE BY THEIR OWN HAND.

I GAVE THEM THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEPART THIS PLACE, BUT THEY SEEMED DETERMINED TO HELP YOU, DESPITE THE COST TO THEMSELVES.

"So you *killed* them."

THE TIEFLING GIRL WAS ESPECIALLY FIERCE IN YOUR DEFENSE. HER FEELINGS FOR YOU BURNED BRIGHTER THAN ELYSIUM'S FIRES.

AND THE TANAR'RI... SHE WAS QUITE STRONG. HER TOLERANCE FOR PAIN WOULD HAVE SHAMED THE BAATEZU THEMSELVES.

I TOOK NO PLEASURE IN THEIR DEATHS.

"Then why did you *do* it?"

IT WAS NOT MY WILL. IT WAS NOT I THAT BROUGHT THEM HERE. ALL OF THEM HAD A CHOICE. AND THEY CHOSE TO DIE FOR YOU.

IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE WAY OF ALL THAT FOLLOW YOU. FOR THEY ARE TORMENTED SOULS, SEEKING A RELEASE. BUT THEY KNOW NOT WHY.

YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN THIS. AND YOU SHALL AGAIN.

"I know you for what you are — you are my mortality. Your armor — it is twisted like tree branches. Such things speak of Ravel's magicks."

I AM THAT WHICH WAS SPLIT FROM YOU BY THE HAG'S POWER, FREED FROM THE PRISON OF YOUR FLESH.

I AM THAT WHICH WALKS WITH ALL LIFE. MY VOICE IS A DEATH RATTLE, A LAST BREATH IN THE THROAT, THE WHISPER OF A DYING MAN.

"Freed from me?"

THE MOMENT I WAS SPLIT FROM YOUR CANCEROUS SHELL, I KNEW LIFE. I KNEW FREEDOM. I SHALL NOT SURRENDER IT TO YOU.

"We were not meant to be separated. And the Planes have suffered because of our separation."

YOU KNOW *NOTHING* OF MEANING AND SEPARATION. BEFORE YOUR MEMORY DIES AGAIN, KNOW THAT WE WERE NEVER MEANT TO BE AS *ONE*. THIS SHALL BE THE LAST TIME YOU AND I SPEAK, BROKEN ONE.

I needed to question my mortality, to seek for a weakness. I also, even now, was still curious, still interested in knowing more about the creature before me.

"Then there is something I would know, spirit — I have traveled far, and there are many questions you can answer."

I WILL INDULGE YOU THIS ONE LAST TIME. THEN THIS FORTRESS SHALL BE SILENT AGAIN. ASK YOUR QUESTIONS. BUT KNOW YOU SHALL NEVER REMEMBER THE ANSWERS.

"You have done everything you can to prevent us meeting from face to face. Why?"

DO YOU THINK I *FEAR* TO FACE YOU, BROKEN ONE? I DO NOT.

"An iron golem, forged from the weapons of war, told me this once: When one kills from a distance and does not show himself, it speaks of weakness. It is how a *coward* fights."

MY ENERGIES ARE NEEDED TO SUSTAIN THIS PLACE, BROKEN ONE, ELSE IT WOULD BE *MY* HAND ON YOUR THROAT WITH EACH OF YOUR DEATHS. I MAY NOT TRAVEL BEYOND THESE FORTRESS WALLS FOR LONG.

"Yet, even when I was within the Fortress walls, you sent Ignus to try and stop me, when you could have stopped me yourself."

THE SORCEROR WAS... CONVENIENT. HIS RAGE FOR YOU RUNS DEEP. I THOUGHT IT FITTING HE BE ALLOWED *VENGEANCE* UPON YOU. IF THE PLANES CANNOT TEACH YOU MERCY, PERHAPS *PAIN* CAN.

"He wanted revenge? For my teaching him the way of the Art and making him suffer?"

YES. AS PAIN TAUGHT HIM, I THOUGHT PAIN MIGHT TEACH YOU. BUT THE SORCEROR WAS WEAKER THAN I THOUGHT, AND NOW YOU ARE HERE. SOON, THERE SHALL BE ENDING OF THINGS BETWEEN US, BROKEN ONE.

"So you sent Ignus to try and stop me… but when he failed, then you *still* didn't confront me, even when you could have — instead, you put that crystal in my path to imprison me."

YES, THE CRYSTAL IS A PRISON, PERHAPS ONE OF THE GREATEST EVER DEVISED. I USED IT, FOR I TIRE OF TRACKING YOU ACROSS THE PLANES, NAMELESS ONE. YOU ARE… *DIFFICULT* TO FIND.

"Why am I difficult to find?"

JUST AS THERE IS POWER IN NAMES, THERE IS POWER IN *NOT* HAVING A NAME. THE EYES OF THE PLANES SLIDE OFF SUCH A ONE. ONE SUCH AS YOU — AND ONE SUCH AS I.

I PREFER YOU BE KEPT CLOSE, WHERE I MAY WATCH YOU. THE CRYSTAL IS SUCH A PLACE WHERE YOU MAY BE KEPT. I WOULD KNOW *HOW* YOU FREED YOURSELF FROM THE CRYSTAL.

"I had help. The woman I brought here long ago, Deionarra, freed me."

AH… THE LOVE-TORN SPIRIT. THERE ARE TIMES I HAVE FELT HER ECHO IN THE HALLS OF THIS FORTRESS. SHE SHALL *NOT* FREE YOU AGAIN. THERE IS *NOTHING* IN YOUR SHELL OF A MIND THAT IS OF CONSEQUENCE, BROKEN ONE.

"Except that — from what the Pillar of Skulls told me, there were three that knew where you could be found and how to reach you — one is Trias, one's you, and the other is me. If you kill Trias and I, they'll be no one who knows who you are and how to find you."

YES, THE ANGEL THAT SHIELDS ITSELF WITH GOLDEN LIES. YOU LED ME TO HIM AT LAST. LIKE YOU, THE BETRAYER WAS DIFFICULT TO FIND. HE WILL DIE THE FINAL DEATH.

"So you used me to find him? You wanted me to kill him, didn't you, so his knowledge would die — then you tried to kill me, so *I* would forget where to find you."

I SEE TIME'S BLADE HAS NOT BLED YOUR MIND OF ALL REASON. MY PURPOSE WAS ALWAYS SUCH: TO MAKE YOU FORGET.

"But *why?* Why do—"

BECAUSE I NEVER AGAIN WISH TO SUFFER YOUR *PRESENCE*, BROKEN ONE. YOU ARE AN IRRITATION, A REMINDER OF WHAT LIFE ONCE WAS, AND I DETEST SUCH REMINDERS. I WISH TO BE LEFT IN PEACE IN MY FORTRESS. AS YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN ME, I WISH TO FORGET YOU. FOREVER. YOU LIE. YOU HAVE ALWAYS FORGOTTEN. AND I HAVE ALWAYS REMEMBERED. IT WAS ALWAYS SUCH.

" 'Always' doesn't mean what it once did. I have died, time and again, and my memories have returned to me."

YOUR DECEPTIONS WILL NOT *SHIELD* YOU HERE, BROKEN ONE.

"It is the truth. Killing me won't stop me — because killing me doesn't make me *forget* anymore. I'll know you always, I'll remember everything you've done, how to reach here, and eventually, how to destroy you."

THEN I SHALL IMPRISON YOU, NAMELESS ONE. IF YOU WILL NOT FORGET, THEN I SHALL NOT ALLOW YOU TO BE FREE.

"But I already escaped from 'the greatest prison ever devised.' You can't kill me, you can't hold me, and you can't make me forget myself any longer."

YES... BUT IT WAS NOT YOUR DOING. THE LOVE-TORN SPIRIT FREED YOU. SHE SHALL NOT DO IT AGAIN. ONCE I CRUSH THE BONES FROM YOUR BODY, I WILL TAKE YOUR LIMP SHELL AND SEAL IT WITHIN THE CRYSTAL. YOU SHALL NEVER WALK THE PLANES AGAIN.

"She won't *need* to. Why did you send shadows to kill me rather than trying to defeat me yourself?"

I SEND SHADOWS BECAUSE THEIR REACH IS LONG. YET IT IS *MY* EYES THAT GUIDE THEM.

"So the shadows can travel distances you cannot."

THERE IS *NOTHING* I CANNOT DO.

"Yet you never traveled beyond these walls to fight me… only sent shadows. I think you're *afraid* to confront me… or else you are lying to me, and there is another reason you remain here…"

YOU KNOW *NOTHING*.

"Why is sustaining this place so important for you? If you are truly as powerful as you say, why would you want to remain here? There is NOTHING here."

IT IS MY FORTRESS. IT IS MY HOME.

"And what a home it is, too. Mortared from my regrets, with nothing but the shades of those we've murdered filling its halls, abandoned relics of the past languishing beneath dust, and the life-draining energies of the Negative Material Plane to feast the eyes on. There are words for places like that — they're called *prisons.*"

EVERY WORD BETRAYS YOUR IGNORANCE, BROKEN ONE. THE FORTRESS IS *SILENT*. ALL THAT COMES HERE *DIES* BEFORE INTRUDING INTO MY PRESENCE. AND THE SHADOWS ARE QUIET CREATURES.

"I think you *have* to remain here, along with the shadows and the ghosts, because that's what you've become. I don't think you sustain this place at all. I think it sustains *you*."

I REMAIN HERE BY *CHOICE*.

"*Really?* So when you said you can't journey beyond this Fortress for long, you were lying? And how is it possible that a Fortress built from MY regrets needs YOU to sustain it?"

I WILL SEE YOU DIE A *THOUSAND* DEATHS FOR YOUR INSOLENCE, BROKEN ONE. YOU ARE AN INTRUDER WITHIN THESE HALLS, AND I SHALL SEE TO IT YOU *NEVER* RETURN.

"I may be immortal, but Ravel told me the ritual was flawed: Whenever I die, I lose a fraction of my mind. In time, after many deaths, I shall lose the ability to even think for myself."

IT IS OF NO MATTER. YOU CANNOT DIE. YOUR MIND MAY BE LOST, BUT YOUR FLESH WILL LIVE ON. THAT IS ALL THAT IS NEEDED.

" 'Needed?' Why?"

WE SHARE A LINK, YOU AND I, HOWEVER SMALL. I DO NOT WISH YOU DESTROYED, ONLY FAR FROM ME.

"Consider this: you say we are linked. So when I suffer, you must suffer as well. Perhaps you are trapped here *because* you suffer, but differently than I do."

THE WEAK SUFFER. I *ENDURE*.

"Is it possible that as I die the death of the mind with each of my deaths, you die the death of the body? As I lose spirit, you lose substance. That's why you find it harder and harder to leave this Fortress and travel beyond this plane. This Fortress is not only your prison, it's going to become your tomb."

IMPOSSIBLE.

"Is it? You said we were linked. Surely, you've felt your body wane over the past century — you even carry the branchings of Ravels' frame over yourself, and you *detest* her — but you need the frame over your spectral form to prevent yourself from decaying faster."

EVEN IF THERE WERE TRUTH IN YOUR WORDS, THERE IS NOTHING TO BE DONE. I WOULD SOONER DIE THE DEATH OF THE BODY HERE IN THIS FORTRESS THAN SUFFER EXISTENCE WITH YOU.

"So if I were to die, that link would be broken…"

YOU CANNOT DIE.

"Well, if I cannot die, then you can't exist. You're my *mortality.*"

PERHAPS ONCE. NO LONGER. I HAVE CHANGED. I HAVE TRANSCENDED AND BECOME SOMETHING GREATER.

I had had enough of my arrogant mortality. It was time to end this. But first, I wished to see if anything could be done for

my friends, for though they were dead, their spirits might still be nearby, and could be reunited with their flesh.

"My friends… I want their lives returned to them, and I want them to have free passage from this place."

NO. THEY ARE *DEAD*. DEAD THEY SHALL REMAIN.

"Why? *Can't* you save them? Don't you have the power?"

DO NOT *QUESTION* MY POWER HERE, IN THIS PLACE. THERE IS NOTHING I CANNOT DO, NOW THAT I AM FREE OF YOU. BUT IT IS NOT MY *WILL* THAT THEY BE SAVED. THEY CHALLENGED ME IN MY HOME, AND THEIR DEATHS SHALL BE REMINDERS TO ALL THAT CHALLENGE ME.

"I don't think you have a choice. I don't think you *can* resurrect them."

BROKEN ONE, IN THE SPAN OF YOUR FORGOTTEN LIFETIMES, I HAVE OBSERVED, LEARNED, AND GATHERED POWER WITHIN THE VAULTS OF MY BODY.

WHEN YOU FOUGHT IN THE BLACK DECADE WAR, ALL YOUR MILITARY KNOWLEDGE WAS CARVED IN MY MIND. WHEN YOU DANCED SORCERIES WITH LUM THE MAD, I LEARNED WITH YOU. ALL YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN, I HAVE *NOT*. THE POWER OVER LIFE AND DEATH IS BUT A MINOR DISPLAY OF MY POWER.

"So that link we share… it allows you to experience what I experience, learn what I learn…"

IT IS A SMALL THING, OF *NO* CONSEQUENCE.

"Deionarra told me that I could reverse death only when the victim had died close to me. But what she awakened in me — are you saying that was only a fraction of my power over life and death?"

YOUR MIND IS A BROKEN STONE, ITS EDGES DULL FROM MISUSE AND NEGLECT. EVEN IF YOU KNEW POWER, YOU WOULD NOT KNOW HOW TO HARNESS IT.

"If you claim *you* have the power, then I must have the power, too — even if I wasn't there at the moment of death."

YOU DO NOT HAVE THE YEARS NEEDED TO LEARN THE ARTS OF LIFE AND DEATH. YOU WILL FALL BEFORE ME.

I felt a stirring in my mind, and I suddenly realized I *did* possess the years needed to learn — for I knew it all once, across multiple incarnations. But the process would take time, and I knew my mortality would *not* allow me the time I needed, unless I made it. I had found a record stone from my practical incarnation, speculating on the purpose of the entry hall I had found myself in. I poured all the conviction from my lifetimes of experience into my next utterance.

"You know, as I made my way here, I opened that inner vault. Those greater shadows are running free in the Fortress — they're no longer locked in that chamber."

YOU *LIE*.

"Then see for yourself, if you don't believe me — I'm not going anywhere."

I SHALL RETURN AND THEN TAKE YOUR MEASURE, BROKEN ONE. IF YOU HAVE FREED THE SHADOWS, I SHALL *FEED* YOU TO THEM.

"Very well… I'll be here. IF you make it back."

I WILL TAKE YOUR MEASURE SHORTLY.

My mortality vanished. Immediately, I ran to Morte's corpse, to use my power. As I reached out, Morte suddenly spoke.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold up, chief. Uh… there's a few things I need to tell you."

"Morte…?! You're not dead!"

"Well, yeah — when you've been dead as long as I have, you learn to fake it really well. I've been kind of listening to your whole conversation. Use that power you got on someone else — I don't need it."

"So you were going to *lie* there while I got my ass handed to me?"

"Well, *yeah*, chief. It's not like you'd die. I mean, if you failed, you'd need someone to remember for you. Plus, you know how worthless I am in a fight — well, when I'm not taunting some mage or another…"

As my power touched him, Dak'kon took a staggered breath, then looked up weakly. It looked like he was barely clinging to life.

"Once, Dak'kon, you made the Pronouncement of Two Deaths as One. It is that time."

As I spoke the words, Dak'kon's eyes closed — for a moment, I thought he couldn't hold on to life any longer — then they opened, and his eyes were no longer the dead black I remembered. Instead, they carried the metal texture of his blade, and I knew that Dak'kon had become something *else* — something far more powerful. Dak'kon took a breath, then steadied himself, his blade *sharpening* as I watched.

"This blade is yours."

I reached out with my power, there was a rush of air, and Annah stirred — she raised her head slowly, then shook it, confused.

"I found my mortality, Annah — and it turns out it doesn't like me much. I need your help."

Annah eyes took on a steely glint, then she nodded.

"I'm gonna stand by yeh."

As my power touched Fall-From-Grace, she rose dizzily to her feet — even disoriented, she somehow managed to maintain her composure.

"Fall-From-Grace — we're at the Fortress of Regrets, and I found my killer; it's my own mortality — it's taken on a life of its own. I really need your help right now." She nodded, slowly; her strength seemed to return as she heard my words.

"I fear now that we have entered, this place will not easily let us go."

I reached out with my power, shaping the soul into Nordom's shape, slowly, until I felt it slipping back into the modron's body. There was a shudder from Nordom's frame, and he sprang to his feet.

"Nordom, I *really* need your help right now… I found my killer, and it's my mortality."

"Awaiting Order."

My mortality suddenly reappeared on the roof.

THIS WILL NOT HELP YOU. YOU ALL SHALL DIE.

I now felt confidant that we could defeat my mortality, but some of my comrades might die again in the process. Besides, my problems arose from the separation of my mortality, which destroying it would not solve. I thought I knew of a way to force my mortality to rejoin me. It would all depend on whether it hated me enough to prefer destruction to the alternative. Best of all, none of my friends need die. I cried out.

"Wait! I have one final question: What can change the nature of a man?"

THE QUESTION IS MEANINGLESS.

"Nonetheless, before there is an ending between us, I will hear your answer."

THEN THIS IS MY ANSWER, AND YOU ARE THE PROOF. *NOTHING* CAN CHANGE THE NATURE OF A MAN.

"If there is anything I have learned in my travels across the Planes, it is that many things may change the nature of a man. Whether regret, or love, or revenge or fear — whatever you *believe* can change the nature of a man, can."

THEN YOU LEARNED A FALSE LESSON, BROKEN ONE.

"Have I? I've seen belief move cities, make men stave off death, and turn an evil's hag heart half-circle. This entire

Fortress has been constructed from belief. Belief damned a woman, whose heart clung to the hope that another loved her when he did not. Once, it made a man seek immortality and achieve it. And it has made a posturing spirit think it is something more than a part of me."

YOUR DEFIANCE WILL HURT YOU MORE THAN ANY WOUND IN THIS PLACE. BELIEF CANNOT CHANGE THE NATURE OF A MAN.

"I think it can. I think belief could even unmake me, if I believed it *enough.*"

YOU DO NOT POSSESS THE FORCE OF WILL FOR SUCH A THING.

"So you admit it's possible."

DO NOT TRY MY *PATIENCE*, BROKEN ONE.

I focused my will inwards, centering myself.

YOU ARE A *FOOL* TO THINK YOU CAN ACHIEVE SUCH A THING. YOU CAN BARELY KEEP YOUR OWN TATTERED MIND INTACT. THERE IS NOWHERE LEFT FOR YOU TO FALL, BROKEN ONE.

I kept focusing.

STOP. YOU KNOW *NOT* WHAT YOU DO.

"I know what I do. You have tormented me enough, and now it ends."

IF YOU DO THIS THING, *WE* SHALL BE UNDONE. THERE IS NO ONE FATE HERE. YOU DESTROY US BOTH.

"As I see it, I have two choices — either I kill us both, or I let you kill me again and again, losing what few pieces of my mind I have left. I think I'd prefer we both die — UNLESS you have a THIRD solution."

THERE IS NO OTHER RESOLUTION TO THIS MATTER.

"I think there is — we can become one again, as we were meant."

YOU KNOW NOT WHAT YOU DO. IF WE ARE RE-UNITED, THEN IT SHALL BE AN ENDING. THERE SHALL BE NO *FUTURE* FOR US. WE SHALL GO ON TO FURTHER TORMENTS.

"It is better *that* happen than the multiverse continues to suffer because of us."

IF WE BECOME ONE, WE SHALL SUFFER. THERE IS TOO *MUCH* OF THE NATURE OF THE FIRST ONE IN US FOR US TO BE SAVED. WE SHALL BE DAMNED. YOU KNOW NOT WHAT YOU DO.

"No, I know very well what I do. And I think this is the only answer. Prepare yourself."

KNOW THAT I HAVE ALWAYS *HATED* YOU, BROKEN ONE. WHEN WE ARE ONE, I WILL CONTINUE TO *HATE* YOU. WHEN YOUR SHELL DIES AT LAST, KNOW THAT I SHALL TAKE *PLEASURE* IN YOUR DEATH.

"I can live with that — and so can the planes."

KNOW THAT MY HATRED FOR YOU WILL *UNMAKE* THE PLANES. PREPARE YOURSELF. WE SHALL BE AS ONE AGAIN — UNTIL YOUR LAST MOMENTS OF LIFE.

"Very well. I am ready to become mortal again." My mortality surrendered its will. Finally, after so many lifetimes, and deaths, and regrets, we were one again.

FAREWELL

* * *

I turned, and called out Morte's name. He drifted over to me.

"Uh, chief, what happened to your *voice?*"

I… AM SOMETHING ELSE NOW. TIME RUNS SHORT, AND SOON TIME AND FATE WILL CATCH UP WITH ME. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, MORTE, IF YOU WISH IT.

"Wh —? Return me? What about *you?* Come on, chief, I may be a *coward,* but there's no way I'm leaving you in this place."

MANY ARE THE CRIMES THAT WERE COMMITTED WHEN MY MORTALITY AND I WERE SPLIT. THESE CRIMES CARRY A… PRICE. YOU MAY NOT GO WHERE I WILL SOON BE.

"Well, I *could* go with you anyway, chief, if you wanted me to — I mean, we've been through wors—"

NOT THIS TIME. PERHAPS ONE DAY YOU AND I WILL MEET AGAIN, ON ANOTHER PLANE. BUT NOT NOW. Morte stared at me for a moment, then sighed.

"Not to get all misty-eyed, but, uh, it's been a pleasure, chief."

FAREWELL, MORTE. I turned to Annah.

ANNAH. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? Annah's eyes widened as I addressed her.

"Wh — what *happened* ta yeh? Yer voice — it's like echoes, it is."

I HAVE CHANGED. I AM SOMETHING ELSE NOW, AND I CANNOT REMAIN HERE MUCH LONGER. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, IF YOU WISH IT.

"Wh—" Annah opened her mouth, then paused. "Wh — Where are *yeh* goin'?"

MANY ARE THE CRIMES THAT WERE COMMITTED WHEN MY MORTALITY AND I WERE SPLIT. THESE CRIMES CARRY A… PRICE. THERE IS A PLACE RESERVED FOR ONES SUCH AS I ON THE LOWER PLANES. IT IS… PUNISHMENT OF A SORT.

"But I… I don't *want* yeh ta go."

I WILL NOT FORGET HOW MUCH YOU WERE WILLING TO SACRIFICE FOR ME, ANNAH.

Annah nodded. She looked like she was about to say something else, but then fell silent — but the unspoken thought remained in her mind, lingering.

I DO NOT NEED YOUR WORDS TO KNOW YOUR HEART, ANNAH. FAREWELL.

I turned to Dak'kon.

DAK'KON OF SHRA'KT'LOR, LAST WIELDER OF THE *KARACH* BLADE. As he heard my words, Dak'kon slowly nodded.

"Your voice… have you at last come to *know* yourself?"

YES. IT WAS A… DIFFICULT THING, AND IT COST MANY LIFETIMES. MANY SUFFERED SO THAT I MIGHT KNOW MYSELF AGAIN.

"The *knowing* of one's self is a difficult path."

IN KNOWING IT, I KNOW WHERE I SHALL SOON BE BOUND. TIME AND FATE COME HERE EVEN AS WE SPEAK, AND I WILL NOT BE HERE MUCH LONGER. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, DAK'KON, IF YOU WISH. Dak'kon fell silent for a moment; when he spoke again, his voice was sharp, as if severing a link.

"*Know* that once I owed you a debt. *Know* that you saved my life, and *know* that I followed you to settle that debt. I have paid for your life with mine. The debt is settled."

VERY WELL, DAK'KON. OUR TWO DEATHS WERE AS ONE. YOU WILL LEAVE THIS PLACE WITH YOUR FREEDOM.

I faced our gentle tanar'ri.

FALL-FROM-GRACE. Fall-From-Grace looked up, and she held my eyes for a moment, then she smiled — but it was a slight smile, that carried more sadness than anything else.

"So you have found yourself at last?"

YES. THE PRICE WAS… HIGH. THE COST WAS MANY LIFETIMES, MINE AND OTHERS.

"The price of such a thing is seldom measured in copper." Fall-From-Grace studied my features. "Are you still —"

I AM STILL THE ONE YOU KNOW — BUT MY PERSPECTIVE HAS… CHANGED. I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN YOU, IF THAT IS YOUR FEAR. Fall-From-Grace smiled again, the same sad smile as before.

"No, that was not my fear."

I CANNOT REMAIN HERE FOR MUCH LONGER. MY PUNISHMENT CALLS, AND FATE AND TIME SHALL SOON BE HERE. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, IF YOU WISH.

"That is not my wish." Fall-From-Grace reached forward, and her hand lightly touched my arm. There was a slight tingling sensation, barely felt, then she took it away. "I *will* find

you again, no matter where in the Lower Planes you will be — just as you shall be able to find me."

IT MAY BE A LONG TIME. WHERE I AM BOUND, TIME IS NOT MEASURED IN YEARS. AND THE CRIMES I HAVE COMMITTED ARE STRONGER THAN ANY CAGE.

"No cage shall separate us, and no Plane shall divide us." Fall-From-Grace's face became like stone. "Keep thinking of me, and we shall meet again."

I SHALL NOT FORGET ALL YOU SACRIFICED FOR ME.

She shook her head. "Just do not forget me."

TIME LAYS WASTE TO ALL THINGS. BUT I SHALL FIGHT IT AS LONG AS I CAN.

"Time is not your enemy. Forever is."

PERHAPS SO. FAREWELL, GRACE.

I turned to the last of my friends.

NORDOM.

Nordom blinked, the shutters of his eyes *kliking* rapidly, then the shutters contracted to points, as if he was squinting at me. "Your voice x-ceeds standard recognized parameters."

I HAVE BECOME... WHOLE AGAIN. I HAVE CHANGED, BUT I SHALL NOT BE HERE MUCH LONGER. I WILL RETURN YOU TO SIGIL, NORDOM, IF YOU WISH.

"Query: Where is your next destination? Nordom will follow and protect you."

I HAVE COMMITTED MANY CRIMES ACROSS MANY LIFETIMES. I GO NOW TO A PLACE OF PUNISHMENT. YOU CANNOT COME WITH ME.

"Branching query: Do you not (require) or do you not (want) presence of Nordom?"

YOU CANNOT FOLLOW, NORDOM. IT IS NOT MY CHOICE. THERE ARE OTHER POWERS THAT NOW RULE MY ACTIONS. THEY ALWAYS DID, BUT NOW THEY KNOW ME FOR WHAT I AM, AND THEY COME EVEN AS WE SPEAK.

Nordom *whrrr-kliked* for a moment, then his crossbows begin *klikking* and *twanging* in his hands.

"Nordom surrenders gratitudes. You helped Nordom find his identity."

AS YOU HELPED ME FIND MINE. I GIVE YOU YOUR FREEDOM, NORDOM. EXPLORE, LEARN, GROW. WE MAY MEET AGAIN, ON ANOTHER PLANE, IN A TIME FAR FROM NOW.

"Response: Heard and acknowledged. Nordom now awaiting said day."

HOLD ON TO YOUR LOGIC, NORDOM. YOU WILL FIND IT A GREATER SHIELD THAN MOST OF THE PASSIONS THAT RULE THE PLANES.

"The issue no longer equals total logic."

FAREWELL, NORDOM.

* * *

A man, a mortal man, stood on the battlements of a fortress. His friends had been sent to Sigil. The shadows which once roamed the halls beneath him had been set free. The crenellated wall his hands rested upon was no longer sharp-edged, but crumbling, as if the regrets which once sustained it had faded away. The man stared at nothing, thought of nothing, in a rare moment of peace in his lives. Soon, his fate would catch up to him, and he would take his place in the Blood War. But not just yet.