

ABSTRACT

HOLLOMON IV, JAMES ARTHUR. *Fragments*. (A Novel under the direction of Dr. John Kessel.)

Alex is a young man losing control of his life. Almost a year after his fiancée of three years abruptly ended their engagement, he finds himself still tormented by both his ignorance of what precipitated the dissolution and his inability to conceive of himself without her in his life. His self-image shattered, he descends into cycles of self-recrimination and destructive behavior that alienate his friends and family and leave his personal and scholastic lives in shambles. Desperate to save himself, he attempts to recall who he was before his break-up, but doing so only feeds the darkness growing inside him.

Viridian is an arbiter, a cybernetic-augmented defender of “reality” in a futuristic city where “logic” and “truth” are upheld as sacred laws and enforced at gunpoint. But when he catches a glimpse of a horror that lies just beyond the fragile veil of his reality, he finds himself under trial by the same virtues he upheld. Branded as tainted by what he has seen, the only hope for his redemption lies in giving up his basic humanity to combat the growing tide of deviancy at its source.

Kazin is the last in a long line of shamans for a good reason; the land he has sworn to protect is dying, withering away under the effects of a mysterious blight. Unless he can somehow find a way to replenish the source of the land’s energy and sever the ties to the spirit that no longer supports it, his people will all perish. Yet doing so requires the aid of primal forces of destruction that his kind imprisoned long ago. In order to succeed, he must make a bargain with demons of a bygone age.

And all three of these characters are the same person.

Fragments is a story of loss, and the strange workings of the mind as it tries to rationalize and circumvent the pain of losing something precious. Through the mental escapades of a character’s alternate selves, we see how the self fights for its identity, the heart struggles to survive, and how in every brain are many minds just waiting for the right catalyst to run wild.

FRAGMENTS

By

James Hollomon

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In

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Approved by:

DEDICATION

*This story is dedicated to the two most influential women in my life:
The one who helped cause the problem and the one who helped solve it.
Both my eternal contempt and my eternal gratitude are theirs;
I think they know which one of them gets which sentiment.*

*And also to my mother and father, for their support and patience,
And above all, their love for me when I felt I had none left.
You were both right, I'm happy to say.*

BIOGRAPHY

Born seven days prior to the end of the Year of the Dragon in 1977, James Arthur Hollomon IV was once foolhardy enough to attempt to cure his arachnophobia by purchasing a tarantula (it worked.) He began telling stories at the age of four after his father made the mistake of showing him how to operate a tape recorder. A self-taught illustrator, painter, and sculptor, he turned away from pursuing visual arts as a career at age nine because “there’s no money in it.” His writing, however, served him well; a short story describing the unhappy fate of a magician’s apprentice named Kazin netted him a merit scholarship to Wofford College in the fall of 1995. *Fragments* is his third long narrative work, and he hopes that it will not be his last. As of this writing in the spring of 2006, James lives in Raleigh with his indispensable wife Ellie Feddersen (who kept her maiden name because her initials spell “ELF,”) their shih-tzu Sprocket (who, like his *Fraggle Rock* namesake, is really a Muppet,) and two black cats, Newt and Ripley.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks goes to Dr. John Kessel.

This novel would not be complete without his patience and encouragement.

Thank you for your guidance, and for helping me get over my fears.

It is an honor to have worked with you.

All songs and lyrics were written by Ronan Harris of VNV Nation

“Kingdom,” “Rubicon,” and “Distant (Rubicon II)” appear on the album Empires

“Epicentre” appears on the album Futureperfect

“Entropy” appears on the album Matter + Form

Thanks for letting me hear the sound of courage.

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PART ONE:

SHATTER

*Nothing I can do that I have not done;
No words I can say, no truths left that I can see;
So must I let this end, let everything fall apart,
Before I live my life as I have always done?
Tell me what to do so I do nothing wrong;
Something I can hope for, something real that I can see,
So nothing falls apart, so this does not end;
I cannot return; I can't start again.*

-- VNV Nation, "Rubicon"

Failure is an ugly color. Mainly brownish yellow, tinged with green and gray, and certainly not the kind of color that Crayola would ever put in the 128 pack, failure colored his life and filled it with its stink, something between burning hair and wet newspaper.

He stared at the mostly-blank *Word* document that was supposed to be his master's thesis and took another pull off his Red Dog. He'd lived with failure for the better part of the past year. It assaulted him whenever he looked in the mirror and studied his sinking cheeks, his haunted, guilty eyes. It waited for him in the halls of the English department, where his professors gazed at him with pity or contempt, apparently aware of how he had let his potential and obligations fall by the wayside in his desperate bid to save a meaningless relationship. His computer games entertained him with failure, letting him sink further and further into it in ever more interesting ways. He heard his failure breathing on the phone lines whenever he lied to his parents about how his studies were going, and saw it stalking him in the aisles of booths at work, a hateful word permanently clenched in its teeth: *waiter*.

He turned away from the screen and rubbed his eyes. His bedroom was dark except for the stinging glow of the monitor; the contrast was starting to make his eyes ache. Through the ground-level window, he could see the leaves of the camellia bushes dancing under the barrage of rain in the fuming orange light of the parking lot posts. The clock on his nightstand displayed 3:38 in unforgiving red blocks. He yawned and turned back to the screen.

It's funny, he thought, how you actually have to wait for your brain to make sense out of these little black shapes on the screen before you can identify them as words. He looked at the empty bottle in his hand and wondered if it was his fifth or sixth.

He read back over what he had written, absently stroking his goatee. All he could see was the worthless shit that he couldn't quite remember having typed. Some piece of junk science fiction story about a machine winding down slowly on a dead world in the galactic middle of nowhere, pondering its own existence and trying to rationalize that it was essentially going to die. It was the expanded version of the lyrics to Gary Numan's "M. E." He grimaced and switched off the monitor with a stab of his thumb. He didn't bother to save his work anymore because he never wrote much worth saving.

Getting out of his chair and stretching, he noted again that his bedroom seemed to be colder than it should have been. Gooseflesh stood out on his thin arms, and he rubbed them briskly. He briefly considered putting another call in to the maintenance hotline, asking them to stop by and check his window for leaks or broken seals. But he knew that without him there to supervise them, they would simply come into his apartment, fart around for a few minutes, and leave yet another yellow service order on the cocktail table saying that they couldn't find any problems. After all, hadn't they done just that when he'd called them out to replace the moldy carpet padding left over from when his water heater had sprung a leak this past winter? His sinuses seemed to think so.

Outside the rain had slacked off. The tattoo on the side of the building had diminished from a pulsing big-top drum roll to a sporadic smattering of golf applause. The wind, however, had increased. It howled raggedly around the corner of the building. Pulling the blinds apart, he saw the spindly pines sway. Living wood creaked softly. Every so often, a fresh batch of spring green leaves, made shiny by rain and sodium streetlight, would skitter past his window.

"This should be a great night for writing," he said to no one. "It was a dark and stormy, yadda yadda, bullshit." He smiled. At least Bulwer-Lytton had been published.

He pulled the last drop of beer from his bottle and dropped it on top of the others in the black wire wastebasket beside his bed. The blue-white clink of glass was a clear signal: he was done for the night. According to the clock, he'd have to be at work in just over six hours... which might not be so bad, if only it didn't involve waiting tables.

The thought of work was enough to override the mellow taste of the beer in his mouth and turn it to bile. There were some days he had wanted to brain more than a few customers with the aluminum tea urns. Yesterday had been one of those days, a straight-through double open to close, sections eight and eleven with barely a table between one-thirty and four o'clock. The down time was nice, but the rushes had been a ripe orange slice of hell. He'd spent most of the night "in the weeds," sucking up to the steaming herd animals that were supposed to be his "guests" and screaming at the kitchen to read his order tickets before sending out something he'd just have to bring back a few moments later.

All told, at the end of the night he'd managed to accumulate seventy-eight dollars worth of comped tickets, none of which he believed were directly his fault. But that didn't matter to his "guests," apparently, and his apologies weren't good enough to convince them to leave him a pittance. It was always the server's fault in their eyes. Food taking too long? He should go back to the kitchen and cook it himself. Lettuce a bit wilted on the Cobb salad? He needed to take a gardening class. All out of Yuengling? Well, he should quit drinking it on the job, because he was a lazy half-wit and they all knew he did.

On nearly six hundred dollars in sales and after tipping out the bar and busboy, he'd walked out of the restaurant at 11:39 with just over sixty-seven bucks, so he wasn't exactly full of the milk of human kindness. He had reached the conclusion that the viability of one's genes should be directly linked to gratuity left, and that bad tippers should be enrolled in a Nazi eugenics program. The pepper mills were just the right length and heft to serve as a cudgel, he thought with a vicious grin.

The sight of the active handset in his right hand put an abrupt halt to his misanthropy. The green eye of the phone's digital display panel was already showing half of her number. His heart lurched before he had time to fool himself into believing that he'd meant to call her. He didn't even remember when he'd picked up the phone. As he sat down on his bed the rebound of the mattress threatened to empty his stomach. He slowly replaced the phone in the cradle on his nightstand.

"Just a slip," he said. His voice was tight. "Because I'm shot, I slipped. That's all. I'm done, over it." He hoped saying it would slow his heartbeat. It didn't.

The last time he could remember any answer at that number had been New Year's Eve, when he'd spoken awkwardly with her mother, and it was almost May now. No, wait, he corrected himself. There was the call he'd made on Easter, when she'd actually picked up the phone and spoken to him. As if on cue, those three painfully cryptic sentences that ended the brief conversation played out again:

"So... are you seeing anyone?" he'd asked. A mistake.

"Sort of... I can't talk to you about it, because you'll get angry." Her voice was cautious, cool.

"What do you mean?" Not surprised, but still hurt.

"Look, I can't talk right now, I have to go."

"Kari, wait!"

“I can’t, Alex.”

Click.

He’d driven the rest of the way home in silence, no CDs, no radio.

After that, the phone rang unanswered every time he tried to call, which thankfully had not been often. He ground his teeth. She at least owed him an explanation, he thought. You just can’t throw three years and an engagement away without a damn good reason, right? He remembered picking out children’s books with her, both of them sitting cross-legged in the aisle in Barnes & Noble, laughing and mooning over the child they were going to have... someday. The memory gagged him.

She had been the one person who’d never given up on him, even if she did go to great lengths to disguise it.

You’ll get angry.

Was she protecting someone? Who? From what? Was he supposed to be dangerous now? When did that happen?

The thought of his former fiancée being with anyone other than him was enough to drive fresh spikes of disgust into his gut. He could picture it vividly, and he wished he could erase his own memories just as easily as the seven other thesis ideas that had already fallen apart. He didn’t revile the memories of his time with her, but forgetting her would make the images meaningless – the curve of her hip, the red highlight in her black hair, her sly, sideways grin

Snap out of it, he told himself angrily. Quit it before you start crying again. He looked at his left wrist, at the short thin ribbon of scar that ran toward his elbow.

“Absolutely no more of that shit,” he hissed. “No more.”

You always were a coward, a dark part of him asserted.

He squeezed his eyes shut. The critic was back. He cursed ever trying the self-help books in the first place – they hadn’t silenced the voices of his doubt, they’d only given them another identity, pedantic and consoling.

Anger began to stir as he remembered his weakness, and the tendons in his wrist pulled his hand into a fist. He smiled, eager for the rage to break the surface and rear its flame-wreathed head. “Come on,” he

whispered into the darkness. “Come on and let it out, be done with it, write her out and get on with your life.”

But nothing came.

That’s not how you are anymore, he thought.

Sadness washed back over him, singing his failure in loud, tuneless wails.

It’s only fitting, the deprecating voice cajoled. *It serves you right for being so stupid as to base your entire life around something as insubstantial as the love of a –*

The crash of the bottle against the bedroom wall (when did I get another one? he thought dimly) silenced the blame. Failure-colored beer painted the wall in a fan from the shattered glass.

“I didn’t deserve this,” he shouted to his room.

Angry pounding from the other side of the wall shamed him into silence.

Well, that’s a start. Keep it up.

He hung his head and tried to call up some therapeutic tears. None would come to his burning eyes; he only cried when he didn’t want to, never when he needed.

You always did think it was too good to be true, said the critic. *And you do so love being right*. And with those words, the Litany of Ifs began to ring through his head.

If only he’d been more understanding with her when she’d started to pull away. If only he’d not been so insistent that she tell him why. If only he’d not beaten himself up in front of her, lost his cool, and (*just say it, it’s all right*) scared her off. If only he’d been able to let go when the time came. Maybe he’d have salvaged his studies, his career, and his drive. Maybe he wouldn’t have gotten lost. The list went on dismally.

He shook his head. The sudden movement clashed with the gray sluggishness of his vision and nausea washed over him in waves. He took three shallow breaths and held the last one until his brain could safely tread water. But his mind wouldn’t leave her alone. It continued presenting him with snapshots of trivia: the gold rings in her green irises, the three gray hairs hidden on the back left of her head, the pair of tiny freckles like fang marks in the hollow of her right breast. He sighed and lay back on the stale, rumpled sheets. If I can just get to sleep, that will put an end to the slideshow, he told himself.

At least until you start dreaming about her. Again. That’s feature-length.

The beer was sloshing in his stomach with every breath he took. He rolled onto his side and felt it pool thickly against his flesh, flattening against the mattress. Outside the wind maintained its flat vibrato. He found a stray edge of blanket and pulled it up over his shoulders, dimly aware that he was still wearing his clothes, even his socks. The red numbers of the alarm clock silhouetted the phone in its cradle. He stared at it, half expecting it to sprout jointed legs and run at him, her number stamped like a death sentence on its blazing idiot face. As he sank below consciousness he could hear her voice – reproachful, sorrowful, and tired.

“I can’t talk to you about it, because you’ll get angry, you can’t understand, you’re nothing to me, you’re nothing to anyone, you’re nothing, you’re...”

“... in too deep, repeat. Thy position has been compromised. deviant reinforcements hath surrounded and cut off Yellow squad. Advise immediate retreat to sector beta-four-three-ought-nine via subsidiary access portal nine-delta-four-four...”

The drone of the commlink died in a wash of static.

So they have disabled the local commgrid, he thought. For insane heretics, these vermin are remarkably resourceful.

He grimaced and removed the commlink from his aural interface port with a counterclockwise twist. Another shower of glass and steel rained down on his head; the other three members of his squad returned fire. A wet cry sounded from behind the deviants’ makeshift barricade of debris before a fresh volley of grav-fire vomited forth in violet brilliance. Seventeen centimeters above his left shoulder, the wall exploded in a white-hot flash of spinning concrete fragments. Reflexively he rolled onto his right shoulder and snapped off two shots from his bolt pistol. The deviant snipers ducked back behind their cover. He rose to his feet. With a single deliberate wave of his pistol, he ordered his squad mates to flank him and press the attack. They rolled silently forward, identical ghosts in charcoal and bronze with weapons trained on the obstruction blocking the narrow alley between the tenements.

By the time the first head appeared over the barricade and subsequently dissolved in a crimson spray, Green squad had advanced within two meters of their enemy. The surviving seven reality deviants scrambled from their hiding places in a disorganized retreat, desperately trying to train their scavenged weapons on the arbiters. Three were cut down before they could raise their rifles, their bodies shredded by supersonic barbed spikes of white-hot ceramic polymer. Two more fell in the shrieking arc of his force maul. The weapon crackled loudly as its glowing energy field ruptured flesh and powdered bone. The two surviving deviants turned to flee, but were brought down with well-placed shots from his pistol before they managed three strides.

With a grunt, he vaulted over the low barrier. The alley rang as his armored boots hit the blood-slick concrete. He kicked the still twitching corpse of a deviant out of his way. The man’s body was a patchwork mosaic of meaningless tattoos, piercings, and grafts. Such meaningless savagery, he thought, surveying the alley before him, his ocular implants effortlessly accommodating for the smoke that choked the passage to the

Tertiary Register's office. The way was clear of hostiles; the grid-lined gray walls of the tenements stretched silently toward the matching sky, patiently awaiting repairs once the fighting was done. He could hear more gunfire and shouting somewhere ahead. Yellow squad shone as a bright green blip on his HUD surrounded by amorphous red clots of deviants. "Squad all forward," he barked, his voice distorted and hollow through the external speakers of his mask. "Brothers Beryl and Sage take point. Brother Emerald, guard against encroachment from behind."

"Affirmed, Alpha Viridian," all three replied at once, their voices equally metallic and flat through their rebreathers. Beryl and Sage moved to pass him, their footsteps in perfect synchronicity so as not to alert any enemies of their number. Even the hiss of their breathing was in perfect time. Emerald spun on his heel, leveled his heavy bolt cannon at the mouth of the alley, and froze, utterly motionless save for the slight swaying of his armored greatcoat. Viridian allowed himself a small, satisfied smile behind the grill of his rebreather; Emerald was perfectly reliable and unshakable in his adherence to the real, an arbiter of the highest caliber. He could say the same for Beryl. But Sage troubled him; the young Arbiter showed skill and admirable zeal, but he had only cleared final conditioning three standard months prior to this new outbreak of deviancy. He was inexperienced in combat, and the latest recruits had already earned a reputation for unreliability. If only Verdigris hadn't been...

He ground his teeth. Verdigris was gone. This was real, and to wish him back was heretical. Viridian muttered the Chant of Immutable Law under his breath and advanced to join his brothers standing at the arched end of the passage and firing shots into the Tertiary's courtyard.

On his HUD, Yellow Squad's indicator had dimmed significantly. He willed the image to magnify, and was not surprised to see that only two members of the four man squad were still emitting vital signs. Viridian doubled his pace, heading for the mouth of the alley. Sage and Beryl heard him coming and, recognizing the distinct ring of Arbiter boots on the pavement, crouched into covering positions and began to spray the courtyard with hails of bolts.

Behind him, Viridian heard the rasping cough of Emerald's cannon. A quick glance at his HUD showed his squad mate almost totally surrounded by shifting red blips, all trying to funnel into the narrow alley. Each time a pseudopod of aggressors tried to reach into the opening, Viridian saw it shrink back into the main

mass to the sound of gunfire and agonized screams. And although getting to the barricade would only take Emerald three, maybe five strides at top speed, doing so would leave him open to fire for a few seconds, and the deviant scum wouldn't be likely to waste such an opportunity. Emerald carries only four belts of ammunition, he thought grimly. It is only a matter of time before he is overwhelmed. Viridian was torn. His duty was clear – he had ordered the attack, he had to commit to the battle. The lives of the surviving members of Yellow squad depended on his swift and relentless assault.

“Alpha! Get down!” a metallic voice blared.

Viridian snapped back to attention just in time to duck a spiraling incendi-frag missile. It screamed past his head and struck the side of the tenement building seven meters behind him with a howling detonation. The majority of the glowing orange shrapnel bounced futilely off his greatcoat and shining bronze carapace armor, but a few small pieces slashed across his exposed forehead and cheeks. Another shard embedded itself in the chink between his right pauldron and breastplate, while still another ricocheted loudly from his armored scalp. He grunted in pain and slammed into a crouch behind Sage, who was already exacting just retribution on the crew of the missile launcher.

“Art thou injured, Alpha?”

“I am sound, Brother Sage, thanks to thy vigilance,” Viridian said. His gauntleted fingers seized the hot jagged blade that had pierced his armpit. He wrenched it free and threw it on the ground. His blood was burned onto the metal.

What in the name of blessed reality is wrong with my head, he wondered? I should have seen the danger!

“Reality affirms thee,” Sage replied with a barely perceptible nod. He fired calmly at the deviant attempting to reload the missile launcher. Glowing spikes ripped through the heretic's torso; the round he carried exploded, setting off a chain reaction among the remaining missiles. The launcher was engulfed in a swirling cloud of white flame. Five burning, wailing figures scattered from the wreckage.

“Green squad, advance into the courtyard. Leave no deviant alive. Brother Emerald, execute combat retreat and rejoin thy brothers. I shall aid thee shouldst thou require – please acknowledge. Out.”

“Affirmative, Alpha,” came the prompt reply. “Executing combat retreat. I tire of these weak mongrels.” Another burst of cannon fire, more screams, and then, “No assistance required. Out.”

Viridian rose from his crouch. The destruction of the missile launcher had left the deviants momentarily stunned; no fire greeted him as he strode deliberately into the broken and pockmarked courtyard. He raised the thick metal rod of his maul over to the broken building before him and thumbed activation rune on its hilt. Crackling yellow energy threw him into blazing relief.

“Throw down thy arms, traitors to the real,” he bellowed, “and thou shalt know its mercy!”

Behind him Sage and Beryl had also emerged from the alley, and his HUD showed Emerald close on their heels. The building that housed the Tertiary Register’s office loomed ahead of them, a narrow gray steel ellipse, belching smoke and red flames from half a dozen ugly rents in its smooth surface. The building’s primary entrance had been ripped open by explosives. Viridian could see at least eight figures crouching just inside the entrance clutching small arms. The sensors sweep of his HUD showed a significant number of reality deviants in and around the massive building. The mob that Emerald had held was slowly advancing down the alley behind them, but its speed was cautious.

Beyond the plaza, the sound of fighting had lessened, replaced by gravid silence. Except for the spitting discharge of his melee weapon and the soft thump of the arbiters’ repeaters, the courtyard had taken on the solemnity of a tomb.

This is a strange target for a reality deviant insurrection, he thought as he began to advance. Why a data repository? It would make more sense for them to strike a munitions factory, or one of the outlying logic terminals. What possible use could these filth have for antiquated records of past deeds? He brought his thoughts to a halt, realizing that such pointless speculation was tantamount to sin.

Two meters... three... four meters... five into the courtyard, and still no fire came from the building ahead of him. Viridian could still see the group inside the main entrance; they were retreating deeper into the building. He scanned the smoke-filled holes in the building for snipers, but couldn’t discern any immediate threat.

His mind told him that something was wrong, in flagrant defiance of the lack of concrete evidence to support the claim. And yet the sensation persisted. Something hung in the silence over the courtyard, an

intangible, unknown threat that pulsed against his temples and made the flagstones beneath his feet hold their breath.

“How can a stone hold breath it does not have?” he said under his breath, making sure to turn the intercom volume down.

Viridian slowed. His previous certainty had drained from him. He glanced around the empty plaza and marveled at his folly for breaking cover in such a textbook error. It was the blunder of an initiate, not the calculated strategy of an Alpha arbiter. His entire squad was exposed, easy targets in the open space. He tensed, gathering his strength for a lightning charge, but unsure of which direction he should choose.

Before he could act, however, the world shattered.

The sound of grinding metal sheared through the air as streaks of jagged red light tore the neutral gray sky, opening it up in great blazing wounds. More bruised light leaked from the tears, and where it fell upon the shining buildings of the city, swirling vortices of green and violet flame erupted. The even grid of geometric buildings heaved and skewed, spires of steel and glass warping in the conflagration, clawing at the air like the fingers of a dying man. The ground lurched as strange fibrous growths spread across it under the toxic light from the sky.

Viridian stood slack, mind-locked as the city warped around him. He could feel the splintering of flagstones beneath his boots, and he could hear the sucking mud bleeding out from beneath. The sky swirled with burning, wounded color. From beyond the rips in the sky he could see three malformed faces screaming, their low moans making his flesh vibrate. The soiled fabric of the sky strained as they pressed against it.

The roar of flame drew his gaze back to the shattered building in front of him. In its place loomed a colossal deformed skull; smoke and flame boiled from its distended eye sockets and the cavern of its nose. Its fanged mouth yawned wide, and standing in it, silhouetted in a wash of red light, was a gaunt figure.

“Mercy,” Viridian pleaded in a weak voice. He took a faltering step backward.

It wore a shroud of dark, tattered rags that fluttered rapidly despite the lack of wind. Thin arms ended in spidery claws. A flapping yellow hood swallowed its head; what little of its face showed was a leering mask, half black, half white. Bloody light shone from behind a single ragged eyehole as it cocked its head to one side

and stared into the Alpha arbiter's face. Viridian recoiled, repulsed on an animal level. The figure's rictus-smile widened.

Not real, his mind shouted over the rising din of panic. It cannot be real.

Can we not?

The alien voice was calm, lucid, and insistent. Numbly Viridian realized that it hadn't been broadcast, or even voiced. He took another step backward; his leg threatened to give beneath his weight and send him sprawling onto his back.

We are as real as you, it insisted. Or as real as you could ever be.

"Alpha, thy orders?" blared a strained voice. From the other side of the world Viridian recognized it as Emerald.

"Brother Viridian?" Sage asked nervously from his right. The young arbiter was shaking, nervously snapping his bolt rifle around, trying to locate the threat he hadn't perceived.

"Brother, what is it? What dost thou see?"

You see us, so according to your own laws, we exist. That is enough, the deviant voice asserted. He watched the figure lurch forward, thin palms up at its shoulders in an exaggerated shrug. Blood oozed between its long fingers as the figure's costume began to pale and glisten, transforming into dripping, flayed skins that slid in fluid, twitching rings around its form.

Viridian groaned and crashed to his knees. The filth pooling at his feet wrapped ropy tendrils around his greaves and thighs and began to tug gently.

This transition will go more smoothly if you just submit.

His conditioning gave under the strain of what he was witnessing; forgetting himself, he screamed.

"Open fire! For reality's sake, open fire!" Sage cried beside him.

"At what? I have no target!" Beryl snapped.

"Control thyself, Brother Sage! Alpha, art thou injured?" Emerald asked, crouching beside him and gripping his upper arm sharply. The bolt cannon clattered on the splintered stone; Viridian heard the squelching as the slime claimed it. Emerald spun Viridian to face him, lowering his face to study his Alpha's.

Viridian shrank back as his squad mate's face blackened and ruptured, sloughing from the metal-enforced skull in patches. The gleaming bronze of Emerald's armor corroded as his gray uniform rotted away. Viridian felt his weapons slip from his numb fingers as he pulled away.

"Alpha, look at me!" the moldering face shouted as the tarnished remains of the rebreather grille fell from its naked jaw. "Tell me what ails thee!"

Viridian's eyes rolled wildly, throwing the nightmare world into a dizzying spin. From behind him he heard the mocking laughter of the deviant wraith. He turned to face it; it was looking at him and shaking its head in mock sympathy.

Madness is the price of your arrogance, the voice grated. This is your fate.

Coughing reports of gunfire drowned out the howling in Viridian's head. The figure in front of him screamed hoarsely. Viridian felt the pain and rage of its cry as an almost physical force. Its arms reached for him, telescoping across the courtyard. Black lightning spat from its claws. He cringed.

Fight this lunacy, a cold voice said inside his head. Show no fear, thou art stronger.

The words broke the spell of terror, and Viridian felt a measure of his senses returning. From the corner of his eye, he spied his dropped pistol within arm's length, and before he could weigh the odds of reaching it before the talons impaled him, his gauntleted hand closed around its butt. There was a sharp cry of pain behind him, very much human despite the electronic filtering. Viridian spun to see Emerald's body riddled by a sizzling volley of grav-fire. He spasmed and fell. More lances of the violet light streamed through the courtyard, and Viridian instinctively rolled to the side. With an outraged cry, he brought the pistol up and fired at the empty space where the obscene harlequin had been standing. His bolts dug more craters in the pockmarked steel of the damaged building. Viridian looked frantically around the battle zone for his target, but could see it nowhere among the gray sane backdrop of tenements and sky.

He caught a glimpse of Sage, firing wildly in multiple directions and screaming curses at unseen deviants. A blur of motion behind the panicked arbiter revealed the swift advance of Beryl. The veteran wove gracefully through the onslaught, snapping off calculated shots from his bolt rifle as he sprinted toward the Emerald and Viridian. Cold contempt blazed in his single organic eye.

Before Viridian could shake off the last shreds of his terror, the concussion wave of a grenade slammed into him. He felt his body lifted from the pavement as he was thrown...

... into the crystal green water. Razor-thin fish and milky, translucent cephalopods squirted out of his way as he dove with scissoring kicks. As he neared the bottom, swaying fronds of giant hydrae clutched at him, but he twisted away from their stinging arms and headed back toward the yellow light above. He broke the surface gasping, relishing the chill in the morning air as he swam back to the shallows. Once his bare feet found purchase in the black clay, he drew the fennel blade from his belt and began flagellating himself. The restless ghosts that had attached themselves to his aura over the course of his journey shrieked in fury as the aromatic lash sheared them away. He eased their torment with soothing chants, wishing them peace, and the spirit leeches fled. The cleansing left him feeling lighter and younger, but his heart remained heavy – what he had discovered at the grove would not leave him.

His cleansing complete, he waded out of the lake and fetched his jerkin from the rune-carved cairn stone that marked the resting place of his great-great grandsire, the blessed shaman Djaz, the Ender of Doubt. He dressed quickly, not bothering to wring out his tangled hair or shake the water from his thin limbs. His buskins darkened and clung to his wet flesh. The great pale sun was already climbing the heaven ladder to join its red and orange brothers, and his master was expecting him in the valley of the people. He mouthed the Prayer of Wander's End as he gathered the rest of his belongings and forged a smile as he stared into the reflective dreamstone atop his walking staff – he needed to make sure that he would be able to face the people with hope in his eyes and joy in his speech.

The verdant rang with the songs of thrashbills and chatternewts as the morning light filtered through the spiky canopy. As he watched, a great draconix sailed out of the trees and glided across the surface of the lake. It wheeled over the surface of the water, its needle-fanged beak sifting the for shallow prey, the tips of its four flaming wings rhythmically tapping the surface and sending up small puffs of steam. He watched the majestic predator snatch a fish from the water; he saw it char in its teeth even before it was swallowed. Filling his lungs with the crackling air of morning, he set off on his ninety-first day of walking.

He didn't mind the journey so much anymore, even though it took over three moons, withered his body, and enervated his spirit. Many seasons had passed since the master had first led him on the long trek to the Grove of New Life. He had been little more than a boy then, and the strange sounds and sights of the

wyrded heath, range of shadow, and far verdant had made him weep with fear and homesickness. But the master had been unsympathetic – in fact, at one point he had resorted to beating him to silence his complaints. But the harshness of his mentor and the road itself strengthened him, and by the time they had reached the grove, he had come to understand that something so wonderful was indeed worth a little suffering. When he had started that trip, he was a boy; he returned to the people an apprentice shaman.

And now the time for his ascendancy to his rightful place was upon him, and he dreaded it. A year ago he had been giddy with excitement, eager to fulfill his destiny as the new keeper of the peoples' most sacred treasure. Now he walked under the knowledge that they would turn to him for explanations. They would demand answers, and he had none to offer them. Would they blame him, he wondered?

As he walked, the world awoke around him. Bull garoxen bellowed challenges deep into the verdant, staking claim over their territories. The jangling, wailing calls of the thrashbills increased in tempo as they engaged in sonic combat over unseen mates. Miniscule biting flies, newly hatched by the rising suns' warmth, cartwheeled through the steaming air in their frantic efforts to feed, mate, and lay their eggs before the chill of night killed them.

All around the young shaman life flourished in stark contrast to the desolation he had witnessed. He shook his head, not wanting to dwell on those images.

He pulled his conscious mind deeper within himself as he walked, shutting down his senses one at a time. Slowly the worries faded, and the aching pain in his blistered feet dulled to nothing. As the anxiety melted, he envisioned his luminous spirit self. He imagined the knots of flesh that held it down coming undone like unbraided ropes. In his mind he saw it rise above him, shedding light in great wing-like fans around it. He sent out wispy tendrils of thought to guide him and attune him to the nature-mind that was awakening in the dawn. He could feel the vibrant spirits of the beasts around him: the strength of the garox bulls, the fury of the thrashbills, and the languid relaxation of the mated draconixes. His "gaze" lingered on their flaming souls; the pair was flying parallel to him just beyond the screen of trees, shadowing him. He smiled, wondering why they had chosen to travel his path, yet glad of their company. The draconix was a powerful totem – will it be mine, he wondered, when I return? But how could it be, when nothing I have seen speaks rebirth? Besides, the draconix only carries the souls of the greatest shamen, and that is certainly not my destiny.

By the time the immense third sun had fully cleared the treetops at his back, the verdant was giving ground to the stony soil and low vegetation of the valley of the people. Cirrus clouds feathered the sky, stained the color of fire by three gentle suns. He could pick out the people far below, harvesting the past season's crops of roots and cabbages. Even from this distance he could see that the bushels were not full, mere shadows of the harvests of past springs.

Other tiny figures were swearing, sweating, and singing as they drove the awkward plough beetles, slowly working the fallow fields. The ploughmen goaded the giant black insects with blunt-tipped spears, while a pair of wranglers labored to keep the creatures' spade-like mandibles in the red-gray earth. Periodically the behemoths would stray from their straight forage lines, and the leaders would haul on their reins, screaming curses while the spearmen laughed. Their voices drifted like gossamer on the cool breeze.

As he got closer, the red-painted sentries spotted him and nocked arrows in their bows. He raised his staff in greeting; the stone in his staff caught the suns' light and sent it out in a rainbow spray. The sentries lowered bows and waved in response. Others in the field had seen him and were on their way to meet him while the ploughmen toiled. A knot of children raced ahead of their mothers, their whooping shouts and laughter widening his smile. His heart plummeted.

How do I tell them, he wondered? He shook his head.

A small boy with a mud-smeared face ran a laughing circle around him, counting coup on his jerkin and medicine pouches before embracing his leg in a tight hug. He swept the child up and wheeled him through the air; the boy shrieked his laughter. The sound of unfettered joy was a blessing, and he laughed as he set the child back on the ground among the rest of the excited youngsters. They pressed in, all clamoring for stories and presents while the adults looked on. The children were content with trinkets and colorful tales, but the adults sought a rarer reward – good news. Respectfully they kept their distance, not wanting to risk ruining their children's happy moments.

How their eyes pricked him. How their smiles cut him. He felt the brief joy bleed back out of him through the wounds they made. Nevertheless, he kept his pleasing mask in place as he handed out souvenirs from his belt pouch, small items that he'd picked up just for this purpose – a glassy green river stone, a chatternewt skull, a firemoth cocoon, a spine-creeper flower. The children accepted their gifts with wide-eyed

wonder, and listened to the stories associated with each one as though they wanted to commit each to memory. He elaborated grandly over each trivial item, never letting on that he was merely stalling until he could think of the best way to tell the adults what he had discovered. When he had given out the last gift, the children departed with their treasures to bicker with one another as to who had received the greatest bauble. They would trade, they would quarrel, and they would forget any sadness they might have glimpsed in his eyes.

After the young ones were gone, and the adults moved in. He braced himself as the tallest of the red-painted sentries took a step forward with his left hand held up in salute.

“It is good to see you well and returned to us, Kazin,” the warrior said formally. He kissed the fingers of his left hand and touched them to his chest.

“It is good to be seen once more by the people, Semal,” Kazin replied, returning the salute. Awkward seconds passed during which neither man spoke. They were more like brothers than cousins, despite their caste difference. Yet each of them sensed something in the other’s distracted gaze and tense posture that said affection might be out of place. Around them the gathered people waited quietly, keeping their distance and watching the interaction with strained faces. Kazin shifted his weight

“You seem... uneasy, cousin,” Kazin said, breaking the silence. Semal flinched, and the other two sentries exchanged nervous looks.

“Actually, I’ve been instructed to... ah, escort you to the shaman,” Semal replied. He smiled crookedly. “As soon as you return, he said. He is waiting for you.” The other two sentries moved up to flank their leader. Their hands, he noticed, still rested on their quivers, as if they were ready to nock an arrow at a moment’s notice. They avoided looking directly at him; they continued to watch the crowd.

Kazin was taken aback. He had been sent to the grove to report its condition to the ailing master, and he could not see any need for an armed escort. Indeed, such a measure seemed unduly wary, a trait that the master had always instructed him to avoid in his own actions. What possible reason was there to keep him under the eyes of warriors, as if he were a dangerous criminal or wild beast?

Unless they fear something has changed in me over the course of this journey, thereby making me... dangerous, he thought. But that was preposterous – his own essence was bound to the master’s great benevolent

spirit, a spirit that was itself tied to the beautiful entity in the grove, and as such was shielded from corruption from any source as long as...

As long as the grove remained sound. Kazin's eyes widened reflexively.

"Is the master well?" he asked before he had a chance to think better. His voice was sharp. Semal said nothing; the answer was in the expression on his face.

"Perhaps we should be going," Semal replied quietly at length, and drawing close enough to whisper, "This is not the place, cousin." He swept his dark eyes around them for emphasis.

Kazin nodded. Part of him burned at the cruelty of not telling the gathered people anything, but he understood why it must be so. The land was dying around them, and their prayers for succor went unanswered. If the shaman was unwell, then surely the people must suspect that something terrible had happened to the foundation of their world. He knew that desperation might have made them unable to bear the news. He dropped his head and motioned for Semal to lead on.

"Let us be off then," Semal said, and then quieter, "Please stay close, cousin, and refrain from making any sudden moves. We do not want to startle them." In that instant, Kazin knew that the sentries were not here to protect the people from him; rather, they were there to ensure his own safety. The sentries, still apprehensive, moved up to flank Kazin as Semal turned wordlessly and marched downhill. Kazin fell into step behind him, feeling more like a captured outlaw than a returning hero.

A dim clamor arose from the crowd behind them. He could feel their fear, now mixed with flustered indignation, following close at his heels.

"Young master!" a man's voice called out. Kazin could hear hunger in his dry tones – it spoke of endless toil and empty bellies. He winced. "Young master, will you not tell us what you have seen? What has become of our blessed treasure?"

"There will be time for questions and answers later," Semal replied, his voice flat stone. "Right now he must see the shaman and interpret what he has seen. We cannot jump to conclusions before all the signs have been studied."

“But surely we have a right to know!” another voice cried. Anger was stirring there, Kazin thought. Images flooded his empathic consciousness, images of parched streams and barren fields, of starved elders and stunted births. “Or have we not suffered enough yet to warrant the truth?”

Kazin was stung by the man’s sarcasm, and insulted by his casual blasphemy. Perseverance through suffering was always rewarded, or so he had been taught from an early age. He felt indignation begin to swell within him. Before he could turn to rebuke the man, however, Semal had rounded with fury. He took three heavy steps toward the crowd, his hand on the hilt of his parang. Kazin made to protest as Semal stopped abruptly before the crowd and drew his blade. He swept its point accusingly at the gathered people. They shrank back with cries of mingled surprise and fear, but it was his voice, not his blade, that lashed them.

“On this joyous day,” he bellowed hotly, “that sees our young shaman back to us safely, I will ignore the grave words spoken here and attribute them to the excitement we all feel and not to any hidden malice.” He glared at the crowd, and Kazin saw several pairs of eyes look away in shame. Semal softened his voice a degree. “But we must remember that even though we are eager for news, even though we live in troubled times, there are still rules that must be followed, and proper behaviors to be observed. It is through these customs that the people have survived and grown. Now is not the time to abandon them.” He sheathed his blade. “I ask your patience, brothers and sisters, and your faith in the wisdom of the shaman, who will surely guide us true after they have spoken.”

Silence answered Semal’s speech; he turned his back on the crowd and rejoined Kazin and the other two sentries. He did not speak as he led them down the path to the village. The crowd remained behind them, watching intently. Kazin could feel their eyes. He could hear quiet sobbing.

“I am so sorry, cousin,” Semal said without turning. “I know you were expecting a better homecoming.”

“No, cousin,” Kazin replied as he wiped away hot tears. “I expected nothing. I am merely glad to see you again.”

“Much has changed,” Semal replied. He kept his face forward.

The quartet continued onward in silence. Kazin could see the low huts and lodges of the village marching slowly toward them. Thin wisps of smoke still hovered over the daubed roofs and watchtowers. The door to the shaman's yurt swung loosely in the dry breeze. He shuddered.

“Strange things have been seen here since you left. Some unusual animals and lights, especially during the day when the suns are high...”

“I have also seen strange things,” Kazin interrupted. “I shall tell you about them after I have spoken to the master.”

“Kazin?”

“Yes cousin?”

Semal looked over his shoulder. His brown eyes met Kazin's and lingered there. But before the question was voiced, a high, strained cry split the air.

“*Kazin!*” the master's voice wailed. “*Quickly!*” Pain trailed away from the impossibly ancient voice, still horribly recognizable, and before Semal could even recover from his own shock, Kazin turned and ran...

... back into the kitchen, narrowly avoiding a collision with Danielle, who was struggling with two hissing and popping fajita platters. He slurred an apology at her and skidded to a halt in front of the expo window.

“Tony, where the HELL are my O-rings for 42?” he roared through the haze of heat. “They’re running almost sixteen minutes!”

“Two minutes,” came the distracted reply. Tony, alone on fry, was shaking seasoning over a sizzling new batch of fries, but his expression spoke of a concentration usually reserved for sculptors fretting chisels over marble eyelids. The other cooks were likewise occupied in their respective stations, tending to charring slabs of ribs or mixing Caesar salads. They were short-staffed again.

The lunch rush had been more brutal than usual for a Thursday, and the restaurant had been blitzed with three large parties all-insisting that they had exactly one hour for lunch. The kitchen had been under pressure to get the large orders finished and send them out together, and as a result many smaller orders had been lost in the shuffle. Alex’s tables were four-tops, and all of the tickets were running long. Normally, he would have been able to smooth things over, but the hangover had impaired his tact. Or maybe it’s simply National Pushy Creep Day at TGI Friday’s, he thought.

Either way, however, he knew appetizers were not supposed to run any longer than seven minutes. He’d already complained to the manager on duty, but considering that Thomas had all the problem-solving acumen of an Irish Setter after two bottles of NyQuil, Alex’s concerns had naturally taken a back seat to the calamity of the bar running out of pearl onions.

The matter wasn’t helped by the fact that he could plainly see a half full basket of onion rings sitting right in front of the fry cook.

“Dammit, that’s what you said two minutes ago, and the time before that too!” he shouted. “What, are you going for a record? Get it done!”

Tony looked up and sneered. “Why don’t you come back here and do it yourself, asshole? I’m busy!”

“I’m about to, right through this fucking window!” he snarled. He could feel hot blood surge up the back of his neck. He balled his fists.

“Three minutes,” Tony said with a nasty gap-toothed smile.

Anger bloomed in Alex's head and made the lights swim. He took a lunging step toward the stainless steel window. Suddenly a pair of cornflower blue eyes interrupted his basilisk stare, the blurry face surrounding them not half a foot from his. Small, strong hands pushed him backward.

“Ok, Ok, take it easy,” Jessie said in her best I’m-really-your-friend-but-so-help-me-if-you-want-to-live-you’ll-shut-the-hell-up voice. She was standing tiptoe. Her eyes, tired but firm, locked his own, and her face tracked every jerking attempt to look past her. “Just take it easy, Alex. I’ll take care of it for you. Just calm down.”

He felt his anger threaten to break. She must have seen it crawling up inside him, and her grip tightened until he felt her lacquered nails almost digging through his uniform polo. The sudden pain distracted him, and even though he was nearly half again her weight and she was standing tiptoe to look him directly in the face, she bore him out of the kitchen like a sumo wrestler. Dimly, he heard Tony laugh.

“You calm the fuck down, or I swear I’ll take you down myself, right here,” she hissed. Her high, full cheeks flushed as she backed him into the wall by the Micros terminal hard enough to rattle the rusted trombone and gas station signs festooning its other side. If the people in the booth behind them felt or heard anything, they kept silent.

“Buy me a fucking drink first,” he snapped. Now that he was out of the kitchen, the tension bled from his arms and his hands relaxed. He grinned at her through the thinning red haze in his vision. “Two drink minimum before take-downs.”

She managed to look murderous for exactly four more seconds before her small mouth cracked into a smile. She exhaled through pursed lips and let go of his shoulders. When she looked back at him her expression had once again become the slightly flirtatious smirk that he’d grown to expect. She tucked the left edge of her ash-blond hair behind her ear, and as she did the diamond on her finger winked at him sourly.

“I’ll buy you a bag for your head,” she laughed. “Otherwise I won’t be able to take you seriously.” She punched him lightly in the stomach. “Jesus, you’re an ass today.”

“How’s that different from yesterday?” he replied as he pulled himself off the wall. He made his way down the short pass behind the bar with Jessie on his heels, feeling as though all eyes were upon him. In the

shadows he leaned against the wall and rubbed his temples. The insect drone of conversations dimmed to dull fuzz, interspersed with the clink of flatware on cheap porcelain. He took a deep breath, his nose long accustomed to the scents of the restaurant: charred meat, fry oil, lettuce slightly past its prime and the pungent tang of too much dressing exposed to open air. Humanity at feeding time, he mused.

“Seriously, you’re way over the top today. Is everything ok?”

“I’m just tired. Maybe a little hung over.”

“So you’ve been drinking again.”

Her blue eyes both accused and consoled. He sighed and once more felt the pulse of his hangover pressing on his retinas. Damn it, why is she so easy to talk to, he thought?

“What do you mean ‘again?’ Did I ever stop?”

“Alex...”

“I’m fine, all right?”

“Bullshit.”

He turned away, chewing on his lip.

“Look,” she said, backing away slightly and looking in the direction of the dining room, “I’ve got to get back to my tables, but if you want to talk later, I can –”

“I almost called her again last night,” he blurted. He waited for Jessie to give him one of her tired gasps of exasperation. Nothing came. He looked back to find her watching him closely. Like a mother, his mind added nonchalantly. He felt very small.

“Did you?” she asked.

“No, of course not. It’s a lost cause, anyway.”

She nodded and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Look, sweetie, we’ve been through this...”

“Funny thing, though, I was so damn drunk I nearly didn’t catch myself in time to put the phone down.” His laughter was hollow. “I still don’t remember dialing. Just thinking about work and then the phone was in my hand.”

“Alex, you’ve got to stop this. You’ll get fired if you keep blowing up like this.”

He scoffed. “Yeah, that would *really* make me *so* sad –”

“*And*,” she said, “I’m worried about you.”

He squinted at her, but her round face showed only sincerity. An image, crystalline, sprang to his mind, and he saw her as a pixie, a tiny wood sprite from his fantasy books. A pixie in an apron and a striped polo. He smiled slightly, genuinely.

“There’s no need to worry,” he said, hoping he sounded convincing enough for the both of them. “I’m just, you know, under some stress right now, what with me trying to finish grad school and all.”

“Drinking by yourself, that’s a sign of a problem.”

Ah, truth at last, the dark voice in his head said. He scowled.

“Well I don’t see you going out with me.”

“And who’s fault is that?” she asked, slapping his shoulder a little too roughly to be friendly. “I’ve invited you to come out with Chad and me, and every time you say you have to work on your thesis. It really wouldn’t hurt you to spend some time with other people, you know.”

Oh, sure, he thought. Just what he wanted to do; going out as the third damn wheel with a cute chick and her perfect fiancée. It would be cozy sleeping between the lovers.

“Well, I do have to finish it sometime,” he replied as he rubbed his shoulder.

“Yeah, I know,” she pressed, “and how much have you written?”

“Seventy-eight pages, give or take,” he lied while his brain recalled the image of the glaring white page on his monitor. Lying was easy, and he’d been doing it for some time. “It’s coming along fine, it’s just piecing it together that’s a problem.”

“Whatever,” she replied as she crossed her arms. “But I know that you need to get out. Being alone all the time isn’t good.”

“It’s been almost a year, now.”

She picked up the dropped thread quickly. “And you still try to call her in the middle of the night?”

“I know, it doesn’t make sense to me either. I mean, I know the way... the way things are now. I can’t figure out why I’m still having trouble with it.”

“It’s because you’re not a robot, Alex, no matter how much you may wish you were. You can’t just switch it off because the situation’s not the way it was before.”

“Hey, I’m an only child. We like being alone,” he countered with a small smile.

“Nice try. Seriously, though, what are you doing tonight?”

“Oh nothing special,” he shrugged. “Just injecting bourbon right into my brain and then I’m going to see if I can get in the Guinness book for the most bleach pumped out of a human stomach. Maybe then I’ll write the world’s greatest novel.”

Now she pulled back in earnest.

“Not funny.”

“Not even the last part? Hm, my timing must be off.”

She paused, her mouth hanging open on a reply. He braced himself for the invective, and his left wrist itched in sympathy. Somewhere close by a plate shattered on the brick floor. They both jumped, and looked at each other sheepishly, the awkward moment eclipsed by their own embarrassment. A few cheers and scattered applause eased the transition.

“Look, I’ve already asked Chad, and he says —”

“Oh Jesus, you’ve told *him* about my problems?”

“And *he* says,” she continued unfazed, “that he thinks you should come out with us. We know some people who might —”

“Hey Jess,” a female voice called from the mouth of the hall. She turned, and he looked over her head. Laura, one of many waitresses that apparently thought he was some breed of reptile, was staring back at him warily.

“In a minute,” Jessie responded.

Laura, however, was the headwaiter *du jour*, and she was not about to be sent packing so easily. She placed her hands on her shapeless hips and cocked her head to one side.

“Look, table 33 wants their check. I’ve been looking for you for like five minutes already. You need to get back to ‘em.”

“All right, I’m coming,” Jessie said. When she turned back, she mouthed a very impolite word. “Why she couldn’t take it to them, I don’t know,” she said quietly. “I’ll catch you before you leave, Alex. Just promise me you’ll consider it.” A squeeze of his hand, and she turned away before he could reply. She jogged past Laura, who was still looking at him with kindness normally reserved for sideshow freaks. He sighed and pried himself off the wall.

“Well, if you’re done pitching a fit,” she said in a tone of voice that made him want to staple her tongue to her forehead, “Thomas wants to see you.” He brushed past her.

“How fucking surprising,” he muttered over his shoulder. “I don’t know how we could function without you to provide us with your leadership.”

He heard her say something under her breath, but let it slide; he knew he was probably in enough hot water already over his previous outburst without picking another fight.

His o-rings were sitting unclaimed in the hot window; Alex ignored them. As he wound back past the line and dish station, he was aware of the other staff looking at him. A few of them were smiling the puckered smile of first graders watching a classmate get a check beside his name on the chalkboard. He tried to look nonchalant, but his stomach knotted. When he reached the office door, he peered in through the window.

Inside the tiny cube Thomas (never to be called Tom or Tommy or anything even resembling a nickname) was facing the computer screen. Alex’s personnel folder was open beside the keyboard, and a partially filled-out complaint form was beside it. He felt indignation rising; his livelihood was resting in the hands of this nitpicker, this micromanager who spent all his high-power leaderships skills pointing out stray bits of lettuce for servers to sweep up and checking under tables with a one million candle-power flashlight while customers looked at him like an alien. He was to be judged by a man who panicked and got “in the weeds” whenever there was a wait, who blocked up the kitchen with his inane prioritization of insignificant prep items like parsley and lemon wedges, and whose main function seemed to be drumming up random and pointless conversation with customers who were trying to eat and carrying small children around like the world’s ugliest nanny. The idea was absurd, but the reality was undeniable – he was being written up by this incompetent.

Shit, he thought as he knocked. How many times have I been written up, two or three?

Thomas reached behind him and unlocked the door without turning in his chair. “Sit down, Alex,” he tried to say conversationally, but the tension in his voice was unmistakable. He could feel the confrontation building up steam.

Alex cleared his throat. “Uh... Thomas, I don't know what you heard...”

“Just come in and sit, first.” Even through Thomas' by-the-book courtesy he could hear the contempt. Alex took a seat behind the loathsome troll. The office was at least ten degrees warmer than the rest of the restaurant, and the sound of the dishwasher was loud through the cinderblocks. Thomas sat like a toad, his back still to him, clicking away at some meaningless manifest on the screen. Alex sat and bored holes in the back of his head with his stare.

“Would you mind,” his manager said after awkward seconds, still without turning around, “telling me why you're still here?”

“Here today, you mean? Or in general?”

Thomas turned around, and once again Alex found himself wanting to plant his fist right between those piglet eyes behind the thick glasses.

“Well, both, actually,” he said.

Alex shrugged. “I need the money,” he said. “I've still got tables. As far as the long run, I'm sure I can fit in eventually.”

“Somehow,” Thomas replied, “I doubt that will happen.”

“What about that sh – that crap with Tony? I didn't start that!”

“Oh, I think I've already got a good enough account of that little altercation from the employees who saw it,” the reply came with a dismissive gesture. “What I want to talk to you about is this.” He snatched the event log off the desk beside him and thrust it in Alex's reddened face. “This is your third write-up – a guest complained about your little tantrum. They heard you all the way out in the goddamn dining room!”

Alex made no reply – he'd been caught out, fair and square. He looked at the wall and chewed his lip, wanting nothing more than to simply get out of this building and leave it behind him. Maybe even set it on fire and dance a jig.

A funeral pyre, the critic amended.

“So what I want to know is what do you have to say for yourself?” Thomas demanded as he flicked the paper away. Alex didn’t reply. “Well?”

“Sorry,” he muttered. Shove it, he meant.

“Sorry’s not going to cut it,” Thomas replied. “I think it would be best if you left early today. You can discuss your problems on Saturday with Hugh.”

“I’m supposed to work tomorrow,” he offered flatly.

“Not anymore, you’re not. I don’t want to see you back here until you’ve sat down with the GM.” An ugly narrow smile was on his pitted face. “I’ll be sure to be there too.”

“Fine,” Alex said, rising to leave, his apron already rolled up in his hand. “I’ve got some more important things to do, anyway.”

“You know, that’s your problem,” Thomas said as he turned back to the computer. “Your priorities are screwed up.”

“Excuse me?” Alex glared at the back of his head.

“I bring you in here to talk about your career...”

Ha! My *career!*? He wrenched open the door. Oblivious as always, Thomas kept talking just to hear himself: “...about your negative attitude and how it affects the team, about ...”

“... the egregious lack of judgment and self-restraint that Alpha arbiter 621-GR17, codified Viridian, displayed in the retaking of the Tertiary Register’s office from the deviant insurgents, the results of which included the death of arbiter 992-GR09, codified Emerald, and the total annihilation of arbiter Squadron 003, codified Yellow squadron...”

Stripped to the waist, he stood motionless upon the platform suspended thirty meters over the mouth of the shaft running through the middle of the Sanctum Logi. His scar-covered arms were spread wide, pulled taut by the sizzling force shackles. Restraint was not a precaution in this case, but a further humiliation intended to humble him completely before the eyes of judgment.

He listened not to the droning mechanized voice of the logister listing his failings, but to the more subtle voice of the city’s heart. Thrumming power conduits and pearl-strings of incandescently pulsing thought batteries wound out of the kilometers-deep shaft like the trunk of a great tree before separating into crystal and steel vines and that crawled across the circular walls of the deepest chamber in the Fortress of Arbitration. They sang with the strain of the energies they bore, their sub- and hypersonic voices pricking at the exposed nerves of his wounds. The air was thick with the smell of incense, oil, and ozone.

This was my temple, he thought.

At the apex of the circular chamber the conduits met again, intertwined, and branched into three thick ropes. Dangling from these were the scarab-like stasis sarcophagi containing the atrophied bodies of the three logisters, the undying voices of reason and law. He had watched their ascent with mixed awe, horror, and sorrow as they had haltingly climbed the cables, the mechanical insect legs creaking and hissing under the weight of their burden. The stunted bodies suspended inside the crystalline capsules at the hearts of the machines had lurched like marionettes on the networks of cables that bound them in their prisons. When they had battened onto the exposed power couplings that terminated the cables, he had looked down, both ashamed to witness their one frailty and reminded too clearly of the deviant wraith’s crawling, hungry garment of flesh sucking putrescence from the air as certainly as the logisters fed on the energy of the city.

The image of the abomination was scored onto his cortex; wherever he looked he could see it laughing at him just beyond the fabric of his world. Even now in this holiest of places, he felt its impurity metastasizing

in him, its fundamental doubts spawning questions like tumors in his mind. When he had reported for debriefing, Viridian had been summarily seized and interrogated, while Beryl, still smoldering from the battlefield, had given his testimony to the registers. Sage was wheeled away on a gurney to undergo further conditioning, and the young arbiter's sobbing laughter as they took him away for cortex reformatting still haunted him. But Sage had broken under the strain of combat and could be repaired; Viridian had succumbed to a far more deadly poison, the first taint of disbelief. There could be no other explanation for his failure to perform his duty.

And so he stood in shame, exposed to the scrutiny of the logisters, arbiters, registers, scribes, mediators, inquisitors and every rank and file common that had attended the public trial of an Alpha arbiter. He could feel eyes slither across his bare flesh, tracing the network of old scars freshly crossed with jagged shrapnel tracks. The only pain he felt was the gnawing sense of loss that none of the grenade fragments had done sufficient damage to end his life.

Surely, he thought, he could not continue to exist if the fabric of reality itself was so fragile. And if the fault did indeed lie within him, if the lunacy was his own, then death would be a welcome release.

"...could one in thy untenable position say to exonerate thyself or proffer defense for thy lack of proper action?" the droning voice finished, letting the near silence of the immense chamber crash upon his ears. Only the thrumming song of the city broke the silence.

Viridian lifted his head and focused on the three pairs of luminous eyes locked on him. Even suspended in the murky nutritive soup of their ambulatory tombs, the wizened, slack, tube-infested faces of the three corpse-magi radiated auras of disdain. The absolute lack of pity in their unblinking scrutiny cowed him, and he could not reply.

"We have asked thee a question," Logister Black's voice blared from the right of the triumvirate, "and we demand an answer."

"Perhaps this one is too far gone for Reason, his mind corrupted to the level of dull brutishness," Logister White replied with a barely perceptible turn of its swollen skull. "Mayhap a summary dispersal in the reactors would be the wisest course of action, rather than risk further corruption from the mouth of this heretic."

"Perhaps 'heretic' is not the correct term for this one, Brother White." Black retorted.

“How else wouldst Thou explain the blasphemous report that the accused hath presented?”

“Indeed, it would seem so,” Black said, crossing the manipulator arms of its exoskeleton in a ghost of impatience, “or perhaps 621-GR17’s intense hatred of the deviant hath uncovered a hitherto unseen defect in his programming. Perhaps a complete cortex reformat could preserve his usefulness.”

Hatred, Viridian thought. Hatred, a base emotion? Is my corruption so thorough that I hear blasphemy from the mouth of the incorruptible?

“The taint of deviancy is in this one. We must extirpate it lest it spread. That is the law, and well dost Thou know it, Brother Black.”

“It must indeed be expunged, but to eradicate a vessel into which such extensive modification and training hath been invested smacks of waste, Brother White. We should at least attempt a mental purge first to ensure that all options have been sufficiently exhausted. If nothing else, his body may be rehabilitated as a combat drone.”

Viridian knew he was mistaken – Black had not spoken out of character, and the fault was his own.

“The accused hath not answered the previous question,” High Logister Clear said with finality from its elevated position on the central conduit bundle. Its eyes shone as cold stars, and his psyche was flensed in that gaze, his every secret there for the taking. His tongue unglued itself, and he was startled to hear his own voice.

“Let mine account stand,” he replied flatly, “for I have relayed the events leading to my fall as they happened, without embellishment or invention. I ask no mercy, but only Thy swift and just judgment.”

“Is it thy desire, then, to be purified?” White asked.

“Lie not, for we shall know thy true meaning,” Black cautioned.

Viridian smiled slightly. “I care not the method of my cleansing – that I should no longer suffer the torments of what I have seen is sufficient blessing for one so low as myself.”

And exactly what hast thou seen of our enemy? The freezing voice filled his head, at once alien and familiar, and he felt his eyes being forced to meet the blazing gaze of the High Logister. The cold fire of its eyes seemed to expand and reach for him as it exerted its will upon him. Dimly he heard Black and White continue debate over the method of his disposal, but their artificial voices seemed muffled. He felt the High

Logister's massive intellect pressing into his own consciousness, and he felt his body convulse as his consciousness was displaced..

Resist not, the High Logister's voice thrummed across the surface of his brain. Resistance brings pain. Submit thy memories, and enlighten us.

Viridian felt his will crumble; he gasped involuntarily as his thoughts poured forth into the devouring vortex that was the High Logister's mind. Every thought from his earliest memory to his shame in this ignominious moment bled out of him as Clear categorized and sorted his entire existence. And even through the involuntary tears in his eyes, he never lost sight of the radiant, detached gaze that linked their minds.

In scant seconds of eternal pain, the interrogation was over, and he found himself back in full control his racked body. He trembled, thankful that the contact was broken, and yet part of him lamented the loss of the terrible connection. For one moment, as he had submitted to the High Logister's telepathic intrusion, he had felt himself drawn into Its own cavernous mind, and had seen and heard with Its godly perception. He had seen every mind in the city shining like myriad candles around the pyres of reason that were the logisters' intellects. He had eavesdropped on the surface thoughts of countless mortals, from the smug derision of Beryl as he polished his new badge of command, to the panicked mental screams of Sage as the chiurgeons prepared his anesthetized body for its initial cranial procedure. The sensations had almost overwhelmed his sanity, but he had ridden the tide, awed by the taste of true power and honored to have experienced it.

Reverently he looked at the dead face of Clear, almost lost in the swirling murk of Its tomb. He imagined he saw a hint of respect in the gleaming blades of the High Logister's eyes before they were sheathed behind heavy lids. Viridian opened his mouth to speak, unsure of what he would say.

"It is decided," Clear's voice crackled loudly, and Viridian's tongue shriveled at the finality carried in that robotic tone. Black and White ceased Their debate and swiveled in their sockets to face the High Logister. Clear continued, "Let the former arbiter 621-GR17, codified Viridian, hereby be stripped of honor and privilege, and let him be brought from this court unto the great reactor at the core of the city, where he will be forever expunged from reality, his body and mind consigned to oblivion, and his name forgotten."

For an agonized second silence teetered on the tail of the verdict, then the Sanctum Logi erupted into applause. Viridian was numb. He did not feel the restraints holding his wrists wink out of existence and the

cold gauntlets of the black-armored vigilators wrenching him off of the platform and onto the narrow walkway leading down into the bore shaft. He was oblivious to maledictions following his descent as much as he was oblivious to the softly clanking bulks shimmying down the snaking power conduits after him.

In that spiraling descent, he realized that he was dead. His life, his pain, and his futile attempts at service were behind him. He felt no sorrow; he was defective, a failed construct with no claim to existence. And his knowledge, the damned notions implanted in his brain by the glimpse of what lurked beyond reality would soon be snuffed out with his consciousness. As he trudged onward with force halberds humming at his back, he let this new revelation fill him and displace his fears. He straightened and lifted his head as he marched downward toward oblivion.

I shall meet my end gladly in the knowledge that the will of reality is served, he told himself. The memory of the deviant threatened him, but his pride at the High Logister's contact chased it away.

As he descended, the voice of the city grew louder and more complex. Deep *basso profundo* hums from sunken turbines intermingled with the static hiss of open conduits and the warbling whines of the thought batteries. The lullaby of machinery further eased his mind; before it the last images of the harlequin grin paled and lost focus. His shaven scalp tingled, stroked by invisible soothing fingers of logical energy, and he dared to hope that soon he would be at one with these pure forces.

When the path reached flat ground, Viridian found himself in the grid of dormitories, laboratories, and repositories that comprised the training facilities for his own and every other codification. As he was lead toward the heart of the city, he caught glimpses of his own past: a quick glance into a room where a preserved tutor was instructing a class of bald novitiate arbiters in the tenets of discipline, a weapons range lit only by muzzle flashes and pauldron lamps, a mist filled inception bank where masked technicians mixed the geneseeds of future defenders of reality. In the last, one of the techs was reverently lowering a specimen into a roaring white autoclave; Viridian knew that his line had been cut. He admired the efficiency.

“Halt,” the mechanical voice said quietly. Viridian obeyed without thinking. “vigilators, thou art relieved. Leave us with the condemned, now.”

“But...” one of his captors began.

Viridian heard the heavy whine-clank of servomotors and steel impacting steel as one of the immense sarcophagi spun to face the objector. There was a rapid, metallic clicking followed by the crackling snap of an electrical discharge. Blue light threw the corridor ahead of him into sharp relief; not even the filters installed in his eyes prevented Viridian from being momentarily dazzled. Several alarmed cries sounded behind him, followed by the clatter of an armored body hitting the metal grate floor. Even as the realization of what had just happened struck him, the smell of charring meat reached his nose.

“To defy us is treason,” the Logister’s voice said quietly. “Leave at once, or be judged as traitors.”

Viridian heard the remaining guards retreating quickly. When the last echoes of armored boots were beginning to fade, his instruction came.

“Look at us, Arbiter.”

Fear uncoiled along his spine, and although his synthetic endocrine system tried to compensate, a cold film of sweat wreathed his temples. He turned slowly.

They crouched in the corridor like immense spiders, each massive engine three times his size and limned with the yellow light of the deep passage. The crystalline globes at their centers shone like immense flayed eyes, the withered forms inside shadowy and insubstantial. The body of the disobedient vigilator lay smoking below them; a large fused hole marred the breastplate of the dead man’s armor, and his face was frozen in surprise. Amazed, Viridian watched Black withdraw the plasma-caster back into its shell and sidestep to allow Clear to pass. Its eyes blazed in the silhouette of Its distended head, and Viridian involuntarily recoiled from Its stare. One of Clear’s clawed legs crunched through the corpse as it advanced. Viridian took a step backwards.

“Thou hast suffered much,” Clear said after scrutinizing him for exactly fifteen seconds.

“My lord?” Viridian asked, dumbfounded. “I – what?”

“Thou hast seen our enemy,” White said from behind Clear’s bulk. “Thou know’st its face.”

“My lords, I – ”

“There is no need to explain,” Black said as It moved to flank Clear. Viridian saw its head nod in the direction of Clear, who still stared silently at him. “We have seen what thou hast seen, and we know it for what it is.”

“Thou hast?” Viridian asked in disbelief.

“Of course,” White said with a hint of scorn in its synthetic voice. “We have seen through thine own eyes.”

Again Viridian felt Clear’s gaze tugging at him. He shuddered.

“Thou dost bear a terrible knowledge, arbiter.” Black said. “A knowledge of things not yet transpired. Thou art to be commended for not submitting to madness when it sought to usurp thy reason. Thy mind is indeed strong.”

“And yet it haunts thee,” White added. “Thou shalt never be rid of it, and shouldst thou continue thy life, it will someday overtake thee. Of course, thou shouldst already know this.”

“Aye, lord.” Viridian felt the revulsion and dread of the vision surge anew within him. “I wish to prevent my corruption. And if destruction of my self is the only way to ensure my salvation, then I welcome it.”

“Thou art wise to seek the solace of death, arbiter.” Black said quietly, closing its eyes.

“Aye, lord.”

“But which death?” White asked, “Thine own, or thine enemy’s?”

“What?” Viridian asked.

Suddenly Clear lurched closer, and Viridian was forced to take another step backward to avoid contact.

“Thou hast lost everything,” it said, the lamps of its eyes glowing white slits in its cadaverous face.

“Thy honor is dust, thy faith is shattered, and thy world is broken.”

Viridian did not reply. The hole inside him yawned wider; he chewed his lip as he took another step backward.

“Nothing awaits thee now,” Clear continued, still advancing, “except the release of death. The solace of oblivion,” it continued, its inhuman voice picking up a faint trace of wistfulness.

Viridian nodded.

“But what of the one that has brought thee low?” White asked as it also moved to flank Clear.

“Wouldst thou not see it punished before thy time is done?” Black added. It pressed closer to him.

“My blessed lords,” Viridian began, still retreating before their burning gaze, “I do not understand. Am I not to be purified in the reactor?” The Logisters did not answer right away, but they continued their advance.

“If that is thy wish, then thou shalt die, and thy fall from grace shall go unpunished. Thou wilt have lived and died for naught, none shall remember thy name, and thou shalt enter oblivion with nothing but thy shame to comfort thee.” Black said.

“But if thou couldst take with thee the knowledge that thy unmaker, the fiend that has brought thee to this state, has died at your hand, would that not please you?” White inquired.

“By my hand? Please me?” he asked. The logisters’ words were making little sense; his mind rebelled at their implications. “My lords, I am too simple to follow thy logic! The horror I have witnessed, it was not real! It was madness, deviancy incarnate! How can a mere man fight so intangible a foe?”

“Everything hath its cause,” Black boomed, and Viridian imagined he could hear cold amusement in its electronic voice. “Each occurrence in existence is precipitated by another, whether seen or unseen. Yet all such catalysts must, by their very influence, be real, in some way.”

“And based on what thou hast seen and what we already know, we have come to believe that thou hast witnessed the real cause of the recent outbreaks of deviancy,” White said as it clanked closer to Viridian. “The figure thou hast seen, it may indeed be real, and if that is true then thou art the proper man to destroy it.

“I, my lords?” Viridian’s mind was spiraling. He looked from Black to White as they spoke in turn.

“Aye, arbiter, that is our belief. Thou hast faith in our beliefs?”

“Thy will is law,” Viridian said, relieved to be back on the solid ground of certainty.

“And dost thou not hate the unclean fiend that hath brought thee low? Dost thou not see it as responsible for thy disgrace in the eyes of thy peers?”

Viridian grimaced and ground his teeth. Unwanted tears stung his eyes. “Aye,” he hissed. “If that... *thing* dares contaminate reality with its profane existence, then not only do I blame it, but I desire nothing more than its destruction.”

“What wouldst thou give for the chance to slay it?” Clear finally spoke as it loomed.

“All I have and am, my lords,” Viridian exclaimed as he took another step backward, and his bare foot met empty air. A giddy moment passed as his reflexes, honed through years of combat experience, desperately tried to avoid the fall, and he teetered with muscles twitching and shock tattooed across his face.

“And so thou shalt,” Clear said as ot gently nudged him over the edge.

Viridian landed hard on his back in a sunken alcove in the floor. Steel bands cut into his wrists, ankles, waist, and neck as thick needles pierced his chest and abdomen, the pain of their entry occluded by the searing agony of the cryonic solution they injected. He managed a half scream before his throat froze, and as ice crystals crawled across his corneas his betrayed stare never left the cold, sardonic lights of...

... the hissing fire, and the roasting brush piglet on a ironwood spit. Semal was kneeling dangerously close and sniffing appreciatively, his hunger having apparently overridden his sorrow and his ability to feel heat. Even Kazin's grief conceded some ground to his rumbling belly; after three moons of foraging and rationing, even a small offering like this seemed a banquet. He turned away from the fire and looked across the valley of the people below him. The fires of the village winked, their warmth lost to distance. He could not bear to look at the central fire for too long, especially when the wind carried the lamentation to his ears.

"And so it ends," the black-clad figure sighed, his reed-thin voice muffled behind the blank of his spirit mask. "Damn me for not making haste." The words were heavy with regret; Kazin felt them echo in his own thoughts. "I only made camp here so I could enter by morning light; I feared raising alarm if I came at night. If only I had been more bold I might have reached him before the end."

"There was nothing you could have done," Kazin offered by way of consolation. To him, it sounded like an indictment of his own helplessness.

"I do not know that," the stranger replied, bowing his head and drawing his cloak tighter around his shoulders. "I suppose I never will, now. The dead are quite beyond my reach." He turned to face Kazin, and the firelight threw the white of his mask into stark relief against the black well of his hood. Dark eyes glittered through the eyeholes, and Kazin could see the film of tears upon them. He opened his mouth to reply, but thinking better, merely nodded in agreement. The stranger turned back to the sparks of the village. "He told you I was coming?"

"Yes," Kazin replied. "It was one of the last things he said; an exile mystic approaches, in response to his call. He instructed me to meet you." He studied the exile's unreadable profile. "He did not tell me your name, though."

The mask nodded. "No, he wouldn't. It would have been disrespectful not to allow me to choose how to introduce myself." A wan smile drifted through the tired voice. "I have too many names, but that is the price of all these years of wandering." He turned back to face Kazin. "You may call me Ganothil, my shaman, if you wish." He bowed slightly at the waist, keeping his arms wrapped in his cloak.

Kazin flinched away from the slap of the title. From the corner of his eye, he caught Semal studying his reaction over the fire.

“I am no one’s shaman,” he said quietly. “I lack the peace in my heart to guide wisely.”

“Peace is hard to find these days,” Ganothil nodded. A stick of an arm lilted from beneath his robes and rested a fragile claw on Kazin’s shoulder. The touch felt like a dried leaf but carried a soothing coolness. “But your strength will flow, if not from one font than from another.” He broke the contact. “I think the food is almost ready,” he said. “I can see you and your friend are hungry. You will forgive me if I don’t join you, but I do not seem to have much of an appetite.” He glided back to the fire and knelt beside it. Yellow light washed his wooden face.

“It hardly seems right that we should consume the food you prepared for yourself.”

“I would be honored if you would, young shaman; if nothing else, consider it a gesture of my grief for you.”

“Is it true,” Semal asked as he turned the spit over the fire, “that exiles never remove their masks in front of others?” He prodded the meat with a sharpened twig, producing a small trickle of juice that hissed into the flame.

“Semal!” Kazin exclaimed.

“I have heard that to look on an exile’s true face is to be cursed,” Semal continued, now sucking thoughtfully on his makeshift skewer.

“Cousin! That’s enough!”

“Actually,” the exile said, still staring into the fire, “our lives in the wilderness away from the people have left us scarred,” he circled his thin hand in front of his bone white mask, “and we hide behind masks so we are not mistaken for evil spirits.”

Semal stared at him slack-jawed, and even Kazin shifted uneasily. Ganothil watched the flames lick the carcass as he gave the spit another half turn.

“Is that – are you...” Semal began.

With a fluid sweep the exile removed his mask, and Semal jumped back from the fire. Kazin felt his heart lurch, but relief flooded back as he stared at the heavy lines of the careworn face looking back at him.

Ganothil's skin was the color of a tanned hide but looked as thin as a firemoth wing. His black eyes shone from inside nests of wrinkles. The old man smiled, his few remaining teeth small and yellow.

"You should not believe everything you hear," the exile replied, and chuckled softly. "I am sorry, I know that humor is out of place now, but I could not resist." Both cousins exhaled. Kazin smiled; Semal frowned and ran a broad hand over his shaved scalp to wipe away the sudden slick of nervousness. His flush blended with the red paint he still wore.

"It is all right, friend," Kazin said and sat beside him. "Semal, go ahead and eat – I need to speak with Ganothil."

"What, am I just supposed to leave you with him?" Semal exclaimed as he rose. "You cannot trust him!"

"First, cousin, you should get some food and *then* leave me to speak with him, just for a while. And second, if the master said I could trust him, then I can."

"And he told you this?"

Ganothil watched the exchange stoically.

Kazin took a breath. "Yes," he said.

Semal looked about to protest, but he closed his mouth; Kazin's gaze was adamant. He drew the small knife from his belt and shaved off a portion of the brush piglet's flank. He raised the dripping meat toward Ganothil, muttered a brief thanks, and strode away into the darkness beyond the feeble circle of firelight. Kazin and his withered host watched the warrior go. The stars carried his silhouette to the crest of the hill, and dropped him behind it. Neither man spoke for several more seconds until the exile's dry voice broke the silence.

"You were untruthful with your cousin then," the exile said quietly.

"He was not there; he does not know what was said."

"Interesting. I did not expect you to be so comfortable with untruths."

Kazin scowled. "I'm not," he said.

"Indeed?" Ganothil paused. "And exactly what was said?"

Kazin looked into the old man's face, turned toward him in anticipation. His eyes glittered like onyx beads. He didn't even seem to breathe.

The shaman's yurt had been a squalid, reeking parody of the incense filled sanctum he remembered. Gone were the old fetishes, the mystic spirals of dream thread and bone that had hung from the ironwood supports; gone were the mandalas of colored sand and phosphorous; gone were the hanging herbs and sacred bones of his ancestors. The only traces of the magic he remembered had been a few blackened fragments of bone and charred skins in the fire pit. And in their place...

"We spoke of the grove," Kazin answered as he wrenched his mind away from the images. "He wanted to know if his visions were true."

"They were," Ganothil said and nodded gravely.

"You've seen it?"

Ganothil shrugged. "Not directly, no. But it does not take a shaman to see the sickness of the world." He stoked the fire with a stray branch; red and yellow sparks soared toward constellations. From somewhere over the rise in the path, Semal belched appreciatively over his meal, his quiet grief apparently displaced by the food in his belly. "It spreads each day," Ganothil said as he laid his poker aside.

"The grove..." Kazin began.

"Is no longer the home of the spirit. Without her, it has become the center of the blight which spreads out across the land. Yes, I have thought as much. Why else would a proper shaman seek a heretic like me unless he could no longer depend on the source of his power?" He looked at Kazin. "That is what is in your mind, is it not?"

"There is no need to mock us, exile," Kazin said stonily.

"I do not mean to," Ganothil replied quietly, lightly touching Kazin's shoulder once more. "I – we, that is – may not have agreed with the shaman and their... dependency, but we never begrudged them their prosperity by it. And remember, we left of our own accord to forge our paths in the world. The people did not drive us out." He removed his hand. "And I'm sorry that time has proven us correct by proving just how dangerous ties can be should the anchor be... removed."

“Everything was so sure,” Kazin whispered. “We were supported and sustained; the land was the spirit’s, and the spirit was ours.”

“A fine system, if it was not the nature of things that all things end.”

“Unthinkable.”

“But always possible,” Ganothil admonished, but softened his tone. “I grieve for you, young shaman, for our people, and for your dear master.” He fell silent.

“Do you know what could have driven the spirit away, Ganothil?”

The exile did not answer immediately. He looked toward the sky, at the thin skirts of cloud chasing the stars. “The world of spirits is not like the world of men,” he said at last. “There are not always clear reasons behind their actions; their motives are hard to divine, even for the most skilled. I think that we would do better to concern ourselves with what to do now.”

Kazin smiled. “He said the same thing, in our last talk today. While I was gone, he had been trying to work out a solution.”

“And that is why he was practicing the shunned path.”

Kazin started. Ganothil nodded and looked into the fire. Neither man spoke, but the fire laughed dryly.

“How did you know?” Kazin asked.

“His summons reeked of it – not like our past communications at all.” He ignored Kazin’s surprise at the knowledge that his master had been in long-term communication with an exile. “His spirit was always pale yellow and green; the last time it was shot through with red and black veins, like cracks of old blood. Death was in him, but not as an intruder – he had welcomed it. The dark arts leave scars.”

Kazin thought again of the charred bones, bloodstained pots, and reek of bitter poisons that had welcomed him home. And the feverish eyes of his master blazing from the sockets of his drained, lacerated face. What he had done to himself was unthinkable, all in the name of gaining the power to save his world.

“He was desperate,” Kazin apologized. “Desperation blinds a man, makes him forget himself, and leads him to do things he normally would not.” He threw a hard look at the old man. “But how did you recognize the signs? Are you a practitioner?”

Ganothil laughed, a hollow barking sound barren of humor. “I do not use blood and bone magic,” he said with mild contempt in his voice. “We turned our backs on those practices when we turned away from the path your tribe followed, young one. But we remember when the people practiced them. Back when the banes ran wild.”

Kazin shuddered. Ganothil had mentioned them... just as his master had. He steered away from the subject.

“So he projected himself to you? I am surprised he had the energy.”

“Your master was a great, great man, Kazin, and though he was dying his spirit was far from broken, fed as it was on his body.”

Again Kazin thought of the decrepit man in his master’s bed, of the wounds and amputations, the *sacrifices* he’d made to try to channel his life into the dying magic. No wonder he’d been mad. He forced the image back down.

“And he asked you here?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Ganothil paused and stared at the bone-white mask in his gnarled fingers. He frowned, the lines of his face cutting deeper into his skull. “He wanted my advice, and my help. You see, he believed – wrongly, I might add – he had found a way to save his people.” His voice trailed off as he stared into the vacant eyes of his mask.

“Go on,” Kazin prompted.

“I do not think it wise to discuss this, young shaman. If he had wanted you to know, he would have told you.”

“Unless he ran out of life before he had the chance,” Kazin said, accusingly.

Ganothil looked at him, then nodded. “Very well. The shaman had seen something in one of his... ceremonies,” Ganothil said with a shudder. He drew his black cloak tighter around his shoulders; Kazin remarked once again how fragile the old man looked. “He had seen the death of the grove, yes,” he continued,

“and that was why he sent you there, but not to confirm what he already knew to be true. Perhaps he wanted you to see it with your own eyes, but I think he wanted you gone, young shaman, so you would not stop him.”

“Stop him from doing what, Ganothil?” Kazin’s skin felt full of nettles; how much did the exile know? Had he guessed his master’s plan? Would he try to stop him from seeing it through? Ganothil’s earlier comment about his dishonesty came back to him, but he dismissed it. It was necessary to bait the old man, to glean what information he could.

“He wanted to look back to a time before the grove, before the rites of binding. Back to a time when the banes held sway over all. I do not think you need to be told the dangers of that.”

““When you look into the world of spirits, the spirits will look back into you,”” Kazin repeated the master’s words. ““One must know when to look, and when to shut one’s eyes.””

“Very true. We never look back that far, because they might see us.” Ganothil quickly touched his forehead and spat to his left and right.

“He was looking for a way to break the covenant,” Kazin said, careful to make it sound like he had just arrived at the realization. He was shocked at how easy the act was.

“Yes.”

“But that’s impossible,” Kazin said, feeling cold despite the fire. “The covenant was flawless. There was no weakness in the ritual. The ties between the people, land, and spirit were the greatest magics ever worked, and no force could break them.”

How cold have you become, part of him asked. How cold will you let yourself get?

“The banes could do it,” Ganothil said quietly. “And he was convinced of this. He sought to unleash them and return the world to the way it was before they were imprisoned, hoping that the people would survive long enough to find another force with the power to subdue them again.” He turned his onyx eyes back to Kazin. “He wanted to know where their prisons were, and he thought I knew. We exiles see much, after all... sometimes too much,” he trailed off again, lost in the lines carved on his mask.

“And do you know their locations?” Kazin asked, and instantly regretted the slip.

Ganothil stared at him, his eyes widening in comprehension. “Deceitful boy! I suspect that he told you all this in his last moments,” he said. “And I think that you intend to take up his cause to unmake the world!”

“Well, can you think of a better option?” Kazin asked coldly, rising to his feet.

“I should have known! You are still your master’s servant!” He rose with difficulty; Kazin did not help him. “What other reason would you and your warrior friend be setting out from the village on the night that your people need you the most if you were not off to fulfill this horrible wish?”

“The people do not need me, they fear me!” Kazin exclaimed. “They fear that I will become like him, that I will go mad! They think the crops failed and births stilled because the line of shaman has been corrupted.” He wiped away a sudden mist of hot tears. “And besides, as it stands the entire world will wither and die! At least this way there’s some chance of survival. There was no blight during their time.”

“No, there was not. There was only chaos and destruction.”

“But we survived those times, and we shall do it again.”

“Unleashing the banes is suicide. They know no gratitude or restraint, and they will not have forgotten how they were trapped before. They will blow you out like a tinder-flame if you set them free!”

“Better to die doing *something* than sit and wait for starvation from the blight!” Kazin’s anger was rising; it felt good to feel something besides sorrow. A sly smile crept onto his face. “And I never said I was just going to free them. I plan to harness their power and direct it against the grove.”

“Your people were right to fear you, it seems; you already are mad!” the exile whispered harshly. “Even if their power can sever the ties between the grove and the rest of the world, you cannot command them to break the covenant. They will rampage where they please!”

“But they *can* break it!”

“That is not the point!” Ganothil protested. “Nothing can channel their fury!”

“My master taught me that all spirits can be channeled with the right focus,” Kazin retorted. “And terrible as they are, the banes are still spirits, and they are bound by the same rules.”

Ganothil laughed in scorn. “You think you can put a bane in a bottle and plug it with a cork? Or wave a crystal before one and trap it in a facet? The focus that could hold a bane, let alone all three, has never been made, and doing so would take all the power of every shaman that has ever lived since the dawn of our world!”

“And that, exile,” Kazin said, fierce triumph erupting in his heart, “is what my master has done.” He reached into his belt pouch and brought out the fist-sized bundle, wrapped in the rune-carved, cured skin of a draconix. At the sight of it, Ganothil’s breath caught in his thin throat and his eyes swelled. Kazin felt his own knees buckle slightly as a phantom wave of cold emanated from the fetish.

“His *heart*?” the old man breathed, somewhere between horror and adoration.

“That has carried the power, the blood of every shaman since the dawn of the world, as you said.” He looked down at the grisly thing in his hand that was already beginning to harden and solidify under the magics placed on it. “He told me what he had done,” he said as he ran a finger over the cold fibers of muscle. “He told me about how his sacrifices had not rekindled the life of the grove, how even his blood and flesh had been used in vain. He...” Kazin swallowed, and let his tears come now. “He cursed his allegiance, and used his anger and fear to fuel the spells he carved into his flesh. He burned his totems and ate them all; he swallowed their spirits and bound them into his flesh. He fed his life force with others to give him the strength to finish. But he needed me to end it, to perform the last rites that would prepare it. And then he told me to cut...” Kazin couldn’t finish. He could still feel the sacrificial blade in his hand as it slid into fevered flesh. “It was the only option left, he said.” The heart pulsed imperceptibly in his hand; Kazin felt its raw, unforgiving power. He looked at Ganothil, whose face had gone as pale as the mask he had worn.

“He became a monster,” the old man said. “Everything he sought to protect the people from, he embraced in the end.”

“He became our savior,” Kazin said fiercely. “He suffered more than any one of us so that we might have a weapon against the death of our world. I can forgive him any evils he did should his sacrifice save us all.” Kazin thrust the dry heart toward Ganothil, who flinched away. “Tell me, is this not a focus worthy of a bane?”

“I cannot say,” Ganothil replied, “but I can feel his – its power. Overwhelming.” He looked up at Kazin with alarm; his hands traced a ward in the air. “I beg you, put it away! I feel it tugging on me!”

Kazin nodded and reverently rewrapped the talisman and slid it back into his pouch. He felt its weight as a comfort. The anger he felt earlier bled out of him. He sat down close to the fire, shivering.

“Do not expose that until you mean to use it, boy!” The exile shuddered.

“I promise I will not,” Kazin said feebly.

“I think I understand now what you are to do, young shaman,” the exile said sadly. “I confess that I still think that your quest will only end in your own painful death, if not the destruction of all the people. The banes are not typical demons – they are primal forces that have been here since the dawn of time. They may *not* be bound by the same laws as other spirits; you may find them impossible to contain.”

“They were trapped before,” Kazin insisted.

“With the aid of a force that is no longer in this world! Surely you can see...” Ganothil trailed off, then new alarm flashed into his face. “Does your cousin know?”

“No,” Kazin said quietly as he sat by the fire. “I told him nothing of the plan.”

“But he accompanies you?”

“He thinks that the master told me of a new Grove, and that we are going to find it.” Kazin looked into Ganothil’s black eyes. The old man’s gaze was unfathomable.

“You lied to him, then?”

“I... I am afraid to tell him the truth. I fear what he might say, what he might think. I do not think I could stand losing his support.” Kazin smiled thinly. “Semal has always wanted to protect me, ever since we were young.”

“You will need his protection,” Ganothil agreed. “Though it is cruel, you are right not to tell him of your mission, as he would surely try to stop you.”

“And will you?”

Ganothil shrugged. “I feel it is not my destiny to impede you. In fact,” he sat beside Kazin, “I am now convinced that the shaman did not call me here for his sake so much as yours.”

“You will help me then?”

“It would be a grave sin if I did not try, and this old body has neither the strength nor the magic to stop you. So I will offer you the aid of my knowledge and hope that you succeed, or that you will come to your senses before it is too late to turn from this path.”

“I am in your debt, Ganothil,” Kazin said, feeling his own heart as an iron stone, but whether it was heavy with guilt or resentment he could not tell.

“First, I want you to take this,” Ganothil said, and pressed his spirit mask into Kazin’s hand. He silenced the younger man’s protests with a wave of his hand. “You should know,” he began, “that we exiles see much. The real reason we wear our masks is so nothing can see *us*. There are things, creatures, forces in this world that see a man’s face and *know* him, and once the man is *known*, he is vulnerable. It is like knowing a thing’s true name, but far easier and more insidious.”

“I think I understand,” Kazin said as he cradled the wooden mask to his chest.

“I believe you do. The wisdom that your master passed to you about looking into the spirit world is quite true, and terribly so where they are concerned. When you look upon the banes, let them not see your face, or you will be theirs. And do not look upon them with eyes unhidden, or your soul will fly into their maws.” He paused before continuing. “This mask carries the power of all I have seen and *known* in life, and it may help you against Them, though it is doubtful. It will, however, lead you to them; I have seen their dreaming. You have but to follow the threads of their thoughts, and you will find them.”

“Thank you, wise one.”

“Do not thank me for this!” Ganothil spat acidly. He sighed and composed himself before continuing. “And second, before I tell you what I know of the banes’ prisons, I must tell you of another vision I have seen. A vision of a bright death that will walk this world in the tracks of the blight and still all before it with the fire of dead stars.” He paused and looked surreptitiously over his shoulder. “Something that even the banes may fear.”

“What is this vision?” Kazin asked, not sure why the taste of ash was on his tongue.

“I only know what I have dreamt,” Ganothil answered, “but I will attempt to show you. Give me your hand.”

He held a crisped claw out to Kazin. Kazin took it.

“Look into the fire,” Ganothil said as he closed his eyes.

Kazin obeyed. The flames were slowly losing their color, becoming gray and distant. In the heart of the fire, Kazin could see...

... the concrete stairs rising to meet his face. Instinctively he raised his right arm to shield his nose and mouth and twisted sharply to his left. His shoulder took the brunt of the impact, and before he could roll down the stairs he kicked out with both feet, grinding the heels of his combat boots into the concrete. He mentally thanked his father for enrolling him in aikido classes all those years ago as he snapped his head back to glare at his assailant.

“Now get the fuck out of here,” the bullnecked bouncer said. Beside him, a safe distance away, the asshole who started the fight was being given the same tender treatment. He was not going quietly, and neither was his date. Despite his split lip, he was screaming at Alex and the bouncers, and she was screaming at him for getting them kicked out.

“Oh you don’t have to worry about that,” Alex smiled acidly up at the chunk that had just thrown him out of the club. “I have every intention of getting the fuck out of here, as this is definitely not my kind of establishment. You should just thank your lucky stars that I’m not hurt, or I’d have your ass in my wallet by morning. Take some fucking sensitivity training, Eegah.”

The bouncer, clearly not aware of the cinematic reference, dismissed him with a swipe of a paw through the air. Alex picked himself up and slapped the grit from his silk pants.

“Christ on crack!” Jessie exclaimed as she rushed out of the door. She almost ran headlong into the bouncer, but he managed to sidestep her at the last minute. In less than a breath she was at Alex’s side, a raging pixie in red patent leather pants. “What the fuck happened!?”

“Ask Prince Charming over there,” Alex said and nodded at the redneck and his thug escorts. His antagonist had shifted his fury toward the bouncers that still had hold of him. They were dragging him toward the parking lot by the collar, his shrieked threats slurred by his wounded lips. His date was walking stiffly behind them, her hand raised to her face as if she were being pursued by paparazzi. Alex grinned fiercely. “Guy apparently takes great offense at anyone dancing with his girl. Maybe he should have told her that before she started dry-humping my leg on the dance floor.”

“Oh Jesus, Alex, your face!” He winced away from her fingers; the skin of his left cheekbone felt like it had been given collagen injections with a turkey baster.

“Nothing that an evening with an icepack won’t fix.” He rubbed his stomach where the first blow had caught him. “Can’t say the same about that asswipe, though. He’ll probably need stitches to fix his harelip.”

“Your cheek’s gone all red.”

“I said I’m okay,” Alex said, brushing her hand away brusquely. “Guy hits like a puss. No follow-through at all.” He spat at his feet; there was no blood in his saliva.

“Ok, we’ve got to get out of here, like, now, before somebody calls the cops.”

“Jess?” Chad called, appearing at the entrance. He managed to look both concerned and annoyed.

“What’s going on?”

“Some fucker tried to pick a fight with Alex,” she called back over her shoulder. Alex saw Chad pull a face that seemed to sum up how typical he thought the situation was, and felt a very strong desire to be away from them both.

“It’s ok,” he said. “Go on back inside, have fun with your fiancée. I’ll just head home.”

“No, I don’t want to stay here, this place sucks.”

“I thought you said it was your favorite club.”

“Yeah, until I see how they treat my friend.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it, I’m ok. And honestly, the whole drum-and-bass techno scene really chaps my ass. The music here blows.” He looked down at his all-black ensemble and brushed some more grit off of his pants. “Besides, I’m not in the rave Twinkie uniform anyway, and I think that I should get going before that sucker-punching douche bag comes back with some of his shit-kicker friends.” He looked in the direction of the club’s parking lot. The two bouncers were watching the couple drive away; the girl was behind the wheel, and he could see her gesturing violently toward her bleeding passenger. “Well, it should be safe to get my car now,” Alex said.

“You’ve been drinking. I’ll take you home.”

“I’ve had one drink, Jessie. How many have you had?”

She didn’t answer. He nodded.

“Are you sure?” Jessie asked. Chad was still watching, arms crossed, from the entrance. “We could go somewhere else, if you wanted.”

“Positive. I think the best thing I could do right now is to get home and get some ice on this before it starts swelling,” he said and gave her a quick hug. “I’ll see you at work.” He waved to Chad, still vulturing the scene. “Nice meeting you, Chad!” he yelled.

“Yeah, you too, sorry.”

As he walked away from the pounding bass vibrations his cheek and gut began to ache less, but his pride hurt all the more. Great, he thought, now the hubby’s first impression is of me getting kicked out of some lame bar, and Jess sees me get tossed like a rag doll.

The night had turned cold. The air carried the promise of rain. Alex pulled the collar of his ultra-suede jacket up against the cold wind. He could hear distant thunder as he turned right on the sidewalk and began the uphill march to the public parking garage. With each step the commotion behind him dimmed, while the pain in his twisted left ankle grew. Each needle of pain sharpened the aimless hostility swelling in him.

“Assholes,” he hissed at no one. “Fucking cookie-cutter sheep.”

It’s your own damn fault, the critic said. You just had to lose your cool.

“He threw the first punch,” he hissed. “I was just trying to have a good time.”

Yeah, like you could enjoy yourself in a place like that. Fit right in, didn’t you?

“But I look good in black.”

The waistcoat? Velvet? You looked like Poirot with hair and a tapeworm.

“So fucking what?” he snapped. “So I got a few stares, ok. That chick was all over me.” He quickened his pace, stomping through his limp as the first cold drops trickled in between the gelled spikes of his hair.

Yeah she was, and wasn’t that great? Isn’t that always what you wanted to be, a club whore?

“Shut up!” he shouted, startling himself with the volume of his voice. He looked around the empty street. A single car passed, its windows rolled down. The driver actually swerved further away from him. Alex felt himself flush.

“I should have sliced his face open,” he whispered as his fingers closed on the straight razor in his hip pocket. Not as good as a gun for intimidation, he knew, but he wasn’t one to be caught helpless downtown after dark.

Oh sure, just what you need. Get arrested for assault with a deadly weapon, spend the next few years getting boned in prison showers. Great finish to your story, Alex. Write that.

He let the razor drop back into his pocket. “Just shut up.”

Who are you talking to, anyway?

Embarrassment burned him again, and he ground his teeth.

This isn't a good sign, the critic laughed. The voice was getting stronger. Maybe you need help.

Alex didn't reply.

By the time he'd walked to the end of the next block the rain was coming down in earnest. He screwed his face into a grimace and crossed his arms in front of his expensive waistcoat. He took the next corner almost at a run.

And nearly ran headlong into Kari.

In twenty-four years, he could recall only four instances when time had stood still for him: falling from a brick wall at the age of four; a soccer ball rocketing at his face when he was nine; immediately prior to his one car accident when he was seventeen; and the day he'd proposed to Kari in the corner booth of McGuire's tavern and waited for her answer. Now he could add a fifth. Each glittering streak of rain, every leaf on each decrepit branch lining the street hung suspended in the agaric of shock, rendered into a still from the photo album of dreams. A stray lock of jet black hair crossed her white face; droplets of water provided diamond accents to the steel buckles on her boots. Her black lips parted in an O of surprise, her blue eyes bright in the thick black swirl of her eyeliner.

Wait, he thought through his rising panic. Look again, Alex. *Blue eyes?*

“Jesus, watch where you're going,” she said with a sneer that only partly hid her alarm.

Kari's eyes are green, he told himself. This girl had the wrong color eyes. Alex willed himself to calm down, and slowly the face in front of him resolved itself – the resemblance was uncanny, but it was not Kari. And still his heart raced.

“What the hell are you staring at?” she demanded even as she took a step back. One hand had found its way into the coffin-shaped leather purse at her side. The other gripped her hot pink umbrella like a firebrand. The rain thumped dully on its stretched nylon wings.

“I’m terribly sorry,” a ragged silk voice he hadn’t used in years replied. “I didn’t mean to be rude, but I honestly mistook you for someone you couldn’t possibly be.”

“Yeah, well, just watch where you’re going,” the girl said, still eyeing him suspiciously. She gave him a quick once over, and he felt her eyes linger at the pendant of his choker. “Nice spider,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said, touching it lightly. “It was a gift from my ex. She gave it to me right before we went to see Bauhaus on the Resurrection Tour.” The rain had already begun to fade from his senses as he slipped into the old charm.

“Good show,” she agreed, melting slightly. “Where’d you see it?”

“Atlanta. The Tabernacle.” He ran a hand through his hair, slicking back his drooping wet spikes into a sheet of black pinfeathers. He tugged the hem of his waistcoat.

“No shit! Me too!” she said.

“I’ve never been to another show where there were five encores.”

“Yeah, and when they covered ‘Ziggy Stardust’...”

“I love David Bowie,” he said with a theatrical smile. He was amazed at how natural it felt. “But if you can’t have Bowie, then Peter Murphy makes a wonderful substitute. I also caught Love and Rockets there, a few months later,” he added. “I loved the irony, it being their last tour.”

“I missed that,” she said with a pout. She looked closely at him. “Uh... did you get into a fight?”

Alex touched his cheek and winced. “Yeah, I don’t think the patrons at the Warehouse liked me too much. I actually got thrown out.”

“Why the fuck’d you go there?” she asked. Color flared in her vinegar-pale cheeks. “Fucking normals, they’re all so judgmental. Show them anything that doesn’t fit into their tiny little world, and they just want to wreck it. Just last week someone down there tried to beat up Devin while he was walking down the street! He wasn’t even trying to go in, and these fucking wiggers tried to jump him.” She stopped and smiled sheepishly. “Not that that would mean anything to you.”

“No, I completely understand what you’re saying,” he said. “This sort of thing happens a bit too often to me. I just wish I knew where I could go and, you know, fit in a little better.” He hoped she would take the bait, and he wasn’t disappointed.

“You should come to Legends sometime. Monday night’s Goth night, and Thursdays are industrial. I’m headed there now.” She paused. “If you want, you can come with me. I’m a member, and I can get you a discount on the cover.”

“Thanks, but I think I really need to be getting home. If I don’t get some ice on this, I’ll need to go back to greasepaint to hide the bruises.”

“That would be unfortunate,” she said with a laugh. Another small pause and she checked the pink plastic wristwatch set into her black leather bondage bracelet. “Well, it was nice talking with you, but I’m late meeting some friends.”

“Of course. Don’t let me keep you, miss... ah...”

“Amber,” the girl replied.

“Amber, right. I’m Alex.”

“Nice meeting you,” Amber said and offered her hand, which Alex took in both of his.

“Well met,” he said. “And good evening.”

She turned and walked quickly down the street. She stopped in front of a nondescript bar that he’d never really noticed before. As she opened the door, he heard muffled music, unmistakable despite the distance and the white noise of the street and rain.

The Cure, “Lullaby.” His old song.

“Turn around,” he whispered, willing her to look back.

She looked back and waved. Alex felt the triumph explode inside him.

He resumed his trek back to the car park, the pain in his face, stomach and ankle forgotten on the tide of euphoric recollection. He felt as though he’d just recovered a fragment of who he’d been before he’d gotten lost in someone else. Perhaps not quite so momentous, he thought, seeing as how you always just wore whatever mask best fit your surroundings. Still, his darker side had always felt more comfortable when he put it on the outside. Chameleons are even harder to see in the shadows.

Thinking this, he stopped and stared back at the tiny club under the sodium arc lights. The music was faint, but the magic was there, still intoxicating, still seductive.

You should not go there. The voice wasn’t the critic; it was softer, less abrasive. Alex frowned.

“But I’ve finally found a place where I might remember how to live,” he mumbled.

If you go there, you turn your back on everything that you were with her, on everything you believed.

Alex looked up at the sky and let the rain fall on his injured face. Dimly he could recall life before Kari – the drugs, the parties, meaningless seas of human experience that he’d enjoyed with the contempt of one so jaded that the word “enough” was the greatest possible lie. It didn’t seem like a hellish existence to him anymore. It seemed like the escape he’d been looking for.

You cannot go back in time, the new voice said. Going back to the life you led before Kari will not make the pain go away. You’re still running, and you know exactly how it will end. It reminded him of the “counselor” he’d visited once after his last episode with the razor. She’d suggested religion, being born again. He hadn’t bothered to come back.

“But it might work this time,” he said. He began to walk toward the club. The music grew in volume. “Maybe I can remember how to be me…”

You’ve come a long way since then.

Yeah, and look where it’s gotten you, the critic replied. The cold voice now sounded a lot like his own. For once, he didn’t curse hearing it.

There are other people in your life who’d care if you slid back. Remember them.

“They’ll live,” he said to himself with a dry smile.

Alex, you do not want to be that person again. You were miserable then, and you made everyone else miserable. What makes you think it will be any different now? The voice in his head was gentle, reasonable, and somehow distant.

“Well, I sure as shit can’t stand myself now, so what do I have to lose?”

All that you are and were. The thought echoed in his head.

He grasped the handle of the club door. Its sheet metal façade threw a smudged reflection back at him, and he smiled his most devilish. “No good trying to scare myself with something that’s already happened,” he mused. A rush of cold air, thick with smoke and clove, greeted him as he yanked the door open and stepped across the threshold into his past.

PART TWO:

DISPERSAL

*I asked myself, was I content
With the world that I once cherished?
Did it bring me to this darkened place
To contemplate my "perfect future?"
I will not stand nor utter words against
This tide of hate;
Losing sight of what and who I was again.
I'm so sorry if these seething words I say
Impress on you that I've become
The anathema of my soul.*

-- VNV Nation, "Epicentre"

The immense monitor before him was, for the time being, his world. For hours he had watched surreal images march across the screen as the shadows of others danced just outside the narrow scope of his vision. The sound of its speakers had resolved itself into a steady bass drone, and the hushed voices of the specters around him were reduced into lapping gray fuzz by the narcotics coursing through his system. The earlier discomfort had faded to a dull twinge, detectable only as a faint red miasma at the far corner of his consciousness. Occasionally a tattered scarf of acrid blue smoke would drift in front of him, but his eyes remained unblinkingly focused on the screen.

His eyelids had been incinerated two days ago, along with his lower jaw and tongue. He only noticed their absence when his exposed eyes began to dry, but it was an inconvenience easily relieved by the saline dispensers on either side of his head. The flow of arcane chemistry through his petrified body had eradicated all but his consciousness and his curiosity. Pain was a dimming memory, as irrelevant as sleep and time in this place of metamorphosis.

Watching the recorded feeds from the probes was far preferable to looking at the mirrors hanging above him. Though he didn't mind his appearance, it was far less intriguing to him, despite the flat voice of the blind med-tech servitor speaking directly into his newly upgraded aural port, keeping him informed of every step of his reconstruction. He'd listened to that dead voice for days, and was quite bored with it. The sight of his transfiguration no longer fascinated him, even as the robotic surgeons flensed layer after layer from his body and replaced it with glittering steel and dull ferro-ceramics. The pieces they cut from him were dropped into the humming autoclave to the side of the operating table, each bit of obsolete flesh sending up blue-white plumes of steam and ash.

"And thus," the mechanized corpse sitting beside his head droned, "the musculature of thy right arm canst be removed by severing the tendons at these five points, allowing the insertion of the bone mounts and plastic integration ports for the conduction of..."

Viridian willed his new audio filters to tune the litany out and tried to force the garbled sounds of the viewscreen into resolution. The half-nude painted figures seemed to be shouting, perhaps even singing hymns of praise while crude multi-legged black machines resembling the lurching sarcophagi of the logisters gouged

furrows in the raw red ground. His distaste seethed again, and the neutralizer unit dispensed another small dose of emotion suppressants into his bloodstream.

“We are unsure as to the purpose of these constructs,” Black’s metal voice sounded at his right. “They demonstrate great strength, as thou canst see. Mayhap they are some form of construction apparatus.”

“We also believe they might be some sort of combat engine, perhaps a mobile weapons platform,” White said from his left. “The trenches they dig might provide them with support for heavy artillery that might be concealed beneath their armor plating.”

“Whatever their unclean purpose,” Clear’s voice rang from behind him, “Thou shalt surely face them in thy mission. Be thou ready, abolisher.”

He was still not quite sure what they were calling him. The title “abolisher” spoke of termini, of sanction and obviation. He tasted it with his mind, and found it suited him. Each time the logisters called him by the name, it felt more appropriate to describe what he was becoming.

Viridian swung his parched eyes to his right. In response, the saline dispensers once again sprayed a brief lubricating mist onto his exposed eyes. The focus of the screen became clearer.

Abruptly the image on the monitor broke up into jagged blue and white bars of interference. He felt something close to loss, and longed for lips to frown.

“...to make room for the weapon’s coolant system,” the servitor continued, “thy liver...” There was a wet rip followed by dull tugging on his abdomen. He didn’t bother to watch.

“All the probes we have sent have failed scant hours subsequent to their insertion,” White said as a black-shrouded technician keyed up more archive footage. “The light of these suns must be deleterious to their batteries. It is fortunate that we have a contact collecting them.”

“And every agent sent through either returned with the taint of deviancy, or simply vanished,” Black added. “An unshielded mind seems quite susceptible to the influence of this place.”

Viridian looked right again, and the dispensers irrigated his eyes. He wanted his vision sharp.

“...the fusing of thy ribs, prior to electroplating...”

Once more the screen flickered to life, the viewpoint soaring over stunted vegetation and pools like open sores. The landscape undulated below, rolling hills shrouded in yellow and white fog. Viridian felt

loathing rise in him. He voiced a strangled grunt from the ragged wound of his throat. The pipes snaking into his lungs muffled it.

“Yes, abolisher,” Clear commented. “Horrible. Completely devoid of order.” He heard its clanking tread advancing closer. The logister’s proximity sent crackles of energy skipping along the exposed sections of his cerebrum. The pressure in his abdomen had slackened, and he glanced down to see two technicians easing the blood-slick installation prongs around the graceful edges of his new personal plasma reactor.

“The seismic scans and topographical surveys recovered from our probes confirm that the very ground moves, often independent of the surface, which largely remains static,” White said. “At times, the motion almost resembles the autonomic functions of a living organism.”

“And it is always rearranging itself,” Black interjected, “as though in direct defiance of permanence. This land is chaos itself.”

The probe that carried his gaze banked sharply toward the space between two glowering suns. Below it the swamp gave way to jagged ridges of raw stone. Leaning spires of rock tore at the inferno-hued sky. Shadows leapt between the blades of stone in defiance to the light, moving with an almost animal cunning. The tallest spires of the range drooled caps of dead ice

“...to facilitate a 63 percent rise in firing accuracy the nerve relays will be replaced...”

A sudden spasm ripped through Viridian. His eyes danced wildly in their sockets, throwing his vision into chaos. The saline dispenser fired randomly. His eyes swam in artificial tears and lost their focus. He gargled in annoyance.

“Careful, simpleton!” White’s synthetic voice snapped. A trio of technicians cringed away from the logister as it rounded on the master control station. “Keep thou away from the subject’s motor functions! It must remain motionless if all procedures are to be completed without damage to the vessel!”

“My apologies, my lords,” the overseer said from behind his console. “But this equipment is very delicate, and I... cannot see clearly around the servitor. If one of my staff couldst reposition it I am certain –”

Black’s sarcophagus thudded forward. One of its jointed legs whistled through the air and smashed into the droning servitor, knocking it to the ground and silencing its commentary. Viridian heard its electronics short and power down. It did not attempt to rise.

“Obstacle: removed,” Black boomed. “Now see to thy work!”

“Aye, my lord,” the unseen overseer mewled. Viridian dimly felt pressure on the inside of his skull. A quick glance at the mirror showed the implantation spike imbedded in his gray matter shifting back into proper alignment. The seizures subsided. A breathing tube fed his lungs a long even stream of oxygen, and he relaxed.

“See to that one’s repairs,” White barked as two suited technicians removed the inert servitor from the operating theater.

The scenery on the screen changed yet again, shifting from one probe’s viewpoint to another’s in a crackle of static. A nightmare landscape devoid of towers, domes, or roads filled Viridian’s vision. Tangled masses of dark green vegetation choked the land. Inhuman cries rose from its depth.

“We have known of this... blasphemy’s existence for some time now,” Clear said from behind him. “The tear in the fabric of our world was small, at first – too small even for us to notice. But it hath widened considerably. We have striven to keep knowledge of the aperture’s existence a secret. Unfortunately, our attempts met with failure. Some citizens have managed to find it, with disturbing results.”

“As more citizens are exposed, the taint of deviancy spreads,” White said as it lurched into Viridian’s view. Its palsied face wore a scowl accentuated by the tubes and electrodes tugging at the corners of its small mouth. The light from its eyes made Viridian suddenly mourn the loss of his eyelids.

“Even worse are the occasions when something from there hath come through to our continuum,” Black added as it advanced on the screen. It extended a manipulator and pointed at a strange airborne object captured by the probe’s camera. It was little more than a dark smear on the grainy screen, but Viridian could make out a ragged pair of wings trailing a long tail. “One of these... abominations,” Black said, “came through not long ago and spread a contagion of lunacy. Verily, thy last campaign was against the deviants spawned by this contact.”

“All this serves to illustrate a dire truth, abolisher,” Clear said. “Shall we tell thee?”

Deeply honored, Viridian swung his eyes right.

“Very well,” the High Logister intoned. “Reality, truth, permanence, and all the virtues we uphold and defend as law... are transient.”

Viridian looked left. *No.*

He felt a dim jolt as his left arm was disarticulated at the shoulder. The bright sparks of a bioweld danced at his side, lighting the blocky lines and edges of the weapon mount being lowered into place there. The procedure captivated him.

“I speak true, Abolisher,” Clear said. “Though thou mayest seek to deny what thou hearest, thy recalcitrance shalt not change the facts.”

“Reality is merely what we tell each other it is,” White said. “Our notions of sanity and lunacy might easily be reversed if one viewpoint gained majority over the other. Thus must ethicality be upheld to arm the sound mind with prejudicial foresight against the threat of deviancy.”

“Truth varies from moment to moment,” Black decreed. “And most horrible of all, no living man doth perceive it like unto his fellow men, unless a strong discipline solidifies the minds of many into a single impenetrable thought that affords only apathy to the naysayer.”

“And nothing is permanent, unless all other truths and realities have ceased to be possible,” Clear completed the thought. “For only when the knowledge of choice hath been expunged can any truth, any reality be considered fundamentally and purely secure. Only then can the most ruthless of logic find purchase. That is, ‘the last is the correct.’ Dost thou understand, Abolisher?”

Viridian looked left. His mind screamed defiance at the extent of his corruption. The logisters, the pinnacles of virtue, had just spoken what had sounded to his tainted ears like the direst of blasphemy. More than ever, he wished for his purification to be complete. He willed the surgeons to work faster.

“Aye,” Clear said, as if intercepting his thoughts. “Soon enough, thy doubts shall be gone. No more questions, for I do believe thy eyes are next.”

Even as he turned his gaze to face them the needle claws of the retractors dug into his eyeballs. For one alarming moment he continued to see, even as the dark humors oozed across his pupils and his sight was stretched from his skull. Then blades severed his optic nerves and minute clamps worked the termini into edges frayed enough for splicing.

“We apologize for distracting thee,” the voice behind him cajoled, “but thou shalt find thy new eyes vastly superior, once installed and calibrated. For now, though, merely listen. Our world, our society relies on

the belief that it is the only way of existence. And should that tenet be proven false... well, thou hast seen the results. Madness, wantonness, and anarchy.”

Viridian grunted along the tube snaking into the raw opening of his lower face. He tried to furrow his brow, but the nerve spikes at the base of his skull prevented such strenuous voluntary movement. The sense of pressure on his exposed optics bloomed dully. The drugs in his system suppressed his panic at his sudden blindness, leaving him only with a sense of frustration and impatience for sight. He tried to express it through a violent exhalation along his breathing tube and produced only another wet grunt.

“Hush, child,” the voice of the High Logister said from above him, and distantly he felt a steel manipulator limb brush his brow. He stilled, awed at the blessing given him.

“Hush,” Clear said again, “thou shouldst rest now and let the surgeons finish their task. When thou hast regained more of thyself – far more than thou hast dreamed until now! – we shall show thee...”

“...what lies beyond the valley, and the outer edge of the verdant! That alone would be worth it, and I cannot let you go off alone on what is the most dangerous journey you or any of the ancestors have ever taken!”

“Now you *are* exaggerating,” Kazin protested as he swatted another scattering of biting flies away from his face. The tiny green insects looped crazily away from his hand. “This journey is a momentary inconvenience compared to the dangers faced by the shaman that forged the prisons of the banes in the distant times. Our path should keep us clear of that sort of trouble.” The lie tasted foul on his tongue, but he had spoken it easily. He adjusted his shoulder pack, feeling the unaccustomed bulk sliding against the worn hide. He would need it again soon.

Semal shook his head. He swung his parang in a great arc, and the undergrowth opened in green wounds before him. “I do not know how you can say that with any certainty, Kazin, if for no other reason than the fact that you were not present during those times.” The laughing wail of a thrashbill punctuated his statement.

“You know the stories,” Kazin retorted. “We both do. Do not make light of the events that led to us, cousin.”

Semal stopped and looked back at Kazin with a gentle, sweaty smile. He wiped green sap from his blade with the hem of his cream-colored hide skirt, leaving a dark smear. “You know I mean no disrespect. I merely assert that you cannot know for certain if the trials of the ancients will prove more daunting than those that we shall face, because you do not know how our journey will end.” He looked back at the dense vegetation ahead of him. “Not even that... exile could tell you that,” he muttered. “Some seer he proved. He could not even manage to point us to a clear path.”

“Ganothil has helped us more than you know. And besides, the search for a new spirit of the land is my quest – you should have stayed behind to protect the people.” He swatted a parasite from his neck and wished its soul a more fortunate reincarnation. “As I have already told you many times.”

“No, this is *our* quest. It is my sacred duty to protect you, my shaman. This may seem like another vision quest to you, but I know that you will face real danger, and I will not let you face it alone,” Semal said.

“And if the exile was so helpful, why are we out here in the verdant instead of on the path to the grove? Even a child would realize that we are headed in the wrong direction.”

“There is no point in going back to the grove. I have already told you, it is barren of all but memory and sorrow.”

“Perhaps we might learn what happened?”

“Semal, what would that accomplish?”

“We would know,” he said with a frown, “and you could make sure it does not happen again when we find a new spirit.”

“I wish magic were that simple.” Kazin’s mouth tasted of ash; Semal’s optimism tormented him. “We do not have the luxury of time, cousin,” he said. “We must hurry toward whatever it is that Ganothil has seen, and pray that it is what we seek.”

“Fine,” Semal resigned. “Still, it would be nice to have a path; then I would not be putting unnecessary wear on my blade. What happens when we stumble onto a garox bull in must and I cannot pierce its hide?”

“I will handle that, if that occurs. As far as the verdant goes, I have a better solution than hacking at it,” Kazin said as he stepped past the warrior and into the thick of the jungle. He closed his eyes and reached into his belt pouch, wincing as his fingers brushed the largest of the totems; the heart was warm, and he felt it twitch in response to his touch. Kazin was suddenly aware that he was sweating. He squeezed his eyes tighter and dug deeper. When his questing fingers touched the dried sapling at the bottom of the pouch, he breathed a sigh of relief and pulled it quickly out. Kazin glanced back over his shoulder; Semal was grimly examining a small chink in his blade. Turning back to the thick foliage, he whispered the awakening chant to the tiny fetish.

As he raised it to his lips he stretched out his spirit, wrapping it in the fibers of the foliage. The plants, outraged at their ill treatment, reluctantly submitted to his will. He blew lightly on the fetish, and the plants sighed away from him to form a narrow path through the jungle.

Semal gaped. “How did you...” he began.

“You never asked me if I *could* do it before you started swinging that meat-chopper. You are too headstrong. If I were you, I would hang the blade across my back before the verdant decides to take retribution against us.”

“What?”

Kazin sighed. He pondered how best to explain. “Some places have power; this you already know,” he began. Semal nodded, and he continued. “Many places that we would call sacred, or even haunted, are simply places where spiritual and natural energies have built up, imbuing it with lingering power. One of the most powerful of these energies is life. Do you understand?”

“Not sure,” Semal grunted as he sheathed his blade on his back. He was glancing around nervously. “You are telling me that the verdant is haunted?”

“Perhaps parts of it are, deeper than this, but that is not what I am trying to say. I am telling you that it is *alive*. Think of it as an animal made up of all the spirits contained within it – the trees, the vines, the animals, even the smallest, most annoying parasite is a part of the whole,” he said, swatting at another cloud of darting insects. “And like all living things, it will act to ensure its own survival. When you attack it, you may expect it to fight back.”

“How?”

“That depends on the attack. In the deep verdant, the trees and vines sing to each other; they listen, and if one calls for help, they can respond directly. Even the earth itself can move under their sway, and make stones stand as warriors. Out here on the edges, though, the symbiosis is weaker, but it is still there. It may not be able to take direct action against a threat, but it can call for help if pressed.” Kazin smiled at Semal, who had gone a few shades paler. His red face paint stood out boldly on his brow and cheekbones. “It could, for instance, send a garox bull our way.”

“It can do that?”

“Oh yes,” Kazin nodded and stared out along the path he’d created. It meandered gently into a deep gorge surrounded by jagged rocks. A breeze whistled between them, bearing on its breath the faint dry musk of sulfur. He grimaced. “The trees could breathe the smell of food to them.”

“If that is true, then why did you not stop me from using my blade?” Semal cried. His deep voice was thin with anxiety.

“Relax, cousin,” Kazin said with a wry smile. “Your blade could no more harm this beast than that fly could drain you dry,” he said, pointing at the insect batted onto his cousin’s thick bicep. Semal looked down in alarm, and Kazin watched his new fear of nature war with his instinct to swat the parasite. He broke into a full grin. “Of course you can get rid of it!” he laughed.

Semal yelped as he brought a heavy hand down onto his arm with a sharp clap. The blow left a red handprint on his arm, marked in the center with a splotch of dark blood. He looked up at Kazin with disgust on his face. Kazin laughed again.

“It is good to see you learning so quickly,” he said. “But you need not be so delicate; our world is a resilient place, capable of much forgiveness.”

The hurt in Semal’s eyes silenced Kazin’s laughter. “I am not a child, Kazin,” he grumbled.

Kazin laid a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t mean to insult you, Cousin,” he said. “I am merely sharing with you the knowledge that the master shared with me on my first journey.” He laughed softly. “Be glad that I am not more like him! He had me thinking that the ground was going to swallow me up for picking some berries for a snack!”

Semal smiled slightly. “You would share the shaman’s teachings with me?” He looked down the path. “It is forbidden for a warrior to know the secret ways.”

“The way I see it, we are both out here,” Kazin sighed, “so both of us must understand what we can and cannot do. Otherwise, and I hope you forgive me for saying so cousin, your presence here would only hinder me.” He silenced Semal’s protest with a brisk wave of his hand. “And,” he continued, “if something should happen to me, I would like to pass on some of the old ways to you, so they do not end with me.”

Kazin watched Semal digest his words behind a stony face. Around them, the verdant rang with animal cries as wind whooshed in the thorns of the canopy. Finally, Semal nodded

“Nothing will happen to you as long as I stand.” Semal clapped his hand on Kazin’s shoulder. “I swear this.”

“Thank you, it is a comfort,” Kazin said. “Now I need to check our direction again.” He unsoldered his pack and laid it at his feet. Crouching down, he carefully reached inside. His fingers found the smooth wooden edge of the exile’s spirit mask. He withdrew it reverently, whispering the words that Ganothil had taught him. The wood heard him, and he felt it pulse in his palms. The air in the wide almond-shaped eyes shimmered like a heat mirage. He swallowed hard and hoped that putting it on would not be as discomfiting as the last times..

Beside him, Semal grunted and spat. Kazin shot him a harsh glance, and he looked away. Kazin stood and raised the spirit mask to his face. His skin prickled at the contact with the worn grain of the interior. His vision darkened as the enchantment flooded from the eyes of the mask into his own, and he blinked hard to clear away the tears welling in response to the irritation. Slowly the verdant resolved itself before him. The spectral red filaments snaked haphazardly through the choked foliage, but there was no mistaking the direction of the trail. Like a ghostly viper stalking its prey, it wound along the path he had cleared, steadily retreating to the south through the deceptively thick brush towards the barren wastes of the wyrded heath. His heart sank at the prospect of that journey, but he was bound to the master’s plan.

“So,” Semal casually commented, “that exile Ganothil has seen another grove?”

Kazin scowled to hear his untruth thrown back at him, and thanked the mask hiding his face.

“Perhaps,” he replied. “He is not sure, but what he described makes me hope it is.”

“And that mask of shows you the way to it? You can actually see what he has seen when you look through that ugly thing?”

“That was his gift to us, cousin, along with his knowledge,” Kazin said, relieved at being able to tell a half-truth. The exile’s knowledge was in his mask, as he had promised. But the diseased threads of the banes’ dreaming he now followed were quite different from the shining path Kazin described to his cousin. No wholesome spirit of healing was at their far ends.

“So does it tell you how much farther we have to go, or will we just know when we get there?”

Kazin winced as he pried the mask off of his face; it came reluctantly, tugging at his flesh and leaving it feeling numb. After a few blinking seconds his vision ceased swimming, although the spectral red trail remained as an afterimage of purple and green that now cut across his cousin’s face. “We will know,” he said,

and pointed down the path he had created. “That way is south, the direction of the heath. We go there. It will take us the rest of the day to reach the far edge of the verdant if we make haste. We should try to find as much food and fresh water as we can, as both are scarce on the heath.” He knelt and carefully slid the mask back into his pack.

“Before we go any further, I must ask you something,” Semal said.

Kazin turned to face him, and was surprised by the conflict he saw on his face. “Ask,” he invited, fearing the unknown question.

Semal bit his lip. Kazin watched the thoughts churning beneath his features. When he spoke, he caught Kazin by surprise.

“Do you believe it?”

Kazin swallowed. “Believe what, cousin?”

“That Ganothil has seen another grove. That we are doing the right thing by leaving the people.”

Kazin didn’t answer right away. He wished he could send him home and be done with the lies. He could still be honest with himself.

“I do not know, cousin,” he said, hating himself. “But I do know this; without the spirit of the Grove to bring life to the people and land, we will all perish. If there is any chance to save ourselves, we would be fools indeed not to at least try.”

“I know,” Semal said. “But all day I have been thinking, how can there be another spirit of the grove? It was the only one.”

“Remember what I said about places of power,” Kazin said. “There is the possibility that a new land spirit may be found in a similar place to the grove. Ganothil believes that he has seen such a place, and the master also believed that such a place might exist. If so, we may be able to harness it to stop the decay that’s spreading.” And failing that, we can harness an equally terrible power to sever the tie, and possibly replenish the drained life of the grove, he thought.

“I suppose that makes sense,” Semal said. He scratched at the swelling bite on his arm.

“You fear for the safety of the people?”

Semal nodded.

“Then you should go back. I am sure that they would appreciate the strongest warrior’s protection.”

“I swore an oath to you, cousin: no harm would befall you as long as I stand. I intend to keep it, so please do not try to stop me, and I will not question you.”

Kazin sighed. Somehow he managed to make it sound relieved instead of anguished.

“Thank you, cousin. I am glad of your company,” he lied.

“I am glad to be with you, as well. And pay no attention to my misgivings. I have not seen much of the world, and I am sure there are many wonders unknown to me.”

“We are not much different, then,” Kazin said softly. “Perhaps you are wiser than me for admitting that you have much to learn instead of insisting that you know what is right.”

“Then let us learn together,” Semal said, stepping aside to let Kazin take the lead on the new path. He was smiling.

Kazin opened his mouth to reply, but thinking better, merely clapped him on the shoulder as he walked...

...back through the swaying forest of black-clad wraiths and lances of bone-white light. A maelstrom of sound and pheromones threatened to capsize his mind and sweep him away in currents of music and smoke. He kept his balance more through his own forward momentum than his sense of equilibrium, and every duck and sidestep he performed to dodge the gyrating bodies felt to him like the penultimate test of his navigation abilities. His beacon shone before him, steady red through the haze – he kept his eyes fixed on it until he felt the sticky surface of the stool under his singing fingertips. He mounted it and rested his elbows on the glowing red bar, wondering if the X he'd taken had been laced with something more strident. The last time had been weak herbal shit – this dose reminded him more of his early forays into the amorphous world of Lysergic.

Still, he considered, he wasn't in such bad shape. The shots he'd taken earlier had left him feeling poised instead of heavy, and the drug was doing a wonderful job of filing his rough edges smooth. His reflection over the bar smiled languidly back at him with gleaming teeth that showed in stark contrast to its darkened lips, its eyes half-lidded inside their intricate slashes and whorls of eyeliner. Not a trace of a mark now, he thought happily. The past two weeks had been somewhat awkward; he'd resorted to concealing to hide his bruised cheek, and he suspected it hadn't gone unnoticed. He was still smiling at his smoky reflection when his view was rudely blocked by a thin figure.

“What can I do ya for, hot lips?” the bartender asked as he bent to look into Alex's eyes. His cupid-bow lips curled into a smile that was accented by the thin blond moustache. He winked, and Alex let his annoyance melt – no amount of drink or drugs could ever steer him into crossing the barrier of heterosexuality, but he wasn't above flirting if it worked to his advantage. This particular bartender (Daryl, 35, Sagittarius, interests include classic cars, 80's fantasy movies, and pornographic anime) had proven to be well worth the false attention, as he knew how to repay it in free drinks and other party favors.

“Your choice, sweet-talker,” he replied, and actually fluttered his eyes. “I'm sure you can whip up a magic potion to help turn this frog into a prince.” And in a slightly lower tone: “I think I need something to chase the pills.”

Daryl smiled. “One black lotus, coming up, shag.” And quieter, “I told you that stuff was powerful. I can't believe you ate both tabs at once.”

“What’s in it?” Alex asked, still staring at his reflection. He ran the point of the claw ring on his right index finger in a lazy circle at his temple, relishing the dangerous cool of the contact. In the mirror, his face opened under its touch. Orange and green light spilled from the wound in an ectoplasm cascade.

“I don’t know,” Daryl said as he twirled a bottle. “I got them from Skittles, and I don’t know where he gets ‘em from. I kind of doubt he’s the cooking type.”

“No, the drink, this black lotus. I haven’t had one of those before. What’s in it?”

“What isn’t? Blue Curacao, raspberry schnapps, cranberry juice, dark rum, and Absolute.”

“And is it black?”

“Believe me, you won’t *care* what color it is. But yeah, it’s pretty dark. Just like you.”

Alex nodded and stared into the mirror. Something told him this drink would be nearly identical to the last three Daryl had poured him in every way except appearance. It would be nauseatingly sweet, smooth as grape juice, and ridiculously overpriced. Well, perhaps not the latter – the flirting so far had opened a “special” tab for him.

The music around him was no longer insistently grinding into him to the tune of Swampscott’s “Wreath of Barbs” – Potsherd’s “Wandering Star” was a much gentler lover. He relaxed against the bar, eyes closed, admiring how the fireworks in his head had begun to explode and swirl in time to the beat. Trip hop indeed.

Gradually he realized that he no longer had his eyes closed. Somehow he’d managed to spin back to face the seething dance floor. Figures twisted and blazed like blacksnakes in a coal fire, their identities lost in the swirl of light and sound. He swayed with them as the music caressed him. The wet clink of a glass behind him reeled him back ashore just as he was getting back to his feet.

“Might want to sample my love potion before you go back out there and shake your stuff, honey,” Daryl said. “Unless you wanna hurt my feelings, that is.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, love,” Alex smiled at the dance floor. He blindly groped for the glass. He didn’t recoil when Daryl’s cool fingers closed around his and guided them around the warm glass. The contact lingered a bit too long, though. He cleared his throat.

“Now, Daryl... how’m I supposed to drink this with both of us holding onto it?” The fingers slid away.

“Tease,” came the accusation.

“But a good one.” He downed the contents of the glass in a single gulp. The taste was rancid-sweet, like cheap wine left out in the sun. “On my tab?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, I’m counting,” Daryl said. “I’ll remember unless you do something to make me forget.”

“I’m the one what’s doing the forgetting tonight,” he said with what he hoped was his sultriest smile. God bless black lipstick, he thought as Daryl blushed. He twirled off the stool and threaded his way back onto the dance floor.

As he slipped into the crowd, he thought about what he’d said, and decided that he was finally starting to succeed at something again. The past three weeks had been a balm – in reconstructing his life prior to his fall, he’d been captivated all over again with a part of himself that he’d cast off as obsolete. The pain that gnawed at him was easy to placate with new acquaintances, old music, and the same cynicism that once made him feel like a god among sheep. He had almost stopped wondering if she really had been cheating on him.

This is getting easier, he thought as he began to sway in time to the beat. Almost like part of me is getting stronger.

Or colder, the internal voice said. Alex couldn’t tell whether it was the critic or the new voice, the counselor. *Maybe you are forgetting too much, like your real feelings? Your morals? The things that hold your dark impulses at bay?*

“Yeah right,” he mumbled to himself. Definitely the counselor, he thought. “Like that’s a bad thing.” But the thought wouldn’t leave him. Fragmented images kept surfacing: his parents’ crestfallen faces, the empty halls of the English building, Kari’s tight-lipped frown of disappointment. “Fuck that,” he said. “It’s not real.”

You can’t fool yourself like this Alex. You still care. You have to grieve sooner or later; if you don’t, you will never stop hurting, the counselor said over the music.

Alex moved closer to the speaker and drowned the voice. The chemicals in his brain took the edge off, and he lost himself in the music.

One thing about this club, he thought as he let the music bend him, it’s got nice scenery for a gay bar. Monday was the only time that this particular strain of dark misfits emerged from their hidey-holes, put on the

dog, and... interacted, sometimes on several levels at once. They were free here – free to frolic, forget and even try to fuck while the angst-ridden music throbbed and the smoke machines belched.

It had taken Alex only three visits to insinuate himself in with this crowd. The old habits – the dress, the makeup, the mannerisms & speech – had all come flooding back to him as though he'd never turned his back on them. He blended perfectly into the smoke-and-mirror world of despairs both real and imagined. He knew all the songs; the music was a second language in which he was well-versed. And above all, he was fresh meat to this crowd – an unknown outsider unblemished by the natural incest of the scene.

Plus, he looked his best in black velvet and leather.

Contrails of yellow light poured from his fingertips as he wove patterns in the music. A corseted figure appeared on his right, her face a white mask in a wash of burning red hair. Ice blue eyes shone amid a wash of eye shadow. He smiled absently at her, and she fell gracefully into his dance, pressing her breasts against him. It was a presumptuous move, he knew, but he didn't exactly mind. He sighed and adapted to accommodate her, each sweep, duck, and gyration pulling her into his gravity well.

“Not many guys here will actually dance to Portishead,” his new friend practically shouted in his ear. In the thrum of sound, it was a whisper. She pressed in closer.

“How can you not?” he shot back, honestly confused.

“Well, if you're straight,” she smiled, letting the implication hang. He grinned vulpinely.

“If that's a challenge, then I accept it.”

“So would you mind if I gave you a little kiss?” the voice whispered in his ear. He felt his black sheep mask slide into place over his fangs. The song changed again, bright, frenetic and taunting: “Every Day is Halloween.” At this moment, Alex was inclined to agree with the sentiment.

“What could that hurt?” he answered lazily. “Just tell me who you are, afterwards.”

He didn't resist as her tongue parted his lips. Endorphins ignited in his brain, and smiling through the kiss he rolled his eyes up to the flickering violet light...

... of dim fires seen through a haze of morning mist. Bursts of static were the only sound from the speakers. The picture was poorly filtered, dark in spite of the sun that washed the squalid encampment with light. The rough ring of low, crude structures yawned jagged shadows across the smoking remnants of the pyre in the center. Clouds of dust skirled in a stiff breeze, adding further distortion to the image from the failing probe. Near the central fire pit, two figures sat on a squat stone bench. They clung to each other as he watched transfixed by the almost imperceptible hitching of their shoulders.

“Magnify,” Black urged the servitor at the display console. “250 percent normal.”

The image on the screen scrambled and quickly resolved itself, and Viridian noted that his original impression had been only half correct. It was the young woman that who weeping, while the youth bit back his own grief. Both were covered in dirt, and both wore the senseless markings of lunacy. Their faces were haggard, tight with more than mere emotional distress – they looked gaunt, malnourished. The cameras of his eyes recorded their bleak expressions. He vowed that when he next saw them they would be wearing identical blank masks of death. He returned his gaze to the dead fire, scrutinizing it, searching for any signs of charred remains.

“One less deviant it would seem, abolisher – try not to feel too... disappointed,” White spoke. “Thou shalt have many opportunities to practice thy art among these unclean wretches.”

“With thy blessing,” he answered, his voice rattling and buzzing from the loudspeaker set in his gleaming chest, a near perfect match for the logister’s. He did not respond to the contemptuous diction.

“Do not speak lightly, Brother White,” Clear admonished. “Should our intelligence be correct, the pyre that we look upon belonged to the captain of these degenerates. We should be thankful that their hierarchy is broken, for the time being.”

“Our enemy is already dead?” Viridian asked without inflection. He felt a pale shadow of disappointment, but the chemicals dispensed into his bloodstream by the neutralizer quickly restored his equilibrium.

“Merely one among myriads,” Black stated. “And this one was, according to the informant we have secured among their ranks, not the one thou shalt seek –”

“Thou speakest as though we can trust the word of the deviant,” White’s synthetic voice spat. “Thou shouldst not place undue weight on such baseless suppositions.”

“Our informant hath provided the majority of the data which we now use to plan our assault!” Black retorted as it spun to face its twin. “Everything it hath told us thus far hath been corroborated by our own data. Should we disregard this valuable source of information during this briefing?”

“Thou shouldst limit the briefing to facts proven, and not waste time on hearsay supplied by a heretic that we have marked for extermination!” White clanked forward.

Viridian looked away from the screen, mildly concerned with the confrontation unfolding before him. The two logisters had squared off in front of each other like arena combatants. He could feel the force of their wills breaking upon each other – the undertow of their psychic duel pulled at the sensitive circuitry of his brain, making him feel lightheaded and nauseous despite his lack of a digestive system.

“Enough theatrics,” Clear blared. The two logisters turned slightly in its direction before awkwardly resuming their positions at the High Logister’s side. “Thou shalt not waste time on semantics. Our informant hath served us well.” It looked at Viridian with a faint smile on its dead lips. “And we shall reward it for the services it hath rendered unto us in due time, and in the proper manner.”

Viridian nodded with a soft hydraulic hiss. He knew the fate of traitors. Clear, reading his thoughts, nodded its bloated head slightly. The motion sent particles of its skin floating away in the nutrient solution of its tank.

“Regardless of the source of our intelligence,” Clear continued, “it is certain that the one you seek shall not be found here. Rather, the upstart hath left its base of operations undefended in a pitiful attempt to bolster its strength. Perhaps it seeks aid to further assault our perfection. No matter – now is the time to strike, while its attention lies elsewhere.”

“Queue footage, marker minus 4-34-29.803,” White prompted the cadaver behind the console. Darkness washed the screen, except for the dim flicker of firelight. The unseen camera drone was focused on the backs of two male deviants as they walked away from the weak nimbus of light. One was powerfully muscled and heavily painted, while the other was unremarkable save for his wild tangled hair. The camera zoomed in on the latter, and Viridian watched as the deviant turned directly into the hidden lens and waved a

bead-laden arm in his direction. A thin, tired smile gasped for breath on his lips, and his eyes were hollow. Viridian's pulse quickened despite of the internal monitors. The neutralizer automatically responded with a calming serum.

“Aye, abolisher – well shouldst thou recognize that one. That one is thy primary target.”

“Its nomenclature?” he asked as he committed the face to his records. Only briefly did he dwell on the pointlessness of doing so.

“Unimportant,” both Black and White answered.

“All thou need know is he is the one whose death shall prove our salvation,” Clear spoke from immediately behind him. “The other is inconsequential.”

“No doubt the deviant shall try to hinder thee, however,” Black said.

“Feel free to dispose of it as thou dost please,” White concluded, “should it prove troublesome.”

“As thou dost will.” Viridian paused, still studying the features of the mark with clinical detachment, envisioning the best location to place the killing shot. “And the rest?”

“Thy plotted course should take thee through their den,” White spoke. “Leave none alive.”

“Enough instruction,” Black decreed and lurched toward the target drone console. It bowled the rigid servitor out of its way, sending the corpse toppling into the wall behind it. “Thy next round of therapy is due to commence.”

“Agreed, Brother,” Clear said. “Our blade must be sharp. Art thou ready, Abolisher?”

“Aye lord,” Viridian responded. He felt the combat drugs flood into his system in anticipation for the coming exercise. His synthetic muscles flexed inside their metal casing.

Black extended a delicate manipulator array to the console. It blurred with motion, and the enormous screen slid silently back up into the low ceiling. White and Clear clanked away from Viridian's central seat. The securing bolts along his spine and shoulders disengaged with a sharp report. He rose with a hydraulic whisper, his body immense and resplendent in its new metal skin.

“Increments of five, set at twenty second intervals,” Black asserted. It stared at its assassin and waited acknowledgement.

“Aye lord,” he said with a barely perceptible nod. His HUD was already tracking the hovering gun drones through the enforced ductwork of the ceiling. He could see the gyroscopic motion of their anti-grav motors through their armored shells. His aural sensors registered the faint whines of charging weapons. The energy nacelles of his cannon bled curls of faint gray luminescence into the darkening room as the chair in which he had been anchored slid soundlessly back into the floor.

The outer door of the chamber opened with a shriek. The three logisters spun ponderously to face the intruder. The black-armored vigelator stared past them irreverently; he was completely focused on the gleaming figure of Viridian.

“Report!” White barked as it moved to block the guard’s view. “Explain thy intrusion!”

“My lords,” the vigelator recovered. “Forgive my impertinence, but a... situation is developing in the Hall of Arbitration.”

“Clarify,” Black ordered.

“The latest inductees – their programming is failing, lords.” The vigelator seemed to visibly shrink deeper into armor.

“Is this related to the recent problems with neural stripping?” White asked.

“So it would seem, Lords. Lawpriest Slate has requested thy direction.”

“Such impertinence,” Clear said. “Very well... We shall go, if only to reprimand Brother Slate for his presumptiveness.”

The vigelator stepped out of the doorway to allow the three immense sarcophagi passage. Clear was the last in line to vanish into the gleaming steel corridor, leaving Viridian alone in the deepening gloom of the training room. Cold red eyes of gun drones circled him in the darkness. He raised his arm and began to track his targets.

“Shall I continue until thou hast returned, lord?” he called after the High Logister.

Clear turned back to face him, a huge lumpen shadow with blazing white eyes. “Aye, child. Thy skills need honing.”

“As thou dost will,” Viridian said. He dropped into a crouch. His tactical neural implant was running through a steady cycle of trajectory and movement calculations, uploading the projected tactica of the impending firefight into his CPU.

Remember, abolisher,” Clear boomed from the doorway as it began to pinch closed. “That which is most dear must be defended against all foes, be they great or small. Mercy shall only lead to thy downfall. Only through thy purifying fires shall reality be restored to its rightful...”

“... gray, spirit-cursed wasteland, filled only with brimstone fog and slime!” Semal roared and hauled on his left leg with both hands. It came free of the sinkhole with a liquid pop and splattered his chest with gobbets of stinking mud. He looked balefully at Kazin.

“Are you done complaining?” Kazin asked. “I would like to hear something besides your hatred of the heath. I too am hungry, you know.”

“You should have talked that old heretic into conjuring some more meat for us,” Semal grumbled. He wiped the filth from his leg as best he could with the edge of his hand. “I doubt he actually *caught* that pig.”

“Ganothil helped us more than enough,” Kazin shot back. He looked at Semal through the carved eyeholes of the spirit mask. “He did not have to aid us at all, and I for one am thankful that he did. I appreciate your frustration, but it gives you no right to be disrespectful of the only man who has helped us.”

“I wish you would take that thing off,” the warrior said. He unstrung his bow and used it as a walking stick to test for other patches of bad ground as he slogged over to his cousin. “It makes me feel like I speak with a dead man whenever we talk.”

“I must not remove it,” Kazin replied. “If I do, I will not be able to see our path.” The lies were coming too easily now, although they still left him feeling drained. “Until there is no more chance of us getting lost on the heath, the mask stays on.”

“Right, the path,” Semal sneered. “Why can it not show you a path with some berry bushes or a covey of marsh fowl? Or why not one without these stinking sludge pits? It must want to drown us!”

“Have you seen me fall?” Kazin quipped as he surveyed the patchy horizon stretched out before them. The shimmering red tendrils snaked through the mist more frequently now, growing thicker as they retreated southward. He turned in that direction.

Semal looked at the black slime covering his feet. “No,” he said sullenly.

“Then walk where I walk, and take your mind off your stomach before it distracts you to death.” Kazin started confidently toward the south, ignoring the weakness clawing at his own stomach. He wondered how much of it was hunger.

Semal sighed. "I feel as though we have been walking in circles since dawn." He sidestepped another still pool of thick water. "Why can this not be more like the verdant? There was game there, and at least you could tell where you were, or what time it was. There are no suns here!"

Kazin smiled ruefully. "I forget you have never been this far from home."

"Is it all like this?"

"Not always," Kazin replied. "The heath is strange – it changes constantly. One moment it is rolling hills covered with grass like feathers; walk another league in it and you may find yourself on a plateau of broken slate and shale." He paused. "The moor is always here, but I have never seen it so large or rank." Or still, he thought. The undulation of the red lines lacing the air was the only movement. The land was either holding its breath, or dead already, Kazin thought.

"Ha! The blight might actually improve it, then." A splash as Semal's foot slipped into a hidden trough, followed by his grumbling. "This place is hateful to me."

"It is not a pretty place. But the blight improves nothing, cousin. Even the ugliness of the Moor is preferable to the desolate sameness of blighted lands."

Kazin felt Semal pause behind him. "What is it like?" he asked.

Kazin turned, wishing he could share his vision with him the way Ganothil had shown him the secret tombs of the banes and the adversary that would follow them on their quest. He no more wanted to discuss the blight than he did the image of the gleaming man and his dead eyes, striding through burning bodies and houses to the sound of pained cries. The language of horror had a small, inadequate vocabulary, incapable of conveying the mental and emotional anguish one feels when facing an endless sea of...

"Dust," he said. "Think of nothing but dust, gray and fine." He pictured it as he spoke, and he felt his throat thicken as though he were again choking on it. "Trees choking under layers of ash, crumbling to dust, blown apart by the faintest breeze. No sound except the wind, like the sobbing of souls destined never to be reborn. No grass, no animals, no water, not even sunlight. No day, no night, just gray half-light from the endless clouds of dust in the air. No colors, only gray and same as far as you can see." He fell silent. Somewhere in the distance dim thunder pealed.

"That is horrible," Semal said. His voice was small, deep inside him.

“It is,” Kazin sighed heavily. “I fear you may well see it for yourself before we are through.”

“How did it start?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “When the spirit... left, something in the world changed. The balance was gone. I believe the blight is the physical manifestation of that imbalance.” He trailed off, remembering the non-presence he’d felt in the blasted remains of the grove, as though somewhere close by a void had opened and was spilling a horrible new reality into the world. He buried the thoughts. Time enough for speculation later, he chastised himself.

He turned his back to Semal, leaving him to catch up. His staff swept the gray tufts of marsh grass at his feet and revealed a hidden sinkhole. He tapped the ground in front of it three times with the crystal head of his staff and the hole sealed. The newly solid ground took his weight easily.

The pair trudged on in silence for several minutes, with Kazin always in front stepping nimbly around real sinkholes and feigning the discovery of another whenever a ribbon twisted his way. They had become more active; he thought it was almost as though they were responding to their intrusion. Kazin was not sure what would happen should one touch them, but he did not wish to risk contact with even the thought of a bane.

“Well, no matter what the cause,” Semal said as he came abreast of him, “I know that if there is one person left in this world that can set things straight, you must be that person. I may wish we were both back home around the storytelling fire, but I am proud to be at your side.”

“You always were a good storyteller,” he said and turned to face him. His smile died as he saw the red lines snaking toward them. It dipped and writhed through the air, a spasming snake of toxic energy. It passed through Semal’s chest, and he gasped. His smile vanished. His broad face drained of color, and his shoulders slumped.

Kazin looked anxiously back to the filament; the stain it had lifted from Semal’s body traveled back along it, racing to some unknown point south. He held his breath.

“Kazin?” Semal asked. A thin film of sweat stood out on his brow. His face had gone the color of old bone beneath the mud and red paint.

A tremor shook the ground. Kazin tightened his grip on his staff and reached for his totem pouch. The spirits within the leather bag buzzed like hornets around the lump he sought. Is it time, he wondered? He felt Semal move behind him and knew without turning that his cousin had silently drawn his parang.

“Kazin?” he said quietly. “I feel as though – ”

“Quiet,” Kazin hissed. The last reverberations of the earth were dying away in the elastic air. He saw the trailing feelers of energy begin to withdraw. It is coming, he thought with alarm. Fear brayed in his head. His grip tightened around the heart in his pouch; the energies bound to it numbed his fingers and made his head thrum. Semal’s breathing was ragged behind him.

“Kazin... I cannot see...” he began. His voice caught in his throat, and he cleared it. “Are you...”

“Cousin, please, be silent!” Kazin ordered. His eyes were locked on a point to the south where a nimbus of angry orange light was growing. Cold sweat glued the wooden mask to his face.

“Liar!” Semal roared behind him. There was the sound of something long and thin splitting the air in a whistling arc.

Kazin’s world crystallized. The smell of the moor sang in his nostrils, heady with tar and sulfur and ancient soil. The ragged plumes of gas from the cracks within the earth seemed to solidify against the pale ochre sky. The image remained in perfect clarity on the dark of his eyelids as he dropped to the ground. Semal’s parang passed through the space where the top of his head had been. Kazin rolled away from his cousin, his eyes wide behind the mask.

“What are you doing?” he screamed.

Semal was shaking and sweating profusely in defiance of the chilled air. Thick veins strained against his waxen skin, and his muscles appeared tight to the point of tearing. His wide eyes had gone red, their capillaries burst and leaking bloody tears down his cheeks. His lips peeled back from the predator’s grin of his locked teeth.

“Betrayer,” he spat in a voice that was only remotely his. Flecks of foam flew from his mouth.

“Deceiver, traitor! You lie to me!? Do you think me stupid!? There is no other Grove!” He lurched forward and raised his weapon to split his prone cousin in two. “How dare you lie to me!”

Kazin saw the filament even as he rolled to avoid the chopping blow. The parang wedged in the sandy earth. Semal howled incoherently as he hauled on the haft. Kazin rose onto one knee, amazed that his hand still gripped the master's heart. He dropped it back into his totem pouch and began rooting desperately around for another item.

It was battened onto Semal's back like a gargantuan scarlet leech, Kazin saw, with its far end still hidden somewhere deep within the ground. Where it made contact with its host, the main ribbon branched into smaller filaments, each one buried in Semal's flesh. The sight of it revolted him, and yet simultaneously relieved him – Kazin knew that his cousin's mind was not his own. His fingers closed on the smooth river rock in his pouch. He dropped his staff and placed his free hand on the mask.

“Cousin!” he yelled as he raised the stone to his lips, “fight it! Whatever it is, fight this!”

Semal bellowed, sending a fresh spray of saliva exploding from his mouth. With a liquid rip he tore the parang free from the soil and brandished it in Kazin's direction. He lurched forward with lunacy bright in his eyes.

“Whatever the shaman said,” he hissed through clenched teeth, “whatever you told us, we did. We trusted you, and you led us to this! This is all your fault, and now you LIE to me!”

Kazin swung the mask up from his face and popped the river stone into his mouth. He closed his eyes, feeling the memories of the fetish course through him. He bit into it and cold water filled his mouth. He opened his eyes to find his cousin almost upon him, convulsing even as he raised his weapon. Kazin opened his mouth and exhaled the river directly onto Semal.

Semal's scream was a high ragged sound that could not have been made by his voice. The jet of water hit him square in the face and chest, sending up clouds of steam where it touched his livid skin. He staggered back with his free hand raised to his eyes; he lashed blindly with his blade. Kazin snatched up his staff and snapped the mask back into place over his face. With a fluid sweep, he struck at Semal's knees. Already off balance from the deluge of ghost-water, he collapsed with a gasp of surprise. Before he could recover, Kazin straddled his chest, pinning his arms to his sides with his knees. Invoking an oath to his ancestors, he ground the master's heart into Semal's chest. It glowed hotly from between his fingers and sank into the warrior's flesh

like a brand. Semal shrieked; he glared at Kazin with pain in his eyes. Kazin could see the filaments writhing through Semal's flesh, feeding his muscles with fury.

“Child of destruction,” Kazin shouted from behind the mask, “I draw you out! I pull you from his heart into mine!”

The lines of red glowed brighter as they were dragged from Semal's body into the glowing totem in his hand. Semal's face was agony. He seized, nearly throwing Kazin off, but the young shaman tightened his grip with his legs. The heart was devouring the parasite; Kazin felt exhilaration surge in him. Suddenly, the convulsions beneath him stopped. Kazin stared at Semal's slack face in confusion. The filaments were gone; he was breathing the shallow breaths of unconsciousness.

Kazin rose from his cousin's still form. His own breath came in hot gasps. “Show yourself, demon! Face one worthy of you!” He felt the power building a split second before it exploded. The ground directly beneath them erupted in a fountain of sulfur mist and black mud, and Kazin was pitched into the air like a child's doll. As he sailed he saw Semal rolling head over heels across the marshy ground, his limbs limp and flailing. Kazin hit the ground with bone-rattling force, and dim galaxies of pain exploded in his head. He heard a dry crack as his face made contact with the earth and felt the tingling flow of blood down his brow. The pain dispelled most of the fear – he focused on it as he willed his hand not to let go of the master's heart.

Behind him something roared with the voice of a volcano. Withering heat washed over him, singeing his flesh. Orange light spilled across the stunted grass, casting dancing blades of shadow ahead of his prone body. Kazin felt a fresh wave of panic as the ground shook again and mammoth panting ripped the air. He threw a glance back over his shoulder as he scrambled away.

Like a low mountain, a titanic shell rose from the steaming crater in the earth. Its interlocking plates continually liquefied, merged and broke apart, revealing the molten core below. The red filaments seethed from the boiling cracks. On four monstrous splayed claws, the bane hauled itself from its drowned grave. Its burning head snaked out of the hole on a thick, telescoping neck and towered ten feet above the crest of its shell. The serrated beak stretched wide enough to swallow Kazin whole; flame swirled in its maw and shot from its empty eye sockets. The bane's howl cracked the moor surrounding it.

“Blinded by its own rage,” Kazin said absently as half his mask slid away. He rose to his feet, commanded more by throbbing heart in his hand than his own will. As the bane’s incinerator mouth snapped toward him he raised the totem and...

...slammed his forehead into the wooden doorjamb. The darkness was lit by a flash of pain that did little to dispel the fury. With a snarl he spun to face her, gratified at the shock on her wide face. He narrowed his eyes to slits, letting the glacial calm pour back into him. It was more effective, he knew, if used on the tail of an explosive display of temper.

“If you have enough free time,” he said in his best deadpan, nonchalant voice, “to come find me and tell me to restock the glassware, then I put it to you that you have enough free time to haul your bloated ass off the bev stand and do it yourself. That way, we could both get on with our real jobs a lot fucking quicker, *right?*” He hissed the last word, firing it like a bullet. It found its mark unerringly, and Laura’s wide eyes clouded.

“Goddamn asshole freak,” she spat, and tried to sound venomous. The emotion cracked her voice. He smiled.

“Just trying to make a point in a way you’d understand. As long as I’m here, I have one responsibility – my tables. That’s my goddamn job. Anyone or anything that gets in the way of me successfully doing that job is my enemy. So unless you’re going to help me, *stay the fuck out of my way.*” He turned away and casually walked into the kitchen, not letting on just how much his head was pounding. The glances of the other servers who’d witnessed his meltdown and recovery were gratifying.

And then it was gone; the fury bled out of him, leaving him feeling giddy and drained. He slumped against the cold side of the ice machine and tried to control the trembling in his stomach.

“Pretty fucking harsh there,” Jessie said, catching hold of his sleeve. He turned to her with mechanical slowness, and she tensed at his gaze. Her face was pale and stiff. He could see that she was weighing the risks of talking to a psychopath.

Be calm, said he told himself. It’s done. Move on. Maintain control. And suddenly the nervousness and vulnerability were gone.

“Yeah, but she deserved both barrels,” he said in a carefully modulated tone. “Besides, how long was I supposed to take her shit anyway? That cunt’s had it out for me since I started here.”

“Laura’s like that with all of us!” Jessie hissed.

“Then I’m surprised that someone didn’t blow up on her before me. Fuck her.”

Jessie’s mouth fell open, but she recovered quickly. “Look, I don’t know how you danced your way out of that shit you were in a week ago, but I doubt you’ll be able to do it now. That was a serious meltdown you had.”

“I’m not worried. The sales list says it all – I’m at the top today. The way I see it, I’m making the company money, and that cow was trying to stop me from doing that. And nobody overheard that, I’ll bet. Yet another benefit of keeping one’s tone civil.” Inwardly, Alex marveled at his own ability to rationalize his own demonic behavior. He could almost imagine management being too scared of him to fire him, and the realization wasn’t nearly as alarming as he’d expected it to be. In fact, part of him relished it.

“Nice to see you’re so practical about it,” Jessie said. “I’ll admit, you’ve definitely been more... focused lately, but seriously, you’ve gotten... well, *meaner*.”

“Not to you, I haven’t.”

“Yes, to me too, damn it!” She crossed her arms. “You hardly ever talk to me, you turn down my offers to go out...”

“So what, you think I’ve changed?” he sneered. “That I’m some sort of pod person?”

“Haven’t you?” Jessie was looking at him intensely. “Ever since that night at the club last month...”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, will you give that a rest?” Alex exclaimed, shaking his head. “Look, I told you, I’m fine with it. Not my proudest moment, but it’s ok, so just let’s forget it ever happened.”

“Something changed in you after that night, and I don’t like it!”

“For Christ’s sake, I’m still the same old hostile fucker I’ve always been!” Alex laughed, squeezing his forehead in his hands. Through his fingers he saw Jessie peering at him; he saw the small look of hope on her face.

“Are you just hung over again?” she asked, daring to touch his shoulder.

“Actually, no,” he said, lowering his head with a small wry smile. “I guess that’s one thing that’s changed; I haven’t gotten piss drunk since that night. I may have been otherwise indulging, but...”

“What are you on?” she demanded. Her voice was hard, unforgiving. Alex felt his anger rise to the challenge.

“Explain how that’s any concern of yours,” he said icily.

“I’m the only friend you’ve got here!” she shouted. A few heads turned in their direction, and she composed herself. “I just care, that’s all.” She said it grudgingly, almost guiltily. In spite of himself, Alex felt his heart soften, and guilt struck it hard.

“Look,” he said, “I’m sorry. It’s just... well...” he stammered, not quite sure what he was trying to say.

Do you really think you need to explain yourself to her? the critic asked.

“Talk to me, Alex,” Jessie said, her blue eyes painfully bright. “I’m listening. If you don’t know where to begin, you can start by telling me just what in God’s name was going through your head a minute ago.”

Tell her, urged the counselor. *It may help.*

Are you that fucking naïve?

Alex blinked hard. “It was strange,” he began. “When that bitch was mouthing off to me, all I could think about was how Kari used to talk at me when she was angry. So condescending, so disappointed. And I guess something just broke.”

“Well that’s good!” Jessie said with a small smile. “You got angry at your ex. Anger’s the first stage to grief recovery, you know.”

“Jess, it’s been a fucking year. I’ve wasted enough time on this, I’ve grieved all I plan to, and I’m ready to move on.”

“You can’t rush this stuff. That’s what my psych classes all say.”

I can’t believe you’re actually listening to this ab-psych 101 bullshit, said the critic. Alex’s heart went cold.

“Let me ask you,” he said, pulling her out of sight and into the dark recesses of the bar cooler. “Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” she asked, swatting his hand from her arm. The look of alarm was back on her face.

“I mean, why can’t I just decide that I’m done, that I’ve had enough? I’m here, I’m still breathing, so therefore I must be ok. That seems logical to me.”

“Because that’s not how real feelings work.”

“There’s no such thing as *real* feelings,” he scoffed. “A feeling is something in your head; it’s no more real than an imaginary friend. And you should be able to control something that’s in your head, right?”

“Alex, I know you’ve had a rough year, what with your fiancée and school and everything else, but you can’t just pretend –”

“Jessie, do you know what it’s like to put all your hopes, all your belief and dreams in one person?”

She paused, then shook her head.

“Well, count yourself lucky. It’s true what they say; getting too close to someone really is hazardous to your health. Once you involve a person in every aspect of your life, it’s really easy to get lost in that person. I got to the point where every thought I had about myself was in some way connected to that lying, traitorous bitch. And when she left me I didn’t know who I was without her. So I’ve been living this fucked up, miserable half-life ever since with the pieces of me that weren’t ripped away when she vanished.” He leveled his gaze at her. “And all because of my fucking worthless emotions. Because I cared, I let myself be destroyed.”

“I see what you’re saying, but –”

“So, logically,” he continued, “the most expedient way to recover myself would be to get rid of these worthless feelings, right?”

“And how do you propose to do that? No matter how much you may wish you were a robot, you can’t just flip a switch and turn everything off,” Jessie said, rubbing her bare forearms against the chill of the cooler.

“True. That’s a problem I’ve been thinking a lot about lately. And I’ve decided that the best way to get back my old self would be to go back to how I was before I was ever with Kari.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Jessie said with a nervous laugh.

“Allow me to put it another way – when you’ve lost everything you had, when your own personal *God* lets you down, when everything you ever believed in proves false, what other option is there but to try to recall a time before everything that disappointed you *fucking mattered*?” He shook his head. “I can’t think of one.”

“Alex, you’re being extreme again...”

“Damn right,” he sighed. “Jessie, you have to understand: I’ve ripped myself to pieces trying to figure out why things fell apart, and I *still* don’t know what it was that I did wrong. She never gave me a reason, and she dodged every question I asked. Then one day she just wasn’t there.”

“Who’s to say it was you?” Jessie asked, adopting her customary, sympathetic tone. “It might have been something with her. News flash: not everything revolves around you.”

“Yeah, that’s what she said. ‘It’s not you, it’s me.’ And that’s *all* she ever said about it.” He closed his eyes and ground his teeth together as anger began to flood back into his system. “Believe me, it leaves a lot of room for doubt. And suspicion. And I know this much: every event can be traced back to a cause, even if it’s not obvious. *Something* had to have been going on.”

“Well, if she was doing anything behind your back, that should help you get over it, right?”

“Yeah, right. Thinking about that just made me hate myself even more – that not even my total and utter devotion could keep her. No, believe me... I’m better off just not caring about it. Or anything else, for that matter. It’s all bullshit, anyway.”

“Alex, listen to me. This is crazy. You need to work through this.”

“I’m sorry, I thought I’d just finished explaining how I’m working through it. Were you not listening?”

“And exactly what part,” Jessie said, flushing, “of your master fucking plan involves wearing eyeliner and acting like a total ass?”

For a moment, he was taken completely by surprise. Alex rubbed his right eye with his thumb. A faint black smear was on it when he took it away.

“Look,” he said, wiping his thumb on his apron, “all I can say is I can’t stand who I’ve become, so I’m going to become who I was. I’m not asking anyone to like it, and quite frankly, I don’t give a damn if anyone does. This is for me.” He crossed his arms. “Besides, Phil comes in wearing eyeliner *and* mascara every damn day, so what’s the big damn deal if I come in a little blurry?”

Jessie laughed. “Phil does drag shows!”

“Yeah, and I bet I look eight thousand times better in eye makeup than him, any day of the week.”

“Seriously, though, Alex... you can’t just go back. You’ve got to go forward and –”

“Yeah, that’s nice, Jess,” he said with a dismissive wave. “Forge ahead and all that shit. Listen, why don’t you come back after your perfect life has blown up in your face and then you can give me advice on how to recover from –”

Her slap cut his words short. He looked back at her wide-eyed. She had the offending hand at her mouth and was looking back at him with the same surprise written on her face. He touched his stinging cheek and grinned.

“That the best you’ve got?” he asked humorlessly.

Jessie didn’t answer. Her face hardened, and with a twirl of blond hair she spun away from him and marched...

... along the corridor toward the shimmering veil of rainbow light. The steady stream of data from his navigation processor tracked his motion away from the pulsing heart of the city, though his enhanced aural filters could still hear the distant songs of the logic engines. Although he could not smell the staleness of the air in this dilapidated passage, the nano-toxin screens of his ventilator provided him with accurate reports on the number and type of molecules they strained from the atmosphere. Among the ozone, dust, and decaying machine lubricants were impurities that he could not identify, alien and organic. He dismissed them as irrelevant; if these new substances were not toxic to his organic components, then they did not matter. Nothing mattered except his mission.

The black armored vigilators standing watch every twenty meters exuded fear pheromones at his passing; the filter of his rebreather analyzed them even as it pumped them into his artificial lungs. His eyes monitored the temperature fluctuations of their sweating bodies beneath the interlocking plates of ceramic steel and micro-fiber mesh. Had he still possessed a mouth, he might have smiled in derision.

Every step rang on the steel grating of the floor. The smooth contours of the mirrored bronze covering his body trapped the feeble illumination, transforming him into a hulking figure of liquid orange light. The black orbs in the dead flesh of his face bled violet light. The vigilators pressed their backs to the curving wall as he passed them. One began to pray the Chant of Law.

“Silence,” his voice came from his integrated loudspeaker, soulless, electronic and deafening in the confines of the tunnel. He fixed the praying man with a black gaze. His visual indicators showed the man’s body temperature rise. The man’s pulse spiked into the red. “Fear me not,” Viridian intoned, “for I am the will of the real given form and purpose.” The vigilator’s prayers died in his throat. Beneath his opaque visor his face was almost as bloodless as the Abolisher’s.

Viridian turned away and left the man to his crisis of faith. If they disapproved of his words, the white robed lawpriests behind him made no sign. They continued their double-file procession, chanting the Rites of Justification in a unified drone.

“...and let reality reflect thy works, and remember thee in the fullness of time as a most devout and chaste adherent of truth. May thy deeds justify thy passage, and let none mourn thee, Brother, for thou hast done thy work well...”

He knew that this litany was normally reserved for the funerary rites of fallen defenders of reality. He did not care.

Ahead he could see the hazy outline of the tear. It hovered at the end of the corridor, shimmering and rippling like oil-slicked water suspended in midair. The edges crackled with rainbow hued electrical current; occasionally small discharges would strike the walls or floor, and where they struck strange febrile growths of green and blue formed and quickly withered to fine gray ash. Viridian could tell from the almost imperceptible fluctuations of its geometry that it was growing at the rate of three centimeters a day. He came to a halt before the glowing rip in reality, his cauterized mind awash with incongruous data and strange, half-formed feelings. He was repulsed on an instinctive level, and yet a desire to know, to explore, to catalogue and codify every element of this phenomenon and the world he knew lay beyond tugged at him.

He wanted to understand it in order to destroy it.

“Aye, abolisher” Clear’s booming voice rang. A fine dusting of rust flakes fell from the ceiling. “It is as fascinating as it is terrible. We have observed it from the moment of its discovery, and can say that the possibilities it doth offer are limitless.”

Viridian circled around the tear, keeping a safe distance from the anomaly. He saw the logisters crowded into a wide alcove on the other side of the rift. Their eyes shone as brightly as the fluid edges before them, but without the cascade of color. They were staring at him.

“Aye, nigh infinite possibility of change and disruption to our regime,” Black intoned at Clear’s left. “Infinite opportunities for chaos, for dissonance, for anarchy.”

“A myriad of dooms, each waiting to be born into our reality,” White concurred from the High Logister’s right. “It is the unreal itself.”

“It matters not to me,” Viridian replied as he looked back into the tear. “I am the instrument of reality’s will. All shall submit, or be judged wanting.”

“Then know this,” White said. “Once thou hast crossed the barrier between this world and blasphemous existence, the likelihood of thy return shall be small indeed. If thy mission succeeds, then this portal should close for all time.”

“I know, lord,” Viridian spoke.

“All thou shall encounter will be as thine enemy,” Black added. “Thou must expect all things to do thee harm, and thou should purge thyself of both hesitation and pity, for thy enemy may assume many shapes – even innocent ones.”

“I know neither fear nor compassion, lord.”

“And above all, thou must remember the face of thine enemy,” the High Logister said. “The dread apparition thou hast seen shall be the very object of thy search. If thou art to succeed, thou must face it and prevail.” Clear clanked closer to him. “Be thou ready to battle the emissary of deviancy Itself.”

The mention of the avatar assaulted Viridian’s mind with revulsion. It crackled as a bright spark in his circuitry-laden brain. His waxen brows beetled over the black lights of his eyes.

“I shall render thy judgment upon the abomination,” he replied.

“Art thou prepared, champion?” Clear asked.

Viridian felt a fleeting moment of pride at the appellation before his neutralizer unit dispensed emotion-blocking narcotics into his system. He nodded. “I am, lord.”

The High Logister nodded its warped head. It’s palsied face cracked in the ghost of a smile.

“Thy enemy is vast,” Clear chanted, “their might beyond measure.”

Viridian closed his black eyes and responded to the invocation ingrained in his mind since his earliest training.

“My resolve is mightier, my faith vaster.”

“Thy enemy shall assail thy body,” Black said, its eyes closed in reverence, “and shall seek thy death.”

“Let righteousness be my shield that breaks the arm of the unclean.”

White bowed its head inside its suspension tank. “Thy enemy shall mislead thee, and shall poison thy mind with falsehoods.”

“Let reason be my brand that burns the voice from the liar.”

“Thou art but one man,” Clear said, “and thou shall be forgotten in the Fullness of Time.”

“Let reality reflect my deeds, and immortalize my actions in all great things to come.”

“Reality affirms thee,” the three Logisters spoke in unison. Viridian received the blessing stoically.

“Go onward now, abolisher,” Clear said.

“Onward now, and on forever,” he replied and stepped into the unreal.

PART THREE:

GATHERING

*No more the servant of the weak,
Devoid of thoughts or light to seek;
I'll leave no walls, no stone unturned;
Every tower must be razed
To the dust from which it came,
And none will be spared, no remnant saved.
And are you ashamed, are you afraid
As you stare back at your face?
Do you think you'll be saved
By the gods and idols that you have made?
-- VNV Nation, "Kingdom"*

I am burning, he thought. Dim red and orange light flickered and danced through his closed eyelids; at the edges of his numb mind he felt heat, and detected the tang of smoke in the air. I burn, I am consumed. My quest ends here, and I die in disgrace and failure. Somehow, the knowledge was not the anathema he thought it would be. There was a strange comfort in it, a sense of burden removed.

And there was no pain. That was a welcome surprise, along with the realization that his responsibilities were behind him. The abyss tugged at his mind, and he let himself slip further from the heat and light into the refuge of darkness.

A wide surface made sudden contact with his cheek, snapping him back to consciousness. He opened his eyes wide to the harsh devouring light of flame.

Semal sat back on the tuft of moor grass. He nodded curtly and stared at the burning patch of fouled water before him.

“So you are re still with me, cousin,” Semal said flatly. His eyes were haunted, and his skin still bore a corpse-sheen. “Maybe more with me now than you have been thus far,” he muttered and threw a handful of stunted grass into the meter-high shaft of pale flame that guttered from a hissing pool of filth in the earth.

“Why did you strike me?” Kazin asked as he sat up. His hand cradled his stinging cheek.

“Because you did not respond to my voice. You were moaning loudly.” Semal narrowed his eyes. “I did not want you to draw danger our way.”

Kazin took a quick inventory of himself, amazed not only to find himself alive but also apparently whole. He was not without injury, however; his forehead throbbed, and his face felt drawn. Dimly he realized that the tightness was his own dried blood. He was badly bruised and scraped, and his seared skin hurt at the simplest motion.

“Semal?” he said, “are you –”

“Hurt?” he spat back. “Considering that I was very recently possessed by a bane, I would say that I am rather well.. I suppose I should count myself among the fortunate. I have certainly gained an impressive story to tell the people now.” He paused. Somewhere across the darkening moor, a night animal cried; the sound was like mocking laughter.

Kazin looked away, hurting more by the second. The pain in his ribs paled next to the spear of guilt in his gut. “Ganothil called it ‘Ta’Eguro the Ever-Burning,” although I am certain it has many other names, and none of them true.” Still he spat to his left and right to expel and scatter the evil from his mouth. He was only mildly alarmed by the blood in his spittle. “How much do you remember?”

“I remember enough,” Semal said quietly. A small convulsion of disgust passed through him. “Enough of what it did... and what It said.”

“To me?”

Semal nodded almost imperceptibly. “And to me.” He was covered in sweat, although Kazin could feel the chill in the air despite his scorched skin. Kazin’s eyes traced over his cousin, and came to rest on the char-edged fist-sized hole burned into the trench between his pectorals.

“Semal, your chest!”

The pale warrior looked away from the fire and gave Kazin a blank look. He looked down at himself; Kazin saw fresh recognition dawn on his face. Semal traced the wound’s ragged brown edge with his finger. “It doesn’t hurt,” he said flatly. “I know that is not a good sign with burns, but I doubt it will do me any more harm than scar me.” “Besides, I think it a small price to pay for my life... such as it is. It was a good thing you had... that.” He nodded toward Kazin’s hand.

Kazin looked down at his right hand to the mummified lump of flesh he still held in a death grip. The dry brown fibers of muscle glowed dimly with the fires trapped inside, and he could feel the bane’s lethal energy swirling like a cyclone in the narrow chambers, unable to vent its fury. The runes carved into the stony tissue shimmered with angry orange light; they looked like maddened eyes.

Kazin willed his hand to open. The sudden flex of his burned flesh hurt him straight up to his shoulder. He ground his jaw as he pried his fingers away from the heart with his left hand. The melted skin of his palm remained attached to the totem, leaving his hand raw. Kazin blinked away tears of pain as he laid the master’s heart gingerly on the gray grass; it sent up thin feathers of smoke as the grass curled and turned brown. He bound his hand with medicinal moss from his shoulder pack. The cool herbs soothed the wound. He let his breath out in a rush.

“Let me make a poultice for your chest,” he said as he brought more moss from his pack. He offered it to Semal.

“Leave it alone,” he said, brushing it away.

“But that wound might fester if we do not treat it. I doubt I can do much for the scarring, as it is.”

“All the better,” Semal snapped. “A fitting reminder of the day I learned not to trust you.”

Kazin chewed his lip, consciously willing the earth below him not to yawn and swallow him for fear it would listen.

“Cousin... I am so sorry...”

“I only have one question for you,” Semal said. “All the others can wait. But I need this one answered now, and honestly.” His eyes were stone, glittering black gems in the flickering light of the fire.

“Ask,” Kazin conceded.

“Why did you not tell me what you were really doing?” Kazin nodded. This was a break that no amount of magic he could wield would be able to seal. He stared into the sickly fire without speaking. The yellow-white flames hissed disapproval at him.

“Well?”

“Why did you have to come with me?” Kazin replied, hating the thick weakness in his voice. “Why could you not just listen to me when I asked you to stay behind? Curse you, Semal, this is *my* burden to bear! You should not have to be here!” He wiped at the crust of blood on his face to mask the fresh tears. “I should not have to worry for your safety as well as my own.”

“Cousin, you must not know me,” Semal scoffed. “I would have gladly faced all three banes at once if you had but asked.”

“That is exactly what I must face,” Kazin admitted. “In order to set our world right, I must embrace the very forces that threatened to tear it apart in the distant times.” He sighed. “I thought that you might try to stop me if I told you the truth.”

“Of course I would have! This is madness! Why would anyone want to unleash these monsters?”

“Your wound is weeping,” Kazin said.

“Do not change the subject,” Semal said “I want an answer.”

“The master told me how to harness Their power and break the bond between the Grove of New Life and our people.” Kazin let the weight of his statement sink in. Semal’s face crumpled as he tried to digest it.

“What possible good could that accomplish?”

Kazin sighed. “Think about it, cousin. We depend on the land to support us. The land is tied to the spirit of the Grove. The spirit of the grove is gone, so the land dies, and our people are dying with it.”

“So by breaking the bond...”

“We can stop the decay.”

Semal studied the fire. “When that... thing had me,” he said at length, “It used my eyes to see you. It looked into you, and it showed me what it saw.” He sniffed sharply, and Kazin realized with amazement that he was on the verge of breaking down. To Kazin, seeing his cousin in such a vulnerable moment was worse than the pallor, grime and blood. The images he’s always held of Semal’s strength, his indefatigable optimism and determination, fractured slightly, and his heart lamented. “It showed me how you’ve lied... about the grove, about the spirit, about the master and Ganothil. It knows what you are trying to do.”

“I am sorry,” Kazin said quietly. “I should have told you.”

“I did not want to believe it. And yet part of me knew that it was telling the truth.” He looked back at Kazin. “And still I needed to hear it from you before it could be real to me.”

“I am so sorry, cousin,” Kazin repeated, not knowing what else to say.

“It laughed at your plan. It said you were doomed to fail, and that you would die in pain and regret.” Semal’s voice cracked. “It said that would be their blessing to you – the honor of dying first so you would not see our people suffer.”

“What else can I do?” Kazin asked. His stomach trembled. “The master tried everything he knew – every spell, every prayer, every offering and sacrifice he could imagine. Still the spirit left us, and now everything else is going after it. The only chance that any of us has lies in breaking the tie to the land and the people, and there is only one way to do that. You do not know how much it grieves me to say these things, but they are all true.” Carefully he picked up the heart, still hissing thin tendrils of smoke and orange light, and slid it back into his belt pouch. “For what it is worth, I do not think that this bane is laughing at us now. The master’s plan worked; it is trapped.”

“Fine. Suppose you are right, that the shaman was correct. Let us suppose that you actually manage to trap these demons, and somehow manage to... persuade them to break the tie to the grove. What then? What sort of world will our people have without a guiding spirit to make the land prosper?”

“One that’s no longer turning to ash!” Kazin cried. “That is all that matters. The people survived through their reign before; surely they can survive with the banes imprisoned, even if there is no other spirit. As long as there is a land, we will be here.”

“And you expect me to keep going along with this insanity?”

“No,” Kazin replied as his anger evaporated. “I expect no such thing of you. I know that I was wrong to deceive you, and if you want to leave, I will not stop you. In fact, I will welcome your departure as one less burden I must bear. But know this: my course is set, and it is too late for me to change it.” He felt he was speaking his own death sentence. “Please try to understand, cousin; there are forces at work here of which I am a mere plaything. This is my fate, though yours may still be unwritten.”

Semal was silent. Kazin turned his face to the dark, cloud choked sky. No moon was there to smile back at him – he wondered if it even still existed. Again the mocking cry of the unknown beast echoed across the moor. Kazin hugged his knees to his chest, feeling as though he were shrinking.

Semal sighed, “You must not know me at all.”

“I do not wish you to accompany me any further, cousin. And I know I do not deserve your trust.”

“And I know you cannot stop me. I have come with you this far. Believe me, there will be a reckoning between us when this journey is over, but no matter what love we may have lost, I cannot turn my back on you now, knowing that my presence might mean the difference between your success and failure.”

Kazin turned to face him, and saw him reach behind his back. For one second he imagined Semal drawing his blade again and charging at him with the bane’s fire in his eyes. But Semal’s hand reappeared holding two jagged, stained white pieces of wood. It took Kazin a moment of incomprehension before he recognized them as the halves of Ganothil’s spirit mask. The memory of his splintering crash to the earth assaulted him afresh, and he reflexively raised his hand to the uneven rip in his forehead where the wooden edges had bit him.

“It seems your lucky charm did not survive the encounter as well as we did,” Semal said with a faint smile. “I suppose you should be the one to tell Ganothil the bad news... if we ever see him again.”

“No,” Kazin said, taking the two halves from his cousin, “This just means that we can both use it now.” He handed one half back to Semal, who took it hesitantly. “It should still show us where they are,” he said. “And maybe with both of us watching we will not be surprised again.”

“They already know we are coming.”

Kazin nodded. Animal laughter echoed in the night.

“Fine,” Semal said as he cut a strip of leather from his mud-stained skirt and fashioned it into a thong for his half of the mask. “And now I think that you should take the time to explain to me...”

“... how your work is coming. You never talk very much about that anymore. I can’t help but feel that something’s going on that you don’t want to tell me about.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing that he could block out the voice in his ear. Still, he’d opened this door by mentioning the taboo subject in the first place.

You also made the mistake of answering your phone, idiot, the critic said.

“It’s going ok, I suppose,” he said into the receiver, surprised as always at how silver his tongue sounded when it lied. “You know, it’s a work in progress. I’ve made some major changes, and my committee seems excited about them.”

“You’ve spoken to them recently?” his mother’s eager voice came through the earpiece. “That’s great, honey! I’m so proud of you.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed. “Now, I don’t want to get your hopes up, because they say that I still have a lot of work to do. But I’m hopeful that I’ll be able to give them the finished product in another week or two, at the most. From there it’s just a question of editing, rewriting, and that sort of stuff. Easy by comparison, really – it’s always easier hacking it up than actually writing it.”

“That’s wonderful! And what about your French proficiency? How’s that coming?”

The instructor’s face flashed through his mind, and he rolled his eyes. He hadn’t been to that class since the first day.

“Eh, it sucks, but that’s because it’s all review,” he fabricated automatically, and then decided to insert a half-truth to give credence to the failure that he knew was on the horizon. “Honestly, I don’t know how they can expect me to remember four years of French in one semester. I’m not feeling too confident about it, to tell the truth.”

“Well, I know that you’ll do your best,” Mom said, consoling as ever. “Here, your Dad wants to say hi, hold on.”

“Ok.” He contemplated hanging up the phone, blaming it on a bad connection, just to make the torture end..

“Hey champ!” his father’s voice rumbled over the line. “How’s my scholar?”

“Tired of the scholarly life.”

“Well, it sounds like you’re starting to wrap things up, Al. That’s great. We’re both proud of you.”

“Yeah, Mom said that. Thanks.” He forced a grin that he hoped his father would hear. “It’s not been easy.”

In the theatre of his mind, he could see both of his parents sitting at their breakfast room table, flashing anxious but relieved smiles. He could see Bishop at their feet thoroughly engaged with the Nylabone that always made his gums bleed, looking up in vacant surprise whenever his mother raised her voice, or his father used his congratulatory tone. Cozy in the house he hadn’t been in since last Christmas, when he’d tried one last time to patch things up with Kari. Such comfort and familiarity; a tableau inside a snow globe was as close as it seemed to him at this moment.

“Well, I think that you’ve done a good job recovering from that business with you-know-who. I gotta tell you, I was really worried about you for a while.”

They still should be, right Alex? the critic asked teasingly.

“Thanks, Dad. I’m doing much better now.”

“I’m looking forward to reading that thesis,” his father said. “I bet it’ll be great.”

“Hey, Alex!” Erik called from the other side of the bathroom door. “Man, come on out! Gina just broke out the good shit, and it is fuckin’ *dank!*”

A pause on the line.

“Are you busy?” his Dad asked. “Sounds like you’ve got company.”

“No, not me,” he said with a forced laugh. “I’m actually over at a friend’s place right now. Trying to take a break from all the school work with some classmates.”

“Well, we’re not trying to check up on you. We just wanted to see how you’re doing, ‘cause we haven’t heard from you in a while. I don’t want to keep you; I know you need to let off some steam. Just promise me you’ll keep up the good work. You’ve come so far, it’d be a shame to give up now.”

Alex ground his teeth. For his life, he couldn’t even remember why he’d ever thought school was a good thing for him. He wanted to tell his parents that it was over, that he’d given up, and just put an end to this

deception. But inflicting that pain on them was something that he would do anything to avoid, even if it meant simply prolonging the inevitable discovery.

After all, if there was one thing he knew he still excelled at, it was procrastination.

“I promise, I’ll keep doing my best,” he said a little more forcefully than he’d intended. “I just hope it will be good enough.”

“There’s nothing you can’t do if you set your mind to it, son,” his father said. “You know that we’re always here if you need us. Now you be safe, and have a good time.”

“Alex, for fuck’s sake, *come on!*” Erik yelled from the other side of the door. “You’re already behind two shots and a tab, let’s go!”

“I will Dad,” Alex said, cupping his hand tightly over his cell phone. “I love you,” he added.

Do you?

Alex mentally told the critic to get fucked.

“You too, buddy. Call us again soon.”

He heard the line go dead with a faint click. He kept his ear to the receiver until the dial tone was replaced by a busy signal; only then did he thumb the talk button and kill the connection. He stuffed the phone quickly back into his pocket. His reflection in the mirror stared at him with mute accusation. The acid cast his face in luminous green, leering and ghoulish. His lips peeled back in a grin that he knew he wasn’t making. He coughed into the sink until his head cleared.

“Jesus Christ, man, are you sick?” Erik called from the hallway.

“Fuck no,” he barked at the door. “That weed’s just sticks and seeds, though. It’s got me hacking. Put in the good shit, and I’ll be out in a second.”

“All right. Look man, don’t puke, or you won’t get any,” the voice admonished.

“Right,” he said, looking into his reflection again.

How can you do this to the people who honestly care about you? What sort of a person have you become? The counselor’s voice sounded like his memory of Kari.

“Not like I have a choice anymore,” he told the mirror. “I wish I did.”

You're a lying, selfish bastard, Kari's voice told him as it twisted into the critic's acid tone. You only ever think of yourself. That's why you're in this mess. Let's be honest, that's why you lost me in the first place, too. You started this, driving me away with your accusations...

"Shut up," he hissed. He squeezed his skull between his fingers, trying to dig the voice out physically.

Everything that has happened has been something that you could have averted. You have no one to blame for this but yourself. You expected the worst. Of course you got it.

Alex ground his teeth together. "I didn't want this," he whispered through clenched teeth. "I only wanted..." The words died. He wasn't sure what he wanted anymore.

"I'm trying to bring *myself* back," he said to his reflection. There was no reply.

He yanked open the door and stepped back out into the hallway. As he crossed into the tiny living room, he was engulfed in the acrid blue haze of grass and less harmless substances.

"Fuck, man. It's about goddamn time you got out here," Erik said as he rounded the corner from the kitchenette with an almost overflowing drink (vodka tonic, by look, Alex thought absently) sloshing on the floor. "I was beginning to think you were cashed, ya fuckin' lightweight."

"Just had to deal with the parentals," Alex said, taking the glass from Erik's hand. "You know, prove that I was really studying." He downed a generous gulp.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. My mom's always riding my ass; 'When are you going back to school?' and all that shit. 'You can't make it in life as a drop-out.' Fuck that, I do all right." Erik pushed up his ever-present sunglasses. "So anyway, I was telling you about this chick I know that I think you should meet..."

"Yeah, I'm listening."

"Anyway, she's an English major too..."

"So fucking what? That's not that rare. Pull up to McDonald's, and it's 'Hi, I've got an English degree! Do you want fries with that?'"

Erik laughed. "Well, I just think you might have a lot in common. Plus, she's hot as hell."

"Look," Alex said, placing a hand on his shoulder, "I've said it before, and I'll repeat it now: the last thing I need is to get mixed up in some serious relationship."

"Yeah, but —"

“No buts. I need to be my own person, and I’m still not quite sure who that is. Now who do I have to fuck to get my hit?” he asked.

Almost before he’d finished the sentence his hostess, whose name was beyond his recollection (something with a ‘D’, he thought,) was standing in front of him with a small yellow pill between her teeth.

“The price is right,” she purred around it before leaning forward, mouth open...

... wide enough to bite him in half. Teeth like black bayonets erupted from the raw flesh of the dark gums, sending up glittering ribbons of slaver. Still the mouth continued to gape, its split lower jaw expanding laterally as the upper stretched above it. A gurgling roar emanated from the beast's gullet as it pounded toward him on thick, knotted legs.

A flash of pale gray light illuminated every detail in the monstrosity's gaping maw. Its tiny eyes, barely visible over the fangs of its upper jaw, widened and rolled white with shock. A dense cloud of vaporized blood curled majestically from the exit wound in the middle of its humped back. The creature took another three lurching steps toward him before it toppled onto its spotted side. The damp earth groaned from the impact; the two thick legs pedaled weakly before shuddering and lying still.

"Reality denies thee," he intoned, his amplified electronic voice almost reverent. Viridian lowered his left arm. The plasma nacelles sank back into the weapon with a soft metallic rasp. He altered his course only enough to avoid the largest portion of the carcass in his path, and not even the crunch of his armored boots through the remains of the beast's still-smoking skull made a perceptible impact on his speed as he sprinted forward, deeper into the alien landscape.

Little light penetrated the tangled canopy above him, but his eyes saw far more than the morning would have revealed. Through the dead violet light of his new optics he could see the terrain highlighted in irregular glowing relief lines. Even on such uneven ground he moved with graceful precision, all the while increasing his pace until the motion of his feet blurred into bronze crescents. The heat signatures of small, insignificant mutants flashed past his vision as retreating yellow blobs. In the distance his sensors detected another large life form amid a tight grove, but the bioelectric signature was far too large to be humanoid, and so it did not qualify as a "must eliminate" target. He made a minor adjustment in his course to stay outside the alien's probable range of perception, unwilling to sacrifice more energy on pointless encounters that did not further his objectives.

All these things he saw even as he ran far quicker than he ever could have in his former life, and he registered their locations without having to devote a second searching for the information on his HUD. The microprocessors imbedded in his brain documented and catalogued every piece of salient data his sensors

perceived. He did not notice, however, how the lush vegetation shrank away as it touched the burnished metal of his body. He did not remain long enough to see how the carnivorous vines withered, blanched, and dissolved into fine gray powder seconds after contact with him, nor did he spare a backwards glance to see the deep furrows of his tracks spreading into shallow pools of ash.

The power consumption readout on his HUD informed him that his reactor charge had dropped two points during his confrontation with the deviant monster; he was now at 93% of his initial capacity. He slowed his pace to conserve his energy. The red location marker that showed the location of the primary deviant encampment pulsed steadily in front of him, and he estimated that he was just over seven kilometers away from his first opportunity to dispense the blessing of his contempt.

Reality wills it, he thought. So must it be. Let the unclean perish by my hand, let the voices of uselessness be forever silenced. Despite his neural formatting, he was eager to prove himself in the eyes of the Logisters. Part of him still felt Their presence, even in this forsaken place: he carried Their spirits as a comfort. Trees and scrub vegetation blurred past him, little more than wisps of green and black smoke at his sides. Ahead a small drop in the terrain appeared on his topographical HUD. The seismic surveyors incorporated his feet sent out pulses of sonar as they impacted the ground, revealing solid terrain just beyond the edge of the ridge. He accelerated.

Fiery light bathed him through an opening in the canopy as he sailed over the embankment and landed in a small clearing. Reflexively he winced away from the sudden brightness, even though his new oculars filtered it even before his stiff face finished its obsolete gesture. The toxic orange light of this (un)reality's morning washed over him, and his eyes were forced to darken again to compensate for the reflective brilliance of his own body.

Before him was a small, roughly rectangular pool of dark green water. Topographical scans revealed that it was considerably deep, and numerous life signs, some quite large, stirred within its unseen depth. Three of its irregular edges were bordered by tangled foliage, while a small sandy beach framed the shore on which he stood. Beside him was a large carved stone. Amazingly, part of the crude inscription it bore was legible to him: "Blessed... banisher... doubt."

Ghostly anger flared within his mind at the words. "I shall not," he intoned. His purpose is set in stone far harder than this, his will defined in letters far bolder than these. As if to prove the point, he delivered a snapping lateral kick to the monument. The stone broke in half and crashed into the sand. He looked down at it with a mixture of satisfaction and contempt.

More interesting than the stone, however, was the worn road that lay beside it. It snaked through the jungle at opposite ends of the clearing. One of the exits lined up almost perfectly with the projected location of the deviant base camp on his HUD. Viridian nodded; this new road would cut both his power consumption and his travel time significantly.

As he turned to follow the path, a high ululation echoed across the still waters of the pool. Viridian looked upwards, searching for the threat, and the rhythmic thump of his rebreather halted.

Two misshapen suns the colors of blood and flame hung above the ragged edge of the far canopy like baleful eyes. Through the magnification and glare filters over his sensitive optics, he saw their seething coronae, and he could pick out the dark spots crawling like insects across their burning faces. As he watched, an immense pale third broke the tree line and began its slow ascent between the other two.

Despite the circuitry and dampening chemicals in his brain, Viridian stared at his first sunrise in with a mix of horror and awe. Gone was the uniform gray of his sky; in its place was the furious cascade of color that he had seen tearing into his world over the Tertiary Courtyard a lifetime ago. His dead skin broke into gooseflesh, and he waited for the attack to come as it had before. This time I am ready, he thought.

But as he continued to stare at the three suns, he saw them began to bleach and brighten. The dangerous color bled slowly out of them as they resolved themselves into the vast, glowing visages of the logisters. Their eyes were black holes in the seething plasma of their faces. Around them, the alien patterns of clouds dispersed and the fiery light of dawn grew pale. The sky became gray and sane in their cold light.

"May my deeds thus reflect thy reality," he said reverently, his eyes closed in rapture at the miracle he'd seen. His rebreather thudded back to life as his neutralizer unit brought his organic system back in line with the mechanical.

Viridian's reverie was cut short by a repeat of the shrill cry that had initially drawn his attention. He looked up again into alien skies to behold two elemental monstrosities wheeling over the circle of water. Their

sinuous bodies were lost in a fury of swirling yellow and green flame, churned into vortices by the beating of their four massive wings. One of the suffering creatures craned a long neck in his direction, and the eerie wail issued from its gaping beak. Its eyes fixed him, glowing with the blue light of plasma coils. To him, the animal's cry was one of pain.

“May thy suffering cease,” he said almost apologetically as the targeting reticule snapped down over his left eye. His HUD chimed a lock as he raised his left arm...

... to ward off the creature's swooping attack. It shrieked again as it dove toward him, and its cry rang with pain and fury. The animal's suffering assaulted his empathy as its body met his staff. The strong tail wound around it, and wrenched it from his grip as the animal pulled away from him in great rushing flaps. He watched his staff tumble down the almost sheer mountainside, the morning light winking coldly in the dreamstone head. He cursed its loss.

"Kazin, look out!" Semal called from the ledge above him. "It is coming back!"

Through the half-mask covering his left eye he saw the livid red filament like a slash of blood against the yellow dawn sky. He shut his right eye and traced the bane-thread to the animal under its sway. The thrashbill opened its sickle-like beak and shrieked; its bead-black eyes were locked on him. He watched it soar up on a thermal, the thin blue leather of its wings rippling in the wind. As its climb stalled, it banked sharply and dove straight at him. Kazin flattened against the rocky face and tried once again to reach out to the animal's mind. His thoughts met only pain. He covered his face with his arm.

The thrashbill shrieked as its lash wrapped around Kazin's forearm. The bony spines sank into his flesh as the prehensile tail flexed. He screamed in terror as it tried to haul him from the narrow ledge. He pummeled blindly at its scaly breast with his free hand as he felt his feet slip toward the precipice. Still screaming, the thrashbill jabbed its beak at the exposed half of his face; he flinched away, and the stabbing blow struck the wood of the mask.

The thrashbill's cries died with an abrupt squawk as an arrow plunged into its thick neck as it drew back for another stab. As Kazin stared dumbly, a second arrow thudded between its rigid wings. Its black eyes rolled white, and Kazin saw the spectral tendril retract from the lifeless creature's back. The pressure on his left forearm began to lessen. The barbs, however, remained lodged in his flesh, and the thrashbill's body began to pull him over the ledge with it as it started to fall. Kazin flailed wildly with his free arm as the edge rushed toward him.

"Hold on!" Semal shouted from above him. He caught Kazin's right wrist in an iron grip and pulled. He could hear Semal straining against the weight of the heavy carcass, and he felt the joints of his shoulders stretching. He screamed through clenched teeth when the thrashbill's tail spines tore through the skin of his

forearm as gravity exerted its pull. Semal slammed him back onto the rock face as the carcass came free. As it fell, its dead wings caught one final updraft of wind, sending the corpse spiraling gently down the side of the mountain. Kazin watched its descent as he huddled close to cold stone, panting around the edge of his half of the mask.

“Are you all right?” Semal called from the ledge above. His breath was ragged, his voice strained.

“Thanks to you, cousin,” he replied. His lacerated arm sent up flares of pain. The wounds were bleeding freely. Carefully, he reached into his medicine bag at his waist and brought out a small tied pouch. “I am lucky to be alive right now,” he said as he pulled the drawstring open with his teeth.

“That is a mixed blessing for one in our position,” Semal said loudly in between gasps, his deep voice a whisper above the rising wind. “I thought you said you could take care of any animals that might attack us.”

“Normally, yes,” Kazin shouted as he carefully poured the powdered herbs into the bleeding gashes in his arm. He held his breath until the pain dulled. Clots formed quickly, and he flexed his hand to see if the creature’s attack had torn any muscles. “But you saw the thread on its back, yes?”

Semal nodded. Sweat stood in small beads on the exposed left side of his face. “It was like me,” he said. “When we were in the heath.”

“I think it is safe to assume that we may encounter more poor beasts under this one’s sway,” Kazin said as he scanned the brightening sky. He could see no other predators wheeling above them, but the red tendrils crisscrossed the air with greater frequency toward the summit of this peak. The wind was getting stronger.

“So you think it is expecting us, too.”

“Yes.”

“Because of what happened in the heath,” Semal said. “They can speak to each other through these lines, right?”

Kazin shrugged. “Maybe they already knew on their own.”

“How can that be?” Semal said as he reached down. Kazin took his hand and helped pull himself up to his cousin’s ledge. “They are supposed to have been laid to rest! The other one was asleep until we woke it!”

“That may be so,” Kazin said as he leaned in close to Semal so he would not have to compete with the wind to be heard. “But Ta’Eguro, for all its power, was a simple spirit. This bane might be more cunning. Maybe it did not sleep, but merely waited. I think maybe they all did.”

“Waited for what?”

Kazin flashed back to the blasted remains of the grove, how the wind had scattered the sacred wood of the entwined trees into whorls of white powder when he reached out to touch them. He remembered the face of the stone carving representing the spirit as it crumbled to ash beneath his sobs.

“For something to change,” he said. “That time may have come.”

Semal said nothing, but looked to the sky and the snaking red threads. Kazin looked out over the vast expanse of the wyrded heath that bordered this leg of the range of shadow. From this altitude it did not seem so great a distance, but he knew that distance was a complex concept in this part of the world. The master had told him how the land shifted and moved according to its own tides.

Beyond the mist-shrouded moors and low hills of the heath he could see the thin swathe of verdant through which they had passed a lifetime ago. Beyond that dark green strip lay the valley of the people, just out of sight past the thick canopy. It might as well be another world, he thought.

“Do you think it fears us,” Semal asked beside him, “knowing that you have caught its brother demon?”

Kazin smiled tightly and shook his head. “How can you frighten something that is itself an incarnation of mortal fear?” he asked as he raised his hand to his eyes to shield them from the rising wind. He imagined he could see the valley and the village just beyond the distant trees.

A thin shaft of white light pierced the distant orange sky of the horizon. He saw it slice through the ragged clouds as it blazed a trail to heaven. Kazin’s breath caught in his throat. He felt Semal turn to look at him.

“What is it, cousin? Why do you look so pale?”

“That light...” Kazin said, forgetting the pain of his wounds. He pointed toward the distant valley. *And still all before it with the fire of dead stars*, Ganothil’s voice echoed in his ears, blending with the rising roar of the wind.

Another brilliant lance. Kazin flinched.

“What, that lightning?” Semal squinted at the horizon. “It looks like the valley might get some rain. A good thing, the crops are dry.” He turned back to Kazin and favored him a tired grin. “If you are going to act worried, you should at least worry about our present task.”

He knows, he thought. He’d told Semal everything, including Ganothil’s vision. Kazin felt as though his bowels had turned to ice; his heart hammered below the thin prison of his ribs. At his side, the master’s heart began to pulse hotly.

“A terrible storm is coming,” he said. In his mind he could see the charring bodies that Ganothil had shown him; he could hear the lamentation as the gleaming feet crunched through the ashes. He could see the metal demon’s half-face, thin and pale, yet still horribly recognizable above its shining immobile jaw. Its black eyes stared into his soul. His stomach lurched as another flash lit the distant horizon.

“I think you are right, cousin,” Semal said, looking skyward past the jagged peak. “This wind is showing teeth, and clouds are moving to cover the morning suns. We must find shelter, and soon. I think I can see a cave above us.” Standing up, he began to search for handholds in the cliff face. “Strange,” he called jocularly over his shoulder, “I no longer fear what we must face after talking with you. I only want it to be over.” He began to climb.

Kazin did not reply as he slowly rose and joined Semal. He kept his gaze on the horizon as another, watching for another flash of light...

... behind his aching eyelids. The howling wind was getting louder, and he clapped his palms over his ears to keep it inside his head. His stomach lurched again, more insistently this time, and he stifled a retch. Snaking ribbons of red ghost light danced across his blindness.

Through his closed eyes still bled images of the slaughter, more horrible for the silence. The dying made no sound as they shrieked their last, clutching at the fused holes burned in them by lances of chalk-white light. A man fell to the dusty red ground in two pieces; his hands clutched at his still-kicking ankles. Another collapsed, smote by his massive fist. The scene took on the green and violet shades of bruises, shot through with lances of cold arterial fire from his blocked retinas. Another bat-like shadow darted perilously close to his head, and he felt the wind of its snapping tail on his cheek. He shook and bit back a scream, but the mask's eye refused to be blind.

“Christ, how much did you give him?”

The voice was warbling, distorted, issuing from the far side of reality.

He felt hands pawing his shoulders clumsily, frantically. He cringed closer to the rock face and held himself tighter against the raging wind. The half of the exile's mask bit into his frigid flesh as it transformed his vision into overlapping topographical displays. Targeting reticules appeared automatically over the victims instantly before the light leapt through them. Crude projectiles sailed past him in slow motion, born aloft by the wind surging up the cliff face as the first drops of cold rain began to fall.

“Oh, for God's sake, Erik, will you quit being so damned paranoid?” Kari's voice sounded close to him. At the sound of the spirit's blessed voice, calm spread fingers of frost out from his spine and across his fused ribs. He inhaled deeply and steadied his aim before loosing another volley the unclean. “Do you always get like this when you smoke? It's just the 'shrooms, he's having a wild ride. He'll mellow out in a bit, if he doesn't puke 'em up first.”

“You gave him 'shrooms!? He's already had about four hits, you stupid twat!” The angry male voice dropped in timbre as it spoke. Hands again shook his shoulders, and his shot went wild. He felt mild annoyance, but his second arrow pierced the creature's skull as it dove to attack. “Alex, are you ok?” his father asked. “Dude, look at me!”

“I am the instrument of thy redemption,” Viridian intoned flatly. “My gaze is death.”

“Ah, shit, he’s fried,” the voice said, now in the feeble dying tones of his master. “Seriously man, open your eyes. You’re freaking me the fuck out!”

“Semal!” Kazin cried. “Semal, where are you? I cannot reach the ledge!”

“Who the fuck’s Semal?” his mother asked beside him. “Is that one of Skittles’ friends?”

“Damn it Dana, he’s tripping, he doesn’t know what he’s saying!” Sage snapped as the surgeons removed the top of his skull. “Come on Alex, I said look at me!” The hands on his shoulders shook him violently, and his stomach shifted painfully inside of him.

He opened his eyes. Clear’s shriveled face swelled in front of him. The High Logister’s eyes bored into his. “Hey! Hey man, how many fingers am I holding up?” it asked from inside its preservative tomb.

“reality reflects thy will,” the abolisher smiled faintly and bowed his head to look down the smooth passage bored into the mountainside. Kazin caught his cousin’s arm. “Semal, wait! Once we enter do not stray too far ahead of me. And take my lash; your parang is useless against foes lacking a material form.”

“Relax, Alex,” Jessie cooed, turning his burning face to hers. Her blue eyes bled black, and ran down her paling cheeks. Kari’s mouth smiled at him amid the disintegrating ruin of her face. “Everything’s ok, baby. You’re just having a bad trip. We’re all right here, we won’t let anything happen to you.”

“This whole journey has had an ill aspect over it,” the young shaman answered. “Ever since the master’s death. But I shall restore order to chaos, and bring the light of true reality into this false darkness,” Viridian finished. He leaned forward to kiss those familiar lips, uncaring of the putrescence spiraling away from them in blazing red streamers or the shining grill that covered his own mouth. Gray fire erupted over his vision once more as the unseen demon roared expectantly in his head, and he shut his eyes. His stomach cramped again, and he doubled over.

“Ok, Dana, that’s it,” Ganothil’s reedy voice said as his frail arms gripped him. He was hauled up onto his feet. The dusty ground sighed beneath his armored tread, the stinking wind clawed through his braided hair. “I’m taking him home.”

“Like hell, you are,” the spirit of the grove answered. “You’re stoned off your ass, and how many shots have you had? I’m not letting anybody leave here. He’ll be fine right here.”

“Fear not, their weapons cannot penetrate the armor of my righteousness,” Viridian assured her. The gaping mouth of the tunnel yawned behind Kazin’s closed eyes, and he could see the snaking red ribbons of corruption trailing into its depth like the blood gushing from the stump of the deviant’s arm that he had torn free with a single fluid swipe of a metal fist. “Keep your mask on, and move slow. Whatever is to happen, this time I want to be ready for it.” Kazin tried to sound brave, but his innards spasmed again.

“Well, can we at least put him somewhere safe?” Semal asked. “He’s freakin’ everyone out.” A blood-slick clawed hand grasped his chin and lifted his face. “Jesus. Look at him. He needs to lie down, or something.”

“I’ll take care of it,” a faint, unidentifiable female replied as it sped away from him on the wind in his head. More hands steadied his shoulders, sinking deeply and gently into his burnished plating. “Come on, Alex, it’s time to take a nap. Sleep this off.”

“Yeah, put him down until he comes out of it,” the disintegrating male voice said from across the horizon as it phased out of reality once more.

“I’m two halves at war,” Alex murmured.

“It’s ok,” the gentle wind sighed in his ear. “I’ll take good care of you.”

Alex felt his feet leave the ground...

... catapulting him over the thrashing abomination. The black-armored behemoth continued to screech as its remaining jointed legs blindly scythed the air. Blunt mouthparts snapped, slinging gobbets of thick bile into the red dust. He placed the killing shot in the juncture between its head and thorax as he reached the zenith of his leap. The creature died with a final rattle of its stunted wings in the rust-colored sand. Luminous steam boiled from the melted craters of its wounds. It fell to the ground with a crash, joining its two fellows and the eight shaven-headed deviants lying lifeless in the corral.

Viridian struck the ground in front of his kill with a ring of steel. He dropped into a crouch as he landed; servomotors and shock-absorbers in his legs and pelvis hissed loudly as they took his weight. Black light pulsed from his eyes as he scanned the broken rubble of earthen dwellings for his next target. To his right, the heat signatures of two more deviant resistors taking cover behind an overturned cart stood out sharply against the violet backdrop of his HUD. He magnified the image, zooming in on the red-painted faces peeking over top of the cart.

The warriors adopted expressions of panic as his eyes locked onto them and they realized they had been spotted. Standing, they let their battle cries fly with their arrows; one shot sailed over his head, while the other one struck the smooth dome of his left shoulder. The flint arrowhead sent up a burst of sparks as it shattered against his armor. Viridian sprang forward, a blur of gold in the fading light of the suns. Another arrow shivered against his chest as he sprinted shoulder first toward the makeshift barricade. He lowered his head. Combat drugs sang in his veins beside calming narcotics.

The deviants managed to jump clear of the cart an instant before Viridian's weight slammed into it, splintering its frame and sending heavy fragments of wood sailing eight meters through the air before skidding to a halt amid red explosions of dry soil. Anchor spikes in his heels deployed, stopping his forward momentum. The deviants lay prone, still trying to rise as Viridian advanced upon them. The closest turned to face him as he stood; Viridian's internal image recorder captured a perfect still of the dumb surprise on the man's face as he pistoned his glittering fist through brittle bone of the deviant's skull. Blood misted the air, streaking on the dead white flesh of Viridian's forehead.

The remaining deviant yelped as the nearly headless body of his companion toppled next to him. His eyes were white crescents of fear. He tried to stand and fell backwards, scrambling away from Viridian like an insect, his weapons forgotten with his courage in the dirt.

Viridian strode fluidly forward. Bending at the waist, he seized the man's throat in his bloody gauntlet and squeezed. The deviant's face went purple as Viridian's metal fingers bore down. The man's eyes went the color of his face-paint. There was a wet crunch, and the man spasmed, then went still. Viridian let the limp body drop.

"Receive thy blessing well," he said flatly. Approaching thunder echoed his benediction, and the wind surged again, almost drowning out the screams of the remaining villagers.

Leave no deviant alive, the Logisters' voices echoed through his circuitry. Ensure they no longer trouble reality with their impurity.

Viridian willed the small power consumption alarm on his HUD to deactivate as he strode toward the main plaza of the encampment. His feet thudded in the baked earth, each step sending up more dust to be swept away in the chill wind. Through the walls of the shabby dwellings ringing the central fire pit, he could see the body heat of the deviants that had not fled at the onset of his attack, cowering, huddling close together, trying desperately to stifle their panicked breathing. The central fire pit was filled with cold ashes and the charred remnants of the deviant leader's bier.

Warm them all, the cold voices of his masters whispered.

He nodded. The nacelles of his arm cannon deployed diffusing prongs. He took aim at the nearest hut's thatched roof and fired. A fan of white fire caressed the parched straw, igniting it in a flash. Inside he heard the screaming begin. Thick gray smoke belched from the doorway, and he refocused his beam on the dark opening. He waited.

He saw the heat signature, bright yellow against the red miasma of smoke, before the half-naked woman had cleared the threshold of the door. Her face, obscured by a tangle of dark hair, was stamped with fury; she shrieked her defiance at him, a burning spar held above her like a battle standard. The beam seared a fist-sized hole between her bare breasts, obliterating her heart and silencing her cry. Her momentum carried her

bonelessly forward, sprawling her at his feet. Her burning club bounced off of his shin. From inside the hut came the high squeals of juveniles.

Viridian sent another diffuse cone of plasma into the open doorway. The high-pitched screams rose even higher as light erupted within the dwelling. They soon faded into the roar of flames.

On his HUD's scanner, he saw the red blips swarming from the transparent blue blocks of the buildings. The deviants were in a full rout; he saw them scatter, disorganized and desperate, each one seeming to be run in a different direction. He spun in place with death snapping in bright spears from his left arm.

"Submit," his loudspeaker blared. "Die with dignity, and know peace!" The deviants did not heed him. Each buzzing flash of his weapon brought death to another deviant. Some of them managed to flee behind the buildings, evading his wrath. Their cries faded in the distance. Nowhere could he see the target the Logisters had shown him.

The informant was correct, he thought. The neutralizer unit hissed as it countered his annoyance.

A small alarm chimed in his head as a new thermal signature appeared behind him on his HUD. His torso rotated smoothly on the axis of his waist. The weapon's targeting computer chimed as it acquired a lock on the new hostile.

The small boy's face was streaked with dirt; he limped forward, his ankle twisted behind him. Large almond eyes glittered in his pale, shocked face like the tiny green stone held in his outstretched palm. It sparkled with green fire as the last light of the suns was swallowed by the storm clouds on the distant mountains.

"I will give it back," the juvenile deviant whispered through blue lips. "If that is what you want. Just please stop hurting us, young master..."

Viridian cocked his head and zoomed in on the child's outstretched hand. The stone was simply a small green lump of carbon and beryl, polished smooth in irregular locations by inconstant friction. Yet the sight of it stayed his fire. An image forced its way into his mind, a picture of the same worthless mineral glinting in his own living palm as he offered it to the boy with the smiling grimy face...

Again the neutralizer sighed quietly within him, and the image was dispersed by chemical serenity. The red target reticule blazed on his HUD, a halo of blood around the deviant's small moon face. The cannon's nacelles sang with energy.

"Myriad and devious are the forms mine enemies shall take," he chanted as he advanced on the trembling child. "Let my resolve be iron." He raised his crackling weapon and took aim...

... at the crimson tendril snaking toward him. Fire leapt from the palm of his hand; it splashed against the energy filament as though breaking against a solid object. The flash briefly illuminated the niter-crossed walls of the tunnel, and he could see the ancient glyphs of binding carved into the dark stone, now nearly illegible, choked as they were with gray lichen.

Perhaps that is how It was freed, he thought as the tendril blackened and withdrew. . . We should have remained watchful against these forces instead of trying to bury and forget them. We were so trusting...

Below him in the gloom the bane howled again. Its voice sent tremors through the stone around him, and Kazin heard the crashing of rocks falling from the high ceiling of the immense cavern he had cowardly fled. His pulse hammered in his ears; he wondered what being crushed by a cave-in would feel like. Suddenly his retreat back into the entrance tunnel seemed very foolish, despite the demon waiting ahead of him.

Angry human shouts echoed up the passage, and Kazin cursed himself for his selfishness. He set his jaw against the fear that crawled along his spine and ran forward toward the bane's chamber. The light of his torch guttered in the stinking wind of Its breath, and not for the first time he swore aloud at the darkness pressing in on him.

"Semal, hold on!" he called ahead of him. As he passed from the mouth of the tunnel, the blackness of the cavern threatened to swallow him. But through the enchantment of Ganothil's mask he could see it glowing faintly before his torchlight revealed it, floating above the pit from which It had surged like a trapdoor spider after an insect.

The bane's corpse-pale flesh glistened from between the stalagmites ringing its pit like broken fangs. He could see at least five of its sinuous arms, each tipped with clusters of rolling white eyes and ridges of serrated bone, snaking across the damp floor of the cave and leaving hissing puddles of slime on the surfaces

they touched. Kazin could barely make out a polyp-like trunk in the middle of the massive arms. At the apex of its squat, conical body, he could see the arm-length yellow teeth thrusting from its sphincter-like maw. The ghostly, possessing tendrils streamed from its mouth, weaving and slithering across the high unseen ceiling of the subterranean cathedral like carnivorous vines. He stared at it, thinking of the hydrae in the pond where he used to swim...

“Kazin, watch out!” Semal called to him from the far side of the pit.

Kazin dove to the stone floor barely in time to avoid the whooshing sweep of the bane’s arm. As his body struck the rock he marveled at the bane’s speed.. For one panicked second, he thought he would roll down the slope of the cavern toward the pit at its center, but he ground his knee painfully into the rough stone to brace himself. The bane’s arm boomed as it struck the lip of the entrance tunnel. The mountain itself seemed to groan with the force of the impact. Kazin heard the screech of grinding stone as the narrow passage to the outside world collapsed. Thick gray dust billowed out of the opening, and again he thought of the blight. He scrambled away from the expanding cloud, holding his breath against the abrasive grit in the air.

The bane’s voice rattled the cavern. Kazin heard the hunger in Its cry, and nausea washed him. His stomach knotted and cramped.

“Get back!” he heard Semal shout over the reverberating echoes in the chamber. “Get away, you will not take me again!” Something whistled shrilly through the air, and Kazin heard a pained mewling coming from the direction of the pit. He looked across the cavern to see Semal swinging furiously at a clutch of writhing red filaments with the fennel blade he’d given him in one hand and a torch in the other. The bundle of thin branches slashed through the ribbons of telekinetic force, but for each one that Semal severed, another slithered forward to replace it. Kazin could see Semal’s blows were becoming erratic, fatigued. He realized it was only a matter of time before he faltered.

Now is your chance, a cold voice in his head told him.. Use him to distract this demon long enough to bind it. . If he falls, no matter; he will have served his purpose. That is all that matters. No more dragging him along, no more putting up with his whining and questions, no more ...

Kazin shook his head. What was he thinking? He looked down at the pouch that held the heart – dim orange light was shining through the thin leather; he could see his hand curled into a claw around the heart. Perhaps these are not my own thoughts, he realized. He dropped the heart quickly.

Semal cried out as he slipped on the slick stone. Kazin jerked his gaze back up to his cousin. The half of Semal's face not covered by the spirit mask was strained with pain; one leg was pinned beneath him. The torch had fallen onto the cave floor and lay guttering on the cold stone. He slashed the fennel wildly at the encroaching mass of tendrils, completely oblivious to the thick gray arm that had slithered behind him. Kazin saw the eyes in that questing tentacle locked onto his cousin's back; he could see the soulless hunger glittering in them.

"No!" he cried, leaping to his feet. His fingers pulled forth another fire moth cocoon from his totem pouch before he had time to think about what he was doing. He raised the tiny fetish to his lips, imploring the dried husk inside the silk to awaken and burn once more. Light flared in his fingers as the spirit of the insect hearkened to his call, and he saw it rise from the ashes of its cocoon on red wings of flame. "Face me, demon!" he cried and thrust his hand outward. The tiny flame spirit streaked from his palm and burst against the glistening trunk of the bane's body. Its howl of pain shook stalactites from the darkened ceiling; they passed unhindered through its insubstantial body, crashing into the pit below.

For a brief moment Kazin felt his heart swell, until he saw the snaking gray blur diving toward him from the gloom above him. The arm ploughed into him, lifting him from the stone and slamming his body into the cavern wall. His head cracked against the rock, and dull yellow sparks of pain exploded in his vision, replaced by black snow as his split scalp began to bleed. He dropped his torch as the bane squeezed him into the rock. His breath exploded from his lungs.

Weak fleshling, the flint blade voice ripped through his mind. Kazin groaned, willing himself to black out to escape the rape of his mind. *Useless meat! You are too late to stop what We have put in motion. Without the people you cherish, you have no defense against Us. Shall We show you what We have planned for them?*

Red light burst on Kazin's rapidly darkening vision. Before him spread the valley of the people, lit only by the flames of the burning houses and yurts. All around him he heard cries of suffering. The red soil was redder with blood; the pale naked bodies of the people were strewn across the ground like maggots on a

slab of rotting meat. Kazin watched as ragged bloodless wounds opened and closed rhythmically in their sallow flesh; he saw the pain on their faces. In the corral the plough beetles were feeding on squealing children, the tiny bodies being ground into nonsense between the black mandibles. The bleeding sky was choked with poison gasses, and instead of the gentle suns he'd loved since childhood, three gaping black holes were punched into the sky. Red and black filaments spun inside them, snaking out across the horizon.

Kazin had no breath left to scream. He willed himself to die. Still his own flesh betrayed him; he felt his mouth water at the sight of the raw human meat, felt his sex stiffen at the nudity. The bane's perverse desires wormed through his thoughts, and his body responded to the temptation of the atrocities it promised.

Suddenly the terrible vision winked out, and the pressure on his torso slackened. Kazin crashed to the ground in a heap, his lungs reflexively gulping air. A horrible wail split the fetid air of the cavern. Kazin dared to open his eyes.

Semal had pulled himself into a crouch. In the dying light of the torch, Kazin watched his cousin strip another narrow shaft from the fennel blade. He drew it across his bow and sent the flimsy strip of wood sailing through the air toward the bane's central stalk. As the fennel arrow fluttered gently down, it parted the intangible flesh of the bane like an axe blow, leaving behind a gaping gash. The toxic red light of Kazin's nightmare vision light bled from the wound as Semal prepared another shot.

The master's heart was in Kazin's hand in a breath. The pounding lump of flesh sent the fury it held up his arm and into his chest, the hot anger revitalizing his limbs the way fresh water restores a parched seedling. He sprang to his feet. The sigils etched into the heart burned brightly through his white knuckles. Its light seared the gray flesh of the bane's arm as it thrashed around his waist. Kazin bellowed louder than the demon as he drove the blazing heart directly into the cold slime between the rolling white eyes...

... of the ridiculous green frog. It stared up at him with that idiot expression of kewpie-doll cuteness that was the trademark of all Sanrio creations. Hey, that's Keropi, his brain informed him as his senses began to come back on-line. He thrust harder. Good old Kero-Keropi. Another thrust.. Who would have guessed she has a tattoo of Keropi on her –

“Jesus!” he shouted. With a shove he disengaged himself and collapsed against the headboard. Through the sparks in his synapses he noted with no small degree of relief that he was wearing protection. His stomach shuddered.

“Hey, damn!” she exclaimed as she fell forward onto the bed. She rolled onto her elbow and pulled her knees up, granting him an unparalleled view of her ample, heavily inked ass. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but take it easy.”

He gaped at the naked woman in front of him, trying desperately to come up with a name to match the face. He looked rapidly around the dark room; the only recognizable things were three large throw pillows shaped like the Powerpuff Girls. His head throbbed as nausea clamped down on him.

“Hey, are you ok?” Mystery Woman asked him. “You look like you're going to be sick.”

“Where the fuck am I?” he demanded. He snatched the flimsy sheet and covered himself. “And who the hell are you?” He shucked the condom off his deflating erection with the same disgust he would a live slug.

“Alex, come on. You're joking, right?” she laughed. Nonetheless, she inched away from him toward the edge of the bed.

He swallowed hard and stared blankly at her. He was close to panic.

“Ah, I think I know what's going on,” she said as she slid off the bed. He watched the ripe roll of her buttocks as she stood and tried to control his jumping gut. She tugged on a black Sisters of Mercy t-shirt and picked a cigarette and lighter from the bedside table. “Looks like you're finally coming down.”

“Coming down?” he echoed.

“Yeah,” she said. The flame threw her face into stark relief, making her ghoulish. “You were trippin' balls earlier. I thought you'd come out of it when you started getting friendly, but I guess I was wrong.” She

took a long drag and blew a luminous blue cloud into the gloom. “Guess that’s what you get for mixing acid and ‘shrooms.”

The mention of the drugs sparked a memory in his aching head that blossomed into recollection with dizzying speed. The pieces fell into place rapidly, along with shameful stills of his bender. Towering above it all, however, was the sticky feeling of having been taken advantage of, and above that was the knowledge that it was his fault.

Congratulations, Alex, the critic said, its voice flintier than ever. *You just date-raped yourself.*

“Sorry, Dana,” he said in his best I’m-trying-to-be-calm-but-I’m-about-to-start-screaming voice as he remembered the name Erik had called her when they’d come over. “I guess I really don’t know my limits.”

“It’s ok,” she said. “I think you made up for any shortcomings in the tolerance department already. Not many guys I know can go twice on a head full of acid.” In the dim blue light from the window, she winked at him. Her nose ring caught the orange spark of the cigarette as she took another puff. He turned away, and his eyes lit on the digital alarm clock on the bureau: 5:23 AM.

“I really need to be going,” he said, pointing to the clock. He sidled off the edge of the bed and snatched at his pants, trying not to put them on so quickly as to be noticeable.

“What’s the hurry?” Dana asked, sliding back onto the bed. “I thought you said you didn’t have anything to do today?”

“I bet I said a lot more than that last night,” he commented as he put on his shirt. “I’m not sure I remember everything too clearly. But seriously, I have to go in to work,” he lied.

“Shame,” she said. “I was kind of hoping you’d... you know, stay all night?” There was a hint of honest disappointment in her voice that pushed his shame to the next level.

“Well, I really should get some sleep before my shift,” he said as he tugged his boots on. He had no idea where his socks were, but was fully prepared to cut them as a loss.

“You can sleep here if you want. I’ll make sure you’re up in time. The shower’s yours if you need it.”

“No thanks, I’d really feel more comfortable at my own place.”

“Can I at least make you some breakfast?” she asked, standing up.

“I appreciate it,” he said, standing up, “but I really feel I should get going.”

“Listen,” she said quietly. “I don’t want this to be something that you feel awkward about. I’d like to think were adults, we both had a good time, and that’s all there is to it. I know I wouldn’t mind doing it again sometime.” She forced a laugh. “After all, the best cure for that weird one-night stand feeling is doing it again, right?”

“You never can tell,” he said. He flashed a small smile and let it quickly drop. Alex swallowed. “I’m...sorry. I don’t usually do this sort of... um...” He let his sentence trail off.

“It’s ok,” Dana said with a nod. She flicked the ash from her cigarette onto the rumpled bed sheet. “I guess I’ll see you when I see you, then.”

Alex opened his mouth to say something consoling, but he thought better of it. There was no sense in prolonging their discomfort. “See you around,” he said quietly as he opened the bedroom door.

Dana waved, but didn’t look at him. Alex stepped into the dark hallway.

The door clicked closed behind him. The air was stale from smoke and alcohol, and breathing it made his head ache even more. To his left he could see the bathroom where he’d spoken with his parents a century ago. He ducked into it long enough to throw the used rubber in the wastebasket. He actively avoided looking into the mirror – the last thing he wanted to see right now was his own face.

Lit only by the light from the blue screen of the TV, the living room of the apartment looked like a refugee camp. Every flat surface seemed to be littered with bottles, trash, and the contorted forms of sleepers. He picked his way through them as quickly and quietly as he could. Thankfully, his keys were still hanging on the hook beside the front door, and almost as soon as they were in his hand he’d slipped outside, closing the door soundlessly behind him.

Cold morning mist slapped some of the chemical fog from his brain. He took a deep breath and held it until his stomach stopped squirming. Already the sky was brightening into a smoke-gray dawn as warming as a bout of flu. The air was heavy with the smell of rain and damp earth. From one of the nearby trees, a vigilant mockingbird slung accusations at him. Alex lowered his head and slunk across the wet parking lot...

... toward the guttering fire on the low hilltop. Behind him, the village breathed clouds of black smoke shot through with white steam as the rain battered the blazing timbers. The red dust became blood spreading from the wreckage of buildings and bodies alike. Another peal of thunder rang over the mass grave.

The black figure stood motionless before the struggling campfire as Viridian advanced. The old man's small dark eyes glittered in the wrinkled canvas of his face, unblinking against the falling drops.

"A most impressive display of force," he said in a cracking voice. "I commend you, and your masters for producing so effective a killer." He smiled, flashing ancient yellow teeth. "How many times did you make that poor woman cry out to the blessed spirit as you interrogated her? Six? Seven?"

"Silence, heretic," Viridian boomed. The informant's smile faltered. "Thou art my contact. Divulge thy information."

"I fear you will have to be more specific," Ganothil said, recovering his good humor. "I am old, and sometimes –"

Viridian fired into the wet ground at the old deviant's feet; the discharge from his cannon glazed the mud and sent a shower of rubies scattering into the storm. The exile hopped nimbly backwards and cackled with glee. Viridian heard the old man's weak pulse surge as he capered.

"Yes!" Ganothil said, clapping his hands. "Good! Be forceful, it is your gift! Take what you want without remorse! Who can stop you?"

"Thou hast but one thing to tell me, traitor," he droned as his weapon recharged with a whine. "Do not waste my time."

"Ah, but I could tell you so very much, if you took the time to listen."

Viridian leveled his arm at the informant's face. Soft gray light bathed the wet creases of his skin.

Ganothil shrugged. "Very well. Have it your way." He pulled his thin arms back into the folds of his cloak. "Like all predators, your only wish is to find your prey."

"Tell me," Viridian said, keeping his weapon trained on his face, "the location of the one whose death shall restore order to reality. Lie not, for my instruments monitor thee."

“I have no reason to lie to you about that, my shining friend.” From under his robe he produced the spy drone he carried. He ran his hands over the pitted metal, looking at it with obvious admiration. “Have not my communications through the gateway been reliable? Have you not used the information I have provided in order to plan your assault? I have aided your masters faithfully thus far, and I will continue to do so.” He looked up with a harsh light in his eyes. “And not because I fear for my life, seeing you here before me. Believe me when I say I desire nothing more than the destruction of... this *false* existence,” he spat and let the inert machine fall to the ground to be swallowed by mud. “Young Kazin is far from this place, and you are far from him in distance, despite your closeness to him. He is seeking the first powers, hoping to use them to halt the advance of your world into this one and turn the balance in his favor.”

“The location of the avatar,” Viridian demanded again. He did not appreciate the cryptic answers he was receiving. The lethal hum of the cannon increased in pitch as he routed more energy into its firing coils.

“You are too impatient,” Ganothil said, cocking his head to one side. “This may work against you, if you are not careful.” He pointed a long finger toward the distant mountains. “Your quarry is there, beneath the mountain rock in the den of a great power. He has nearly completed his quest, although I doubt he knows it.” He gave Viridian another decayed smile. “If you follow him now, you shall not reach him before he attains the power he seeks.”

“Then thy information is worthless,” Viridian said flatly.

“I said ‘if you follow him,’ did I not?” the informant said sharply. “There are other ways to reach your target, assassin.”

“Explain thyself.”

“Surely your gods told you about the movement of our land before sending you here?” Ganothil asked tentatively. Viridian stared blankly back, the weapon still singing a dirge before him. The old man sighed. “One may think of this land as a living thing,” he began, his voice thick with exasperation, “and like all living things it possesses certain automatic —”

“I know of this... land’s... geographical instability.”

“Well, *I* understand it. I *know* its motion, and I know how to use it to travel great distances in short times.” His smile grew tight. “It is a secret that the exiles... such as myself, keep closely guarded. We do not

easily share it. You should be thankful that I did not teach Kazin this magic, or you would have absolutely no chance of reaching him, seeing as how you came so late.”

“I tire of thy insolent tone and pointless rambling,” Viridian said. “Explain this mode of transport at once.”

“It would be easier just to show you,” the exile replied. He circled to the far side of the dying fire with Viridian’s cannon tracking him all the way. He turned his back to the towering Abolisher and stared intently at the small hillock beside the road. He raised his thin arms inside the folds of his robe. Viridian heard him whispering, the words unintelligible and strained. The rain pelted harder upon them. As the informant finished his chanting, the ground parted before him. Keeping his aim trained on the heretic’s back, Viridian watched the aperture widen into a narrow tunnel.

When the earth stopped its convulsions, Ganothil dropped his arms and staggered back. His feet slipped, and he went down with a small yelp. Viridian lowered his cannon, stepped forward and gazed into the passage. His vision sliced through the darkness, revealing a smooth-walled, twisting tunnel. He could detect no motion in its walls – it appeared stable.

“This will lead to the current location of the one thou callst ‘Kazin?’” Viridian asked, turning back to his informant.

“Yes,” Ganothil said with a groan. He placed a thin hand at the small of his back. “You are faster than he. You should have no trouble overtaking him and his companion.”

“Canst thou be so certain of the avatar’s direction?”

A pause. “He has no option but to follow the one path he is on, now,” Ganothil said. A small pained smile tugged at his lips. “His tale is coming to an end.”

Viridian made no reply. He turned back to the tunnel, sweeping it with his topographical sensors. Its dimensions were barely wide enough to accommodate him; he would have to stoop to move through it. It would slow his progress.

It is irrelevant, the Logisters spoke in his head, and his neutralizer hissed softly. *The way lies open before thee, champion.*

“Well?” Ganothil asked as he rose to his feet. His creased face was white with exertion. “Does this not impress you, my friend?”

Viridian spun on him, and the old man shrank away for the first time since meeting him. “Provide assurance that this is not a deception, deviant,” his voice crackled over the thump of his rebreather.

The old man recovered quickly from his surprise. “By way of assurance, all I can say is if you do not take this chance, then Kazin will accomplish his goal and your reality is doomed. I promise you, this passage will stay open until I close it, and it will take you where you want to go.” He paused, studying Viridian’s blank face and favoring him with a knowing look. “There is something you wish to ask me?” he said at length.

Viridian’s bare brows raised by reflex. “Aye,” he said.

“Well, ask. My knowledge is yours. If I may say, you are wise to seek answers before charging blindly into unknown territory.”

“Why do you do this?” Viridian asked.

“Do what? Help you? Turn on my own, sell them body and soul for the slaughter?”

Viridian was silent.

“I suppose it will not hurt to tell you,” the exile said. His care-worn face hardened. “First answer me this, Abolisher: what do you think of this land?”

Viridian cast his gaze across the ugly ruins of the deviant encampment, the tangled jungle, the rain-swept valley, the jagged mountains looming in the distance. “It is an affront,” he said. “Logic and Conformity hold no sway here; reality matters not in this place.”

Ganothil’s smile was rueful. “You would have liked it more in the distant times; a purist like you most certainly would.” He looked toward the mountains. “We preferred it too, before the lies of the cursed spirit and the naiveté of the shamen. We hate this world as much as you, my friend. We would rather see it destroyed outright than suffer one more day remembering its disgrace. Whatever the difference in our methods, I am quite certain that this is a sentiment with which your logisters would agree.” He regarded Viridian coolly. “Perhaps it is something you yourself understand, yes?”

“Perhaps,” Viridian said. He could barely recall the shame he’d felt in another life, standing in judgment before distant cold eyes.

“No matter,” Ganothil said as he returned to the struggling campfire. “You have your part to play. Hurry now, or your failure is guaranteed. But before you go,” he said slyly, “I understood that I was to be compensated for my services to your masters.”

Viridian’s shot passed through the center of the exile’s abdomen, parting the curtain of his soaked robes like a beam of moonlight through clouds. The old man stood motionless, blank surprise frozen on the waxy mask of his features. Slowly he looked down at his torso. A spidery hand gingerly touched the cauterized hole. His head lifted, and he smiled serenely at Viridian. His dark eyes sparkled.

“So hasty...” he whispered and sank to his knees in a spreading pool of black cloth. He fell, and did not stir.

Viridian turned back to the opening in the ground before him. He waited, counting the passing seconds as the rain pelted him. When it did not collapse after three minutes passed, he strode to the kneeling corpse beside the fire and kicked it onto the gasping flames. Ganothil’s robes suffocated them with a hiss of steam.

“Thou hast received thy reward, traitor,” Viridian said and bowed his head slightly. He left the body behind him as he activated the spotlights in his breastplate. Pale beams of light penetrated the darkness of the passageway as Viridian entered its confines, his massive frame little more than crouching...

... by his side and daubing at the warm trickle that ran down his forehead. He could feel more blood trickling out of the tear in his scalp to replace what the cloth claimed from his face..

“Head wounds always bleed more than they should,” Semal said as he removed the soaked scrap of cloth and threw it onto the cold stone. He brought the torch closer. “Look down,” he said gently.

Kazin obeyed, and touched his chin to his chest. The left half of Ganothil’s mask in his hands looked back at him, its crude features frozen in apathy. He winced as Semal gingerly parted the matted hair at the back of his skull, and he heard his cousin hiss slightly as he saw the wound.

“How bad is it?” he asked, not entirely sure if he wanted to know.

“Well, with all you have been through,” said Semal with a trace of humor, “your head is remarkably intact. But the tear is a large one, too large for the blood to clot properly without treatment.”

“No bone is showing, is it?”

“Not that I can see. Is your vision blurry? Do you feel dizzy, tired, nauseous?”

“Yes,” Kazin admitted. “But I doubt it is a result of this injury, just weariness.” He looked at the writhing bag on his hip and felt a new wave of fatigue wash over him. The heart beat strongly through the thin pouch, and with every heavy thump he felt his own spirit waver. He suspected he had far graver wounds in his soul.

Semal sat back on his haunches with a grunt. Kazin looked up to see him chewing on his lower lip. His strong teeth looked very white and long against his cracked and pale mouth. He looked drained, worn thin. His muscles, once full and swelling, were knotted tightly over his bones, clearly visible beneath his tight skin. The bands of red courage paint had faded on his skin to the color of dry soil, as though he livid wound in his chest had sucked all the pigment into itself. The sight of the ugly hole stung Kazin anew.

He must have made some sound, because Semal looked up at him with tired eyes. He smirked.

“Believe me, you look worse than me, cousin,” he said.

“I believe you,” Kazin admitted. “But that is nothing new. You have always been the beautiful one.”

“That wound must be dressed,” Semal said as he rose. He hissed as his ankle buckled.

“Is it broken?”

“No, just sprained, and not very badly.” The grimace on his face spoke a different tale. “I can walk it out. You should be more worried about your head than my foot.”

Kazin nodded toward the wet scarlet scrap beside him on the floor. “That was the last of my bandages, and I already used all the clotting moss on my arm. I have nothing to stop the blood.”

“We can use part of my wrap,” Semal offered. “The suede side should be suitable for holding the blood. Dirty as it is, it is better than nothing,” he said apologetically, drawing the small knife from his belt. “Can you remember when this was almost white? Those months seem like years.” But before he could cut the yellowed skin, Kazin stopped him with a wave of his hand.

“There is not enough spare material there to pad the mask strap,” Kazin said wearily. “Even if you fashion a head bandage, the mask will surely move it unless we build up the strap. We still have one more of them to face, so I cannot afford to be blinded.”

“Let me be your eyes, then,” Semal said. “I shall guide us to it, and then you can trap it.”

“And when it possesses me with a glance because I wear no protection, what do you propose to do?” Kazin asked. “The fennel branches are almost gone, and you cannot wield the heart.” The thin pouch at his hip was getting hot; it felt as though it held embers. He shivered, suddenly cold.

“I may not be a shaman, but the same blood flows in my veins as yours, cousin. Surely I could – ”

“In the time it would take me to train your mind and spirit to bear the strain of magic this terrible,” Kazin said, “we would have starved in this mountain ten times over.”

“Forgive me cousin, but you seem to be having your own difficulties bearing it.”

Kazin nodded. More blood trickled down his neck, and he wiped it with his palm. “It is so tiring, so heavy. I can feel them. I think they are trying to reach out and claim me,” he said. “But I have to keep going, blood loss or no.”

As he tried to rise, something slapped into his face. He fell backward in surprise, his nostrils swimming with the sour smell of unwashed skin. He tore the wrap from his face and stared at his cousin, now nude except for his parang, shoulder pack, and moccasins. Before he could object, Semal was crouching in front of him, arranging the garment into a crude headdress. His hands, quick from years of hunting and training

with weapons, swiftly lashed his belt tightly around Kazin's forehead so that it bisected the center of the scalp wound at the back. He yelped at the strength of the knot.

"There," Semal said. "I think that should stay in place. I'm sorry for not warning you, but I thought that doing it quickly would shorten the pain." He smiled broadly. "But I must say, you look ridiculous."

"Me!?" Kazin cried, his embarrassment getting the best of the sting of his scalp. "I am not the one who now stands naked!"

Semal looked down at himself and shrugged. When he looked back up, Kazin felt some small joy to see that some of the color had returned to his face. He smiled weakly. "I suppose that make quite the pair to see now," he said as he stood. The sudden movement made his head swim, and had Semal not been there to steady him, he would have collapsed.

"Well," Semal said as he tugged on his half of the spirit mask, "the way we came is caved in. We cannot return to the outside. There is only one other passage out of this pit," he paused as he squinted through the mask's eye, "but it looks clear of trouble."

Kazin gently tied his half mask back on. The spell over his left eye distorted his vision momentarily before sharpening into the now familiar shimmer of a mirage. No red lines issued from the far passage, he saw; Semal was correct. Still, he grimaced.

"That tells me that it is most likely a dead end," he said morosely.

"Well, then we sit here and wait to see if we die of thirst before the world ends," Semal said exasperatedly, "and that will not help us save the people, now does it?"

"It may already be too late," Kazin said quietly. "You saw the lights in the valley, cousin. I think you know what they could have meant, even if you pretended then not to know. But I told you of Ganothil's vision. The people may already be gone."

Semal stared at him, and Kazin watched the emotions war in his face. After several seconds of silence, however, he set his jaw and shook his head. "I will not believe that," he said with finality. "And neither should you. Believing that will only make it harder to accomplish what we must do. We must not despair."

"What does it matter what I believe anymore? Things are happening far too quickly. I would not be lying if I told you that part of me is wishing for us to fail and die, just to put an end to all this suffering."

Semal turned away from him, shaking his head. Kazin chewed his lip.

“Do you remember,” Semal said into the darkness, “when we were children? The day we crept away from the village and went for a walk in the verdant, just so I could finally see where the you and the shaman and my father and the rest of the hunters went?”

“What does that have to do with anything now?”

“We were five, maybe six summers,” Semal continued, “and we found that chatternewt hatchling that had fallen from its nest and broken its back. Do you remember how I could not stop crying?”

Kazin saw the small body in his mind, pink and fragile against the dark moss of the verdant floor. It was lying on its bent back, its still toothless mouth had been open, a small blue tongue hung out of one side. Its eyes were closed. One of its forelegs lay across its narrow chest. It had looked to be smiling in its sleep, except for the thin line blood from its mouth.

“You had never seen death up close until that day. You kept asking what the point of living was if that was how it ends, even for something so young.” Kazin looked up; he could still feel his cousin’s hot tears on his bare shoulder. “You realized then you were going to die someday, too. It is a horrible revelation for a child.”

“And you comforted me,” Semal said as he turned back to face his cousin. Kazin saw the fierce light in his eyes. “And you told me that at least that little newt had lived, even for a short time. You said it was a blessing. I remember thinking, ‘My cousin is so wise; I want to be more like him.’”

“Those were the master’s words, not mine.” Kazin’s voice was thick. “I merely repeated what I had heard. It was what he had taught me to say. I am not so certain of their truth, now.”

“*Your* words convinced me, not his. It was your voice I heard under those trees that stopped my tears. It was you who took my pain and gave me strength, and I have never forgotten that.” Semal strode resolutely forward and laid a calloused hand on Kazin’s trembling shoulder. “Let me give it back to you now, my brother,” he said softly, “because I will not let you give up our fight while we are still blessed with life.”

“We will die on this quest,” Kazin said as his face crumbled in the shadow of the yellow hood. “We shall never see our home again.”

“Then let us live our lives well until the end. Let us try.”

Kazin let the tears come freely as his brother embraced him in the gloom.

FINALE:

TRIAGE

*Endless thoughts of what is wrong
Arrive at no conclusions;
On the floor, still nursing wounds,
No sense of self to speak of.
The thought that God has taken sides
On this path to breaking down
Is disconnected, but not alone,
Screaming to the tune of the background noise.
--VNV Nation, "Entropy"*

The line was empty of everything but his dread after the first soft ring. It made his aching stomach jump all the more.

What do you hope to accomplish with this? the new, strident critic said. There was no reply from the counselor.

The memory of the previous night surfaced again. His groin felt clammy, and he shifted uneasily in his computer chair.

Do not worry needlessly, the cold voice in his head continued, adopting a tone not unlike the counselor. *You did nothing wrong. You were careful. You should not feel guilty, as you merely took what she offered you.*

He looked at his reflection in his dresser mirror. His face was cold, bloodless. It looked like a different person.

You cheap, trashy whore.

The hateful thought shattered what was left of his illusions of sophistication.

Again, he felt an overwhelming need for a shower. He had already had three. The hot water had run out in the middle of the last one, and he had scrubbed himself almost raw in the cold. He did not call in to work to tell them he would not be coming in.

Again the phone line chirred in his hear. Alex bit his lip. He squeezed his eyes shut as the last phone conversation he'd had played out again in his memory.

"Hey, there," Dana had said brightly when she had called earlier that afternoon. He had almost dropped the handset.

"Hey, yourself," he'd said listlessly.

A pause. "How are you?"

"I'm doing ok," he lied. "And you?"

"Yeah, me too. A little sore, maybe." A weak laugh. "Ah... You're not too hung over, I hope?"

"No, I'm feeling much better."

"Really? That's good. I had to take about forty aspirin with my coffee when I got up. How'd you get through work?"

“Fine. “You know, under the circumstances, and all. The coffee was free, thank God.”

“Hey, that’s a bonus, right?” Another tense pause, and then she’d let the pent up words fly. “Look, Alex, about last night... well, I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for things to get so damn weird.” A deep breath. “I was worried about you after you left in such a hurry.”

“It’s ok, Dana. I blame myself, anyway, for getting so fucked up. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“You were doing just fine, if you ask me,” she’d said in another attempt at humor. He didn’t laugh. “I’m sorry, I’m being stupid,” she said. “I just ... I need you to know I’m ok with it.”

He took a deep breath.

“Dana, I’ve got to be honest with you. I’m not ok with it.”

“Yeah, I can tell.”

“It’s not you,” he said quickly. “You were great. It’s me. I’m just...” He paused to collect his thoughts. “I’m just not the type of guy that feels comfortable with one-night stands.”

“Alex, I’m so sorry.” Her voice was miserable.

“Look, I like you a lot. You’re attractive, you’re fun, and you’re really sweet to check up on me. That means a lot to me. I’ll admit that a part of me really did enjoy what happened between us. But I’d be lying to you if I told you that I didn’t think last night was a mistake. I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression about me; I know you must think I’m a total prick, and I hate that. But I don’t want to risk hurting you any more than I already have, so I have to tell you this. I hope you can understand.” He’d gripped the phone in white knuckles, waiting for the backlash of anger and blame. He wondered if real rape victims felt as guilty as he did.

Dana said nothing. He couldn’t even hear her breathing.

And then, unbelievably: “That’s probably the nicest thing any guy’s ever said to me. Thank you for saying that, Alex. Really, you have no idea how relieved I am, and how much that means to me.”

And she kept gushing, not a trace of sarcasm in her voice. He’d kept apologizing. She told him how sweet he was again as she’d said goodbye, promising not to “be all weird” the next time she saw him, which she hoped would be soon.

Who took advantage of whom? he’d asked himself when it was over.

What does it matter?

He wondered if he had been reclaiming himself, or losing what was left of him?

Another ring on the open line. He pressed the earpiece into his head until he could hear his own blood whine. Unless they had changed the settings, he knew that he had two more rings before the answering machine cut on. He did not know what he would do if it did.

Opening his eyes, he stared at the mostly blank *Word* document that provided the illumination in his bedroom, reading back over the lines that he couldn't quite remember having typed. It's funny, he thought, how even though these tiny black marks form grammatically cohesive sentences, my brain still can't make sense of them.

"Viridian is the hardest choice," he mumbled, reading the first line aloud. "What the fuck does that mean? I like the color; it's got a great name. But how can it be a choice? Am I picking out drapes?" Alex shivered; something was making him feel inexplicably cold.

"Kazin must remember his truth?" he asked and shook his head. That name was familiar; he'd used it in dozens of fantasy stories to represent quiet, magician types. He used it like a placeholder name until he could think of a better one. But no other name would come to mind now. He scowled and tugged on his goatee, not feeling the hairs he pulled.

The third and final line, however, had been the one that had coerced him into picking up the phone and dialing her number. Seeing those words glowing on the screen had scared him sober, despite the half-drained bottle of Maker's Mark on the floor.

The phone rang a fourth time. One more to go, he told himself. The letters on the screen leapt at him. His still-woozy stomach cramped again as though the dusty mushrooms were still inside it.

Alexander Harold Jamison Jr., 24, found dead on Monday June 4, 2002 of self-inflicted wounds, survived by no one who gives a fuck because he went nuts and killed them all.

It was tomorrow's date, what should have been his four-year anniversary with Kari.

It might have made him laugh if he'd remembered typing it, and if part of him didn't think it was an appropriate ending for his story.

The final ring was followed by faint electric buzz, and Kari's message began to play to the tune of idiot jingle that had been on the machine since high school. He switched off the phone.

You didn't really expect her to be there, did you? Not when she's so busy with what's-his-name, going to the latest movies, eating at your old hang-outs, fucking him silly on the kitchen floor, the coffee table, the leather loveseat, the –

He flung the phone across his bedroom with a cry of disgust. It hit the wall above the bureau, slightly to the left of the gouge the beer bottle had made. The plastic casing shattered; fragments rattled down the wall. He wound his fingers in his hair and propped his elbows on the desk, actively fighting the urge to put his fist into his monitor.

On the other side of the pulled curtains he could hear the afternoon rain on his window. The room was eerily quiet. No shouted threats, no angry pounding on the wall. He was alone with the voices in his head.

She's gone, they whispered. That is all that matters. Save at least some of your dignity and just admit defeat.

He got up from his desk, determined to try for sleep again, and still certain that none would come. Nonetheless, the rumpled bed beckoned, seeming to offer a haven from the persecuting thoughts. He stole a glance at his alarm clock: 11:21 AM. At least it was Sunday, and he didn't have to work tomorrow.

"This will all be over soon," he said as he crashed...

... along the twisting black passage as quickly as the constricting walls and ceiling would allow. The soft earth had given way to stone, and in some places the white sparks of his armor striking the cold, dark rock lit his way almost as brightly as his blazing searchlights. His HUD was still completely clear of targets; nothing living moved through the earth with him. His power consumption had benefited from the lack of fighting. The tech readout over his violet view informed him that his reactor still held just under three quarters of its maximum charge. He was not so inhuman as to not feel a twinge of satisfaction at his efficiency, especially in light of the carnage he had wreaked upon the unclean.

I commend your masters for producing so effective a killer, the informant had said.

The only thing that bothered him was the portion of the readout that displayed his geographical positioning and mission time elapsed. Both his speed and the distance he had traveled were showing as “unknown” in flashing yellow blocks. The chronometer was even more puzzling: the time was fluctuating randomly, sometimes displaying ten hours, sometimes showing over three standard months. The human portions of his brain could not remember the actual time since he’d stepped through the rift. He wondered if his CPU had suffered a malfunction.

Distance is a complex concept in this part of the world, a voice very close to his own sounded in his head.

This will all be over soon, his own voice replied.

Viridian stopped. His eyes swept the darkness with cones of black light, looking for heat signatures. He had not spoken.

His motion scanner was clear. The lights of his chest showed only more empty stone.

“Myriad and devious are the forms mine enemies shall take,” his loudspeaker blared. The sentence echoed through the cramped tunnel, distorting until his aural filters no longer identified it as his own voice. His neutralizer pumped a massive dose of calming serums into his bloodstream. His rebreather thumped rhythmically, the only sound.

A faint tremor of tectonic motion registered on the seismic scanners in his feet. The earth was shifting again around him.

Always rearranging itself, the Logisters echoed in his steel skull. *In direct defiance of permanence. The autonomic functions of a living organism.*

Viridian resumed his forward charge; he wanted to be out of this unpredictable parody of reality as quickly as possible. The dark-veined stone sailed past his vision, lit by increasing bursts of sparks as Viridian increased his speed.

Suddenly the walls rushed outward and the ceiling soared. Viridian slowed reflexively, his weapon already shedding its pale light and bolstering the yellow searchlights. The cavern was large, he saw as the topographical scans resolved in his vision, but not immense. The rough stone walls had been carefully worked into the resemblance of fitted stone; the sight of grid-work was as comforting as it was incongruous in this alien world. The angles of the walls were true, he noted, at this end of the rectangular chamber, but as it stretched onward to the exit at the far end the excavation became more haphazard and crude. Detecting no life signs, he deactivated his cannon even as his optics found the first of the alcoves cut into the walls.

Standing like a sentinel in the alcove was a human skeleton. A scan of the bones informed him that it was a male, advanced in years, and based on carbon decay, incredibly ancient. What held his attention, though, were the remnants of tarnished and pitted bronze armor that still hung on the moldering bones, almost hiding the corroded wires of obsolete cybernetics. Viridian stepped closer; his footsteps clanked loudly in the still air of the mausoleum.

“Alpha White,” the legend over the alcove proclaimed. The letters were in an old script, but the precision and care put into their carving made them still legible. “First Priest of Law, Abolisher of Darkness, Savior of His People.” The skull grinned at Viridian’s recognition. His mind recalled the image of the shriveled Logister floating in its suspension tank; he could see its ancient eyes blazing with inhuman wisdom, a tiny smile curling around the tubes in its slack mouth.

“Blasphemy,” Viridian said to the corpse. His metal right hand powdered the skull. The bones collapsed, brittle metal armor shattered into glittering flakes on the smooth stone floor.

He turned and began to walk past the other alcoves toward the far end of the chamber, sweeping the body in each with his dead gaze. Initially they all displayed recognizable features: cyber-optic lenses, the tattered remains of an armored greatcoat, even an ancient rifle and ammunition belts. But as he progressed the

signs of deviancy in the bodies increased. Jewelry of tooth and bone replaced the implants, gnarled sticks and crooked blades usurped the armor and firearms. And the legends above each one degraded in turn, both in content and execution, slipping from easily readable codification into the meaningless scratching of the savages. “High Arbitrator B’lue,” one read. Three alcoves down, “Elder Shar-truz.” Another five, almost illegible, “Blessed Shaman Laverian.” Soon the legends above the crude alcoves disappeared, replaced instead with a simple bluish-white drawing of a female figure.

Viridian paused before the painted tableau that decorated the last expanse of flat wall in the chamber. He recalled seeing similarly-executed examples of *aesthetica* in the Halls of Arbitration, but rendered in the purity of metal and light instead of crude pigment. That this one was blasphemous was nature was obvious. His dead forehead creased in a frown as he glared at the unclean image with rising outrage.

The luminous female figure dominated the mural. The details of her face were indistinct, as was the rest of her anatomy; the artist had taken great pains to evoke the notion that her body was shedding light, glowing from within. The figure’s arms were thrust before her, projecting stylized expanding waves of energy against six heavily blurred, multi-limbed inhuman shapes. Three of the smears were dark, the other three almost white. Behind the central woman thronged tiny human figures, their arms raised in celebration, and standing closest to the pale giantess was a slightly taller man, rendered in melted bronze that caught Viridian’s light in orange sparks.

Before he could smite the picture, however, his cybernetic systems restored his clarity with a barely audible chemical hiss.

“I am the instrument of reality’s will,” he said to the tiny representation on the mural as he turned toward the exit and charged...

“... with the guardianship of the Grove and the spirit that watches over all the people. That was the nature of the covenant,” he mumbled, the rest of his words trailing into an unintelligible buzzing of lips and tongue. His head felt as though it weighed eight stone, and his feet sent aching waves of cold up his legs.

Semal nudged him. “Go on,” he urged through chattering teeth. There was the sound of skin rapidly rubbing on skin as his cousin tried to regain warmth through friction. Their last torch had burned out some hours ago. “Keep talking. Tell me more. This is interesting.”

“Oh, what is the point?” Kazin’s fingers slid blindly along the irregular wall of the tunnel. He pressed closer to the stone, letting it take some of his weight as he stumbled onward. “The old ways no longer matter. They are merely stories now, memories with no meaning. They only hurt me to speak them, and if it is our fate to freeze under the skin of the world, than I for one would like to not suffer any more than I must.” He felt the master’s heart lurch against his leg, and he screwed his face with disgust. “Perhaps it is better that the old ways die with me. They have brought us nothing but sorrow.”

“That is not helpful,” Semal shot back. His fumbling hand found Kazin’s shoulder and gave it a rough shake. “You need to have faith. I know you are tired. So am I. We are both fighting against the cold, hunger, and fatigue, but I do not complain.”

“You are not fighting the same foes as I am, Semal,” Kazin said. Semal eased his grip and let go. “I know,” he said softly. “I wish I could take your burden for you. I know that is what is making you despair.”

As if in response to the words, Kazin felt the heart shift wetly in his belt pouch. “I do not think I can hold out much longer against them. Not without rest.”

“We will rest when we get out of this tunnel,” Semal said behind him. “That will be very soon, I am certain.”

“Semal, please...”

“I swear to you, Kazin, it is getting warmer. Can you not feel it? And feel! There is that breeze again! You had to feel it that time!”

Kazin smiled thinly in the darkness. “You are just trying to give me hope.”

Semal paused. "It is what you need," he said. "And it is all I have left to give you."

The blackness was silent save for the shuffling of their feet and the quiet groaning of the earth around them. Finally, Kazin spoke.

"How long have we been walking?"

"I do not know," Semal said. "What meaning does time have in a place like this?" His voice was small.

"Do we have any water left? My skin is empty. I hate to take any from you, but if you can spare it..." The makeshift bandage on his head had begun to itch; he tried to adjust it and winced as the dried blood pulled against his wound.

"I lost my water skin fighting in the cavern against that slimy demon. It slid down the pit when I fell." Semal sighed. "It had been almost empty, anyway, so it is not a great loss. I am sorry, though."

Kazin listened to the irregular drag of Semal's feet behind him. "How is your ankle?"

"It hurts," Semal said. "I might have torn something." The sound of his pace quickened. "I look forward to resting it when we are outside again."

"And that will be soon?"

"Most certainly. The breeze is getting stronger."

Kazin smiled. He almost wished hard enough to feel air moving against his frigid skin.

The cousins trudged on in darkness for several more minutes without speaking. With every step he took, Kazin felt more of his energy drain away. The dark foreign thoughts buzzing at the back of his mind pressed harder. He was reminded of the whittling he used to do as a child, gradually shaving away an ironwood stick until it was sharp enough to be used as a needle. Now he was the needle, and the wood of his spirit is almost whittled away.

"There is one thing that I wish to discuss with you, something that I think you do not wish to talk about," Semal said at length. "Forgive me, but I feel that I must ask nonetheless."

Kazin smiled. "What is your question, my brother?" He heard Semal's pace quicken at the title, and a ghost of pride swelled inside his heart. He regretted that it had taken so long for them to call each other by that name.

“I was just wondering,” he said, “why the spirit would abandon us.”

Kazin sighed. “I have tried not to dwell on that,” he admitted. “I feared that doing so would make me despair and be unable to complete this insane quest. But it has not left my mind since my last journey to the grove.”

“Sorry,” Semal said. “You do not need to speak of it.”

“No, I believe I need to voice these thoughts. Mind you, I do not have the answer to your question, only my own theories.”

“Then I would like to hear them, if you will share.”

“A part of me wants to believe that something happened that drove it away. Perhaps some cataclysm, like a star falling, something we could not have foreseen. Another part of me wonders if the magics of the covenant might have been flawed in some way that we did not see at the time of their weaving. That might have led to a breaking of the bonds, and the spirit might have slipped away. Or perhaps the shaman did something to offend the spirit, and it punished us all by leaving.”

“What could that have been?” Semal asked.

“I have no idea, and that is the worst part of it. But then, another part of me wonders if Ganothil was right – that nothing is permanent, and all things to come to an end, even great things like our bond with the spirit.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Look at the chatternewt.”

Kazin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “There is one more explanation that I am reluctant to voice.”

“Then do not say it. You have already answered my question.”

“I have already begun to let my fears out, and stopping now would not do any good. Besides, the last thought I have is the one that has kept me going more than anything else, given me strength when I needed it.”

“What is it?”

“It may be impure for me to think this, but I cannot help but wonder if perhaps the spirit simply grew tired of the shamen, the people, the covenant, and our world.” Kazin felt the pouch jump again, but this time it

seemed to be leaping away from him. “Maybe it left on its own, for its own reasons. Or maybe it used us for some unseen end, and cast us aside once we had served our purpose.”

“That is not a comforting thought,” Semal said.

“No, it is not. But it is one that has fueled my anger at what is happening to our world, and made me want to do something about it rather than sit in the dust of the blight and moan. After all, we cannot always assume that everything is our fault. Sometimes things happen without us doing anything to deserve them.”

Kazin fumbled in the darkness until his hand contacted Semal’s shoulder. “Believe it or not, speaking these thoughts has actually made me feel somewhat better. Thank you for having the courage to ask me.”

“Thank you for answering,” Semal replied. Kazin felt his hand squeeze his own. The beating of the heart against his hip weakened. I think I understand how you work a little more, he broadcast his thoughts at it. Perhaps he did have the means to fight them. The darkness in his eyes seemed to flicker in response.

A warm breeze suddenly stirred the stagnant chill around Kazin’s ankles, making him stop in alarm. Semal also froze. He heard a creak of the leather harness as Semal gripped the hilt of his blade..

“Stay close,” Kazin said, his own breath caught in his throat. “Whatever happens, I will be beside you.”

Again a warm puff of air buffeted them, and this time there was no mistaking the freshness it carried into the earth. Kazin’s jaw dropped.

“Tell me I did not imagine that this time,” Semal said.

“I feel the breeze now,” Kazin said. “You were right! We must be near an exit!”

Beside him Semal whooped. Not even the dryness of his throat could disguise the joy in his cry. Strong arms wrapped around Kazin’s shaking body. Semal lifted him in a bear hug, only stumbling slightly on his injured foot. His bare skin was hot against Kazin’s.

“Have faith,” he laughed. “I told you, have faith, and we shall be fine!” He let Kazin down. Despite the darkness he could almost imagine he saw Semal’s grinning face.

“I do not know whether I should laugh or cry,” Kazin said, his own smile threatening to split his tight face. The mask shifted over his cheek; he barely felt the wound pull on the back of his scalp.

“Hurry, brother!” Semal shouted as he limped quickly away up the steadily rising slope of the tunnel. “We shall not die in this stinking hole! Blessed ancestors, I can even smell water!”

Kazin started after his voice, every hurried step making his bones ache. He relished the discomfort; it was life he felt, life in all its painful glory. His heart sang. On his hip the master’s heart beat faster. Another warm draft caressed his face, carrying with it the smell of fresh rain and the faint perfume of familiar flowers.

His smile faltered with his steps. Semal’s cries of joy began to fade ahead of him. Kazin breathed deeply, his nose straining around the light, sweet scent, a mere ghost of the bouquet that had greeted his nostrils every time he and the master had...

His mind spouted denials as he dragged a finger across the worn surface of Ganothil’s mask. He felt the chalk-fine dust slide across the wood grain, and suddenly his mouth filled with the taste of ashes. It was not possible that they could be there, unless –

The stone around him groaned softly, almost inaudibly; he could feel the subtle movement beneath him as the pull of gravity was ever-so-slightly altered by the shifting of the floor.

Topographical surveys the probes have performed have confirmed that the very ground moves, often independent of the surface, a demonic voice rasped in his head. The heart fluttered against his hip; its rapid beating felt like laughter.

“Semal, wait!” Kazin called into the darkness ahead of him as he pelted blindly up the tunnel. The thin scrim of dust worming its way into his throat made his voice tight and weak. “Semal, stop! We’re going...”

...to the club tomorrow night, and she's gonna come too. You better be there, man, or I'm gonna catch hell," the voice said. "You have no idea how much shit she gave me, how much I had to push her to come out. If you don't show, I'm never going to hear the end of it."

He shut his eyes.

"Hello?" the voice on the phone said uncertainly. "Dude, are you even fucking listening to me?"

"Yeah, Erik, I'm listening," Alex sighed. "But I don't think you are. How many times and in how many fucking languages do I have to tell you I'm not interested? I can do English, and maybe French."

"Ok, man, you don't need to yell at me," he said. "If you want me to leave you alone so you can go on stickin' it to Dana, that's fine by me."

"Ah Christ, she told you?"

"Yeah," Erik said, laughing. "She told me about what a perfect damn gentleman you were, too. She was serious, too. I couldn't believe it. Talk about sad. Fuckin' about made me cry."

Alex rubbed his dried-out, aching eyes. Looking at the monitor was becoming an experience similar to holding his face in front of a campfire. "I didn't want any of that to happen," he said with resignation. "I mean, I literally woke up inside her."

"Ah, don't worry about it. It's happened to me before, too. I already yelled at her about it, called her a rapist cunt."

That got a smile out of Alex. "Kind of harsh, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but who cares?" Erik said in his happy-go-lucky voice. "She still let me do her."

"Man, do I feel special," he said as he erased the majority of the paragraph he'd just written.

"She's just looking for someone to make her feel good about herself, that's all. I'll do my part. Plus, it was a pretty good lay. Dumb ass tattoos, though. Especially that frog. I'd never pay good money to have something like that put on me."

"Mm." He saw that he was getting purple in his writing again. He trimmed out some adjectives. The keys clicked loud enough to be heard over the line.

"You sound a little distracted," Erik said. "What are you, typing?"

“Yeah, I’ve been writing. It started this afternoon when I wrote this crazy shit while I was hammered. I don’t remember doing it; maybe it was the acid or the ‘shrooms still fucking with me. Anyway, something clicked when I saw it.” He stretched back in his chair. It had stopped raining. “I haven’t been able to stop.”

“This is for school, right?” the question came, distorted by a sudden burst of static..

“Yeah. Believe me, it’s not for fun. I don’t know what I’m trying to do here, but I think it’s something I’ve gotta say. And there seems to be a lot of it, too. Maybe I can turn it into something I can pass off as a thesis.”

“That’s cool. What’s it about?”

“Not sure yet.” Alex looked at the time: 4:46 PM. He’d been writing for over four hours; it was the longest stretch he had had in over a year. “Right now it’s pretty stream-of-consciousness stuff.”

“Rhoda-fuck-me-Wanda-*what?*” Erik laughed. Alex couldn’t help but laugh too.

“You know, just straight-up thoughts, really loose and unstructured.”

“Dude, you’ve totally lost me.”

“Ah, it’s not important. Not yet, anyway.” Alex paused. I think it’s about me, he almost said. But he wasn’t quite sure which version of himself it was about.

“That’s cool,” Erik said. “So, are you gonna be there tomorrow night, or what?”

“For fuck’s sake!” Alex cried. “Give it a rest already. And no, I don’t think I’ll be there. Right now, I just...”

Went nuts and killed them all.

“...want to stay in and keep writing, you know, see where I end up.”

Self-inflicted wounds.

Alex looked away from the screen. The scar on his wrist was itching again.

“All right,” Erik said, his voice exasperated. “I guess that’s ok. To be honest, I don’t know if Lea’s gonna come either. She really doesn’t seem to think that anybody worth her time would hang out at a gay bar every Monday night.”

Alex scanned past the fourteen pages he'd written and back down to the final page where he had saved his earlier cryptic musings. The last line leapt out at him again, and black sickness flooded back into him. His mouth felt filled with dust. He took another sip of water.

Maybe I should go, he thought. I mean, what can happen if I'm out?

Killed them all, the hateful voice purred.

That's not me. I'm not capable of that sort of shit, he thought

Really? Maybe we should just wait and see.

"You still there?" Erik asked.

"Listen," Alex said. "I'm not going to promise anything. If I feel that I can make it, or if I just run out of steam here, I'll probably show up. For a little while, maybe. But I want you to understand that there's some pretty heavy shit that's been on my mind lately. If I'm going to make it, I've got to deal with it first."

"You wanna talk about it or something? I'm pretty good at listening."

Go ahead. Tell him. It'll be fun.

You can laugh all you want to now, he thought viciously. I'm still going to call her. I'm finally going to get the truth, and then we'll see who's laughing.

Oh yes. We most certainly will, the dark critic answered. He could almost see his blood on Its razor-blade smile.

"No," Alex said through clenched teeth. He relaxed his voice. "I think this is just something I have to do for myself. It's been kind of driving me crazy for a while now."

Good one!

"All right, dude, do what you gotta do. Just don't stand me up, or I swear to God I'll..."

“... eradicate all traces of the deviant, the mutant, and any who would stand in the way of the one sacred Truth,” he chanted as he scaled the near-vertical shaft toward the stalagmite ringed opening far above him. The opening was a fanged mouth at the end of a stone gullet rendered in violet and black across his HUD. The droning litany provided the perfect cadence for his insect-like ascent. The sound of his own electronic voice also chased away the vestiges of human unease he felt at the oppressive silence.

His power consumption rate was still well within acceptable parameters, but Viridian saw that his reactor was only slightly above half its maximum capacity. Even though it annoyed him, he slowed his ascent to conserve his energy. He would not succumb to the zealot’s folly and expend too much energy to ensure victory. He hauled himself higher, the servomotors of his arm whining under the strain all his 264.72 kilograms.

The stale human pheromones in the air were growing stronger. The airborne particle analyzer of his rebreather informed him that they were less than two days old.

Soon, our most favored child, the Logisters’ voices rang in his head. Soon thou shalt have thy vengeance on the one that hast brought thee to this state, the one that hast cost thee thy humanity and rendered thee into this form of metal perfection and electrical purity. Soon thy troubled mind shall once more taste peace when thou dost purge reality of its most dire enemy.

In his mind he could see the faces of the Logisters looking down on their most devout servant with approval. He felt a pang of loss that he would in all probability not be returning to receive their praise, that he may never again bask in the radiance of their gazes.

“Service is reward enough for the pious,” he chastised himself as he buried the bayonet- spike of his weapon arm into the rock face. The high-carbon blade took his weight with only the slightest bow, and he hauled himself up another meter. The sides of the pit were gradually becoming more slanted, and they were broken sporadically by narrow ledges that were littered with the broken bones of humans and less identifiable animals. His eyes sent out twin cones of purple light.

The image of the corpse in the alcove resurfaced unbidden in his mind. “Alpha White. First Priest of Law.”

“A deviant forgery,” he said aloud, his voice caroming from the walls. “The most holy Logister White resideth in the heart of the city with its Brothers. May they evermore reign with wisdom over all who have faith in the one reality.”

Whatever the difference in our methods, I am quite certain this is a sentiment with which your logisters would agree. Ganothil’s face smiled in his memory, captured by his image recorder. His eyes shimmered like pools of black water.

Viridian’s heavy right foot came down on a deflated sack on the next shallow ledge. He heard a muffled pop, followed by the splash of water. Looking down he saw a primitive canteen made of animal skin beneath his foot. Fresh water still leaked from its burst side.

They would be thirsty, he realized. Thirst dulls combat efficiency.

The cauterized nerves that once led to Viridian’s lips twitched with chemical-electricity as they attempted to make his missing mouth smile. His rebreather thumped faster as he continued his ascent...

...toward the still pool at the center of the collapsed chamber. Sheets of white dust, luminous in the gray light, sifted down onto the broken stone of the cavern floor. He ran his hands over the tangled roots that cascaded around him in the gloom. He felt the withered wood flake away in his palms. Through the rotting cracks in the stone above him, he could see the circle of entwined trees, stabbing the dead talons of their branches into the monochrome sky. The sweet ghosts of blossoms drifted on the breeze. His dry eyes burned.

“But how?” Semal cried from the center of the shallow water. He wiped at his mouth again, trying to remove the last taste of the fetid liquid. “How can we be here? Why are we here? This makes no sense!”

“We are here because the land brought us,” Kazin said thickly. He looked at the gray-white ashes that coated his palms. “When we were underground, it moved us. For whatever reason, it brought us here.” He let his hands fall to his sides. The master’s heart beat steadily, mockingly. “I think it wants us to die.” His head sagged under the unbearable weight of Ganothil’s mask, and he sank to his knees.

“Why?” Semal said. “Why, when everything we have done was to try to save it from this... this...” His voice broke. “What is the point, what does it mean?” he asked. “Why torment us?”

“I do not know anymore,” Kazin said thickly. “Maybe there is no point. Maybe suffering is the only thing left that is real in this cursed world.”

“We need to think,” Semal said. Angrily, he wiped away his tears and rubbed his hands together. “We cannot survive much longer without water and food. We need to find some first. Then we can decide what to do next.”

“This is the blight, Semal. There is no food here, no water we can drink. There is nothing.”

“What about rain? It has rained much lately. Surely if we wait...”

“It will fall through the dust in the air, and be just as foul as the water you stand in.”

“Then maybe there is some sap left in these roots...”

“Oh, stop it!” Kazin roared, his voice strained and cracking. “Can you not see that this is the end, that we are dead already? Why can you not accept that?”

“Because I cannot! I will not!” Semal shouted back, splashing toward the edge of the pool. “I will not stop fighting, not when we are so close to the end! The people are depending on us!”

“We will not find the last one! We never had a chance, and it was stupidity to even try!” The heart beat furiously at his side.

“You wish to quit? Fine. Give me the heart. I will use the mask and —”

“What good is this,” Kazin said as he tore his half of the mask from his head, “if you are going to die of thirst?” The wound on his head, torn open by the sudden removal of the mask, began to bleed. Bright red drops spattered his shoulders below the flapping yellow hood-bandage. “Besides, have you seen any threads lately? I have not. And even if you do manage to get out of this pit alive, you will not find it in time to stop the metal monster that follows us, the one that has already killed our people and made this whole quest pointless!” The master’s heart pulsed insistently, and his thoughts became acid. “I told you to stay behind,” he hissed. “If you had listened, maybe you could have done something when that fiend came for them, instead of hold me back.”

“I warn you, cousin, do not say such things. Do not push me.” Semal’s face was pale.

“Or what? You can do nothing to me that is worse than this!” He glared at the broken mask in his hand. A drop of his blood fell on its dirty white cheek. Disgust surged within him, and he drew it behind his head. “If you still think this worthless piece of wood will help you, then take it with the blessing of the last shaman!” he screamed and flung it at Semal.

The warrior ducked the flimsy missile and turned on his cousin with fury. His hands knotted in fists as he splashed out of the pool. Kazin surged to his feet, rage that was not his own giving his exhausted limbs strength, flowing from the grisly totem he carried. The mask struck the water behind Semal with a small splash.

It rang as it struck submerged metal. The sound was deep, hollow in the stillness..

Semal froze, the anger bleeding from his face. Kazin felt his own face go slack in surprise. He looked past his cousin at the ripples in the gray water. The weak light glinted on something just below the surface, something shining.

Dizzy, Kazin shuffled toward the pool, every step in time with the throbbing at his leg. Semal joined him, and together they waded through the stagnant water to the location of the object. They took position on either side of the bronze glint.

“Try to find a good grip,” Semal said, bending at the waist. His eyes were peaked in his pale face.

Kazin felt smooth metal under his fingers. Running his hands across the surface, he felt deep lines etched into the cold, curving face. He located a jagged edge and hooked his fingers around it. He barely felt the metal bite into his hands.

“Got it?” Semal asked. His jaw was tight

“Yes,” Kazin said. “On three. One, two...”

They hauled as hard as their drained limbs would allow. Kazin’s vision dimmed as darkness threatened to choke out his consciousness. He felt half of the object lift away from the rest of it with a soft grind. Semal’s face swam before him, strained and white.

“The shore,” he hissed through clenched teeth. Kazin nodded; the motion sent more drops of blood falling from the tattered edge of his headdress. They disappeared as they hit the gray water, their color lost to the blight.

Keeping the metal object at knee height, the cousins shuffled toward the shore. As soon as they were out of the water, they let go, and the two-foot wide hemisphere of bronze clanged loudly on the stone floor. Semal rested his hands on his knees, panting. Kazin knelt, running his stinging fingers over the burnished surface, tracing the sigils in its curving face.

“These are warding glyphs,” he said. “I saw similar ones in the bane’s cave.”

“Look there,” Semal said, pointing to the side closest to him. Kazin crawled around to where he was pointing, and his breath caught.

Embedded in the metal, boring into it like a worm into an apple, was a thin root. The pale white wood had turned black where it entered the metal. As soon as he saw it, Kazin knew what had happened to the grove.

“Help me turn it over,” he said. “I want to see inside it.”

“What about the other piece?”

“Semal please!” Kazin said, his voice little more than a whisper.

“All right. Grab the edge,” Semal said as he knelt beside him. The hemisphere resisted at first, but with their combined strength they were able to raise it onto its edge and ease it gently back down.

“What does this mean?” Semal said as he stared at the mask-shaped hollow in the metal. “What was contained in this?”

“Give me your half,” Kazin said. Numb certainty made his voice flat. He felt the cold wood in his hand as Semal obeyed. Kazin knelt before the bronze shell. His heartbeat matched the one in his belt pouch as he lowered Ganothil’s broken spirit mask into the recession. It fit perfectly, filling half of the hole.

“We have to get out of here,” he said.

“And go where, shaman?” the thin voice said from above them. Both Kazin and Semal flinched at the coldness in that familiar voice. They looked upwards at the ragged gray cracks in the cavern ceiling, and at the gaunt black figure that was looking down at them. A chilling smile crept across the lined face. Worn yellow teeth glittered.

“You,” Semal said. “But how...”

“Silence, brute,” Ganothil spat, as he stepped over the lip of the hole. The air took his weight. Slowly he began to levitate down into the cave. “You should have listened to your cousin and lay down and died when you had the chance. It would have saved you so much trouble.” His black eyes found Kazin. He smiled wider. “You asked so many questions, Kazin. Are you satisfied with your answer?”

Numbly, Kazin rose. His own heartbeat fluttered. The master’s heart seared his skin through the bag that held it. “You are the last,” he breathed.

“Very good,” Ganothil said, his voice black honey. “But not quite true. It certainly took you long enough to figure it out. I was beginning to wonder if...”

“...we were ever going to hear from you again!” she said, laughing. “You know I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately, wondering how you’ve been.”

“Oh, I can’t complain too much,” he lied into the phone. His reflection looked back at him mockingly. His eyes glittered darkly. “How are things with you, Jeanie?”

“Oh pretty good, pretty good,” Kari’s mother said brightly. “You know Gary and I got married this past April, right?”

“No, I didn’t know that,” he admitted morosely. “I’ve been sort of... you know, out of touch lately. With the old hometown, that is. That’s great though, congratulations.”

“Thanks. I guess a lot of things have changed since you were last here.”

Are you sure you want these answers? It’s not too late to just hang up, save yourself the pain, and get lost in your distraction, at least for a little while longer.

To Alex, the eyes of the mirror seemed to be smiling at him.

Let my resolve be iron, he thought.

“Yeah, things have been different, haven’t they? Sometimes I don’t even recognize myself, that’s how much my life’s changed.”

“Believe me, I know what you mean,” Jeanie said. A pause. “Hey, how’s grad school? You should be finishing up soon, right? Getting your master’s?”

Keep lying. Soon you’ll believe it yourself, the voice in his head said. He could almost hear its laughter.

“It’s going ok, I suppose. To tell the truth, though, my heart’s just not been in it lately.”

“Well, I know you’ll do fine. I always knew you were destined for good things. I told Kari that when...” Alex heard her catch her breath; he could imagine the pained look on her face as she bit her tongue.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Alex,” she said. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“It’s ok, Jean.”

Liar, his thoughts grinned. *Can’t stop now, can you?*

“No, I’m sorry. It’s just so good to hear your voice, it made me feel like things were... well, the way they used to be. We’ve missed you. She may not say it, but I know she does too.” Another pause. “She still keeps the ring in her jewelry box by the bed.”

“Yeah, she tried to give it back. I told her to keep it.” He didn’t add how he’d done so out of spite. He’d hoped the ring would always remind Kari of what she’d given up..

Her mother sighed. “I could tell she didn’t really want to give it back. I told her to hang onto it in case she changed her mind again.” Jeanie’s voice sounded tired. “I still hope she might.”

Alex pressed his ear into the cell phone. “I’ve missed you too,” he said. “But I kind of doubt she’ll change her mind.”

“You never know what the future holds, I always say. All we can do is hope for the best.”

Except you can’t do that anymore, can you? his eyes jeered at him. Alex turned his back on the mirror.

“Jeanie,” he began, swallowing hard, “I know it was probably a bad idea for me to call, but I wanted to at least try to talk to Kari, just one last time. I think there are still some things that we need to... take care of. We never really wrapped things up, you know. Is she... available?”

Silence on the line. He listened to failure’s ragged breaths, and realized they were his own.

“She’s not here right now, Alex,” Jeanie said, her voice flat, modulated. “I don’t know when she’ll be back.”

“I see,” his dead voice replied. “She’s never there anymore, is she?”

“No she isn’t, but trust me, it’s not what you think.”

Of course it is. She’s just lying so it doesn’t hurt. You can relate to that, can’t you?

“Is that so?” he asked. Somewhere inside him a black hole yawned a little wider.

“Alex,” Jeanie said. Another heavy sigh, this time exasperated. “I swear, I don’t even know who that girl is anymore, but it is not my daughter!” she all but shouted into the phone. “I don’t even think she knows who she is, she’s so damn screwed up.”

“What do you mean?” A twinge of concern lit the blackness. Alex turned back to the mirror; his face looked slightly more human. “Is she all right? It’s not drugs again, is it?”

“Worse,” her mother said. “Religion.”

“What?” he blurted.

“Alex, she’s not here because she’s off getting ready for church. She’s got her Catholic confirmation mass tonight at St. Aloysius.”

Alex added a sixth moment to the number of times the world stood still for him. Only this time, it didn’t ease on the brakes; it came to a screeching halt. He gaped into the mirror; the look on his face might have made him laugh had he not been the one wearing that blank mask of surprise.

His darker side recovered first. *Oh, that’s just too rich! That’s even better than we thought! Dumped for a 2,000-year-old dead guy! How can you compete?*

“But Kari’s a Wiccan,” he said numbly. “She hates organized religion. The Southern Baptist Bible-humpers burned her in effigy outside her window at college, for Christ sakes!”

“She’s nothing like she was before,” Jeanie said. Alex could hear the quiet concern in her voice even above the cruel laughter in his head. “She’s been ‘saved.’ She spends all her time at Bible study now. Hell, last week she actually had lunch with a nun to discuss joining a convent! Can you believe that? A nun!”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You and me both. Gary says that it’s just a phase, she’ll come to her senses. You know how she gets addicted to things. But I swear, she’s just not the same person anymore.” A pause. “That’s why she left you, Alex. She told me that your relationship wasn’t based on the right things, if you know what I mean.”

““Not the right things!”” he shouted, finally losing his temper. His heartbeat was furious. “What about the fact that we liked all the same stuff, that we had known each other for eight years? That we fucking loved each other? Those aren’t the ‘right reasons?’”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Alex. I didn’t see it myself until it was already set in her mind, but you know how she never tells me anything. Maybe if you hadn’t been away at school you could have seen what was happening to her. She was a lot closer to you than she’s ever been to me.”

It happened because you were too busy to look behind you, because you assumed that everything was perfect, that your precious reality was secure! The voice in his head was triumphant, murderous.

He turned back to the mirror. His own eyes fired accusations at him.

“Alex?” Kari’s mother asked.

“Why didn’t she just tell me?” he asked. His reflection swam in his vision; his eyes looked black through the tears.

“I think she was afraid of how you’d react. That, and she didn’t want to hurt you. It was wrong, I know. I tried to get her to call you so many times; I said that you deserved to know the truth. But she always just cried and said you’d never understand.”

And she was right. You never could understand that it might not be about you, that she might have a life outside of you. You never even gave it a thought. Such arrogance; look where it’s gotten you.

“Alex? Hello, Alex? Are you still there?” The cell phone was an alien object in his hand, the voice a stranger, a ghost for all he knew.

“No, I’m not,” he said quietly

“I probably shouldn’t have told you,” Jeanie said. “But I just couldn’t pretend I didn’t know. Are you going to be all right?”

“I think it’s too late for that,” he said and hung up.

He stood in his bathroom, his head hung, his gaze on the empty eye of the sink drain. It seemed to go on forever.

Well now you know, the mirror said softly. Alex looked up. His face was smiling back at him. Black holes were where its eyes should have been. The reflection crossed its arms and shook its head. *I tried to tell you, better to just accept defeat. But you had to know.*

“It wasn’t me,” Alex said. His tongue was dry. “I didn’t do anything.”

True, the demon in the mirror said. Its voice was the critic and counselor together. *But you let it happen, all the same. We both know that ignorance is never an excuse. And don’t fool yourself into thinking that your own viciousness with her when she started to pull away didn’t speed things along.*

“There was nothing I could have done,” he said to himself. His voice was fading.

You can’t say that for certain; after all, you weren’t there. And when you were, you didn’t try.

“I’ve flushed my whole life away for something I couldn’t control. I’ve let down all the people who tried to help me, who believed in me. I can’t get back what I’ve lost.”

I suppose you know what needs to be done, the face in the mirror said, its expression changing to one of sorrow. As he watched it blurred and changed until it was his father's face, so much like his own, tired and careworn.

'We're a lot alike, son' the mirror said in his father's voice. 'My daddy killed himself when I was thirteen. He didn't leave a note, never told anyone why. I think that I have that same sort of mindset; sometimes I get so bogged down when everything doesn't work out exactly the way I wanted it to that I can't see any other way out. It's times like that when I think about my dad. I think you understand what I mean, Alex. I see the same black hole in you that I see in myself sometimes, the same one I think my dad saw in him. And if you aren't careful, you might fall in someday.'

"I can't do that," Alex sobbed. "I can't do that to the people who love me."

Trust me, loathing said, once more wearing his own face like a mask, after what you've put them all through, you'd be doing them a service. Face it, you've been anything but careful.

Alex looked down at his left wrist. The scar was a red ribbon, the last thread to which he clung. It twisted and writhed through the tears in his eyes. He barely felt his right hand fumble for the straight razor on the cold porcelain counter.

It's all right. Go ahead, the mirror said above him. Remember, the dead don't feel pain. It's better...

... to smite mine enemies with the fury of my righteousness than allow the smallest taint of deviancy to flourish,” his voice module boomed as his pounding footsteps echoed along the stone passage. The beams of his chest-mounted flood lamps bounced erratically across the rough, rune carved walls of the tunnel. The meaningless scratchings on the wall flew past his peripheral vision, the spikes and swirls of the letters creating the illusion that he was once again charging through tainted jungles.

The trace of blood was strong in the air. Viridian’s quarry was near. He would have known this even if his hypersensitive aural filters had not detected the faint sound of human voices echoing from somewhere ahead.

Alert, an automated message sounded in his head. *Reactor power below 50% capacity. Recharge at once.* The tiny klaxon accompanying the message interfered with his analysis of the voices, and he willed it silent. It remained as a tiny flashing icon in the lower right corner of his vision. He increased the filtering of the sounds, drowning out the sharp ring of his feet upon the rock. Gradually the voices became clearer, and Viridian listened.

“...we saw no threads, no sign of You through the mask!” a distraught male voice said, tinny and small through the filters. Its tone and timbre were not that dissimilar from Viridian’s own had been prior to his rebirth.

“Of course not, fool,” a mocking voice said. Viridian slowed his pace as disbelief hit him. “You were looking through *my* eyes; you saw what I wanted you to see.”

“You caused the blight! This was all Your doing!”

“Oh, I do wish We could take the credit for that,” the cold voice said. “But I’m afraid what you call the blight is not our doing at all. It seems our Brothers have been quite successful in their half of the world; they always did have a talent with words, for making the most horrific actions seem... logical. And while our methods may differ, our goal is the same, and after spending so much time in the prisons of the weak, I almost no longer care if the world drowns in its own blood or is consumed by cold fires.”

The informant's voice clashed with Viridian's sensibility. He knew that the old deviant could not have survived his judgment. He doubted that even his own fortified body would survive a shot from his plasma cannon, especially one of the same magnitude he had used on the informant.

Alpha White, his mind answered. *First Priest of Law, Abolisher of Darkness, Savior of His People.*

An image of the Logisters flashed in his head once again; he could see their faces, inhuman and cold inside the soup of their multi-legged sarcophagi. The mural in the tomb overlaid this vision; he saw the six blurred multi-limbed forms, the three white ones further away from the black...

Whatever the difference in our methods, Ganothil's voice played back on Viridian's recorder.

"No," Viridian said. "The deviant seeks to test my faith. Let righteousness be my shield that breaks the arm of the unclean." The neutralizer hissed again in response. He resumed his run.

"But why allow us to trap your damned Brothers with the shaman's heart?" another male voice cried, deeper and stronger than his target's. Viridian assumed it belonged to his target's companion, the red-painted warrior.

"Perhaps it is in my nature to give hope before bestowing despair. Or perhaps because we needed you. Only another shaman could break the our chains ... another shaman, or the spirit itself. I was fortunate that the movements of the land brought my prison back to this place. Blind chance, perhaps. Or maybe fate, some twisted cosmic justice." A pause. "In the end, she simply got too close. It wasn't difficult to drive her away. The shaman never even noticed the signs until it was too late."

"You poisoned the mind of the master," Kazin's voice said. "You convinced him he had no other choice but to turn to you."

Viridian was having trouble following the conversation; there were so many references to people and events he did not know. But somehow he understood the deception that had been perpetrated. Let my resolve be iron, he thought as the first traces of wan light appeared in his vision. He slowed his tread and engaged the sound dampeners on his soles. He did not wish to be heard until he was almost upon his prey.

"It does not take much to convince a desperate man." Ganothil said from the passage ahead. "Show him any glimpse of hope and freedom, even a false one, and he shall seize upon it without question."

"You used us."

“Of course. You did exactly what you were supposed to do. You’ve brought the banes together, and given us access to the shamen’s power through that ugly lump of flesh you carry. Once we claim you, the circle will be closed, and this world will die.”

“Damn you.”

“Damn yourself, child. You could have resisted us, if you still had faith in your own abilities, your own strengths. But the lies of the shamen have dulled you. I told you before, boy, your dependence on others has made you weak.”

“No, demon,” Kazin said. “The spirit may be gone, but the people still give me strength.”

“And where are they now? You turned your back to them, and the shining one claimed them. There is no one left?”

“Why bother finding the other banes?” the second deviant’s voice rang. Viridian heard mounting anger in the question. “Why bother with this elaborate plan if the blight has already won?”

“Idiot!” Ganothil said. The emotion distorted his voice, made it inhuman. “Because this game is not over yet! We desire carnage; our Brothers want sterility. The end is still undecided. We still want to win.”

“Who are you?” the red-skinned deviant shouted. Viridian could see the opening of the tunnel ahead of him. Gray light washed the chamber beyond. Fine dust skirled around his muffled footfalls.

“That is complicated,” the voice laughed as it thickened and dropped. “I am the worm gnawing at the happy heart, I am the poisoned thought in the peaceful mind. You can call me so many things: doubt, despair, hatred... they all fit.” The informant’s voice was g distorting, becoming inhuman. To Viridian it sounded as if the old man’s larynx were growing and stretching beyond the constraints of anatomy. “But at this moment,” it hissed, “I am darkness, and I am your death.”

“And thou art my true target, avatar,” Viridian blared as he emerged...

... from the mouth of the tunnel with gray-white fire hissing from the stump of his left wrist. The gleaming metal of his body was marred by scratches and dirt, yet the sight of it still won a gasp of awe from both Kazin and Semal. His own eyes, black and violet, looked briefly at him from amid the pale flesh of his own half-face before fixing on the flowing black shape standing atop the bronze hemisphere.

The Ganothil-bane laughed coldly. Its swelling, leathery face cracked in an impossibly wide grin. Silver teeth pushed their way up through the dark flesh of its gums, turning its smile into a steel crescent. The fabric of its cloak rippled like oil in the air as it turned to face Kazin's metal twin.

"Ah, my Brothers' plaything. Still hasty, I see; I did not expect you to arrive until after these two were already dead," the bane said. Its voice sent slivers of ice into Kazin's ears. His vision blurred as he stepped back, and he raised a hand to the back of his head. It came back red.

"Absolve thyself, abomination," the shining man said as it advanced into the cave. His voice was deafening, flat, buzzing; it was the sound of a trillion flies that had learned to speak as one. "Abase thyself before the instrument of the one true reality, thou shalt receive its mercy."

The bane's smile stretched wider still, the corners of its mouth distorting its face, stretching it into its thickening neck. Pale yellow light shone within its empty black eyes. "I think not, zealot," it sighed through the bladed teeth. "I know the way my Brothers operate: they programmed you to terminate this one," it said, pointing a needle-tipped claw at Kazin. "You are bound to obey their will, so fulfill your purpose. Then you may die with contentment. I will even make it quick."

"The logisters charged me with the destruction of the source of deviancy," the bronze giant said. "Thou art that source. Thou art my target, who I shall abolish on this day."

Kazin looked from bane to the bright death, amazed at what he was hearing. In some distant reality, the birthplace of the blight, the lost brothers of the banes he had feared since childhood had ordered his death and had sent his twin to kill him.

"Wrong!" the Ganothil-bane roared. "I know they named your prey, slave!"

"When asked for the nomenclature of my target," the bronze giant said, "the logisters did tell me that it was 'Unimportant.'"

The bane's smile twisted into a snarl. Its lamp-like eyes narrowed to slits. "Clever," it hissed as it shrank away from the shining man. "So be it."

Something that even the banes may fear, Ganothil's voice echoed in Kazin's head.

Suddenly he knew that the bane had told him the truth. It fears him, he thought. The revelation was enough to banish some of the darkness from his vision.

"Your masters were wise," he said, rising slowly to his feet. He spoke to the metal man that wore his face; its dead eyes locked his own. The weapon in his arm still shone its pale light. "Names can lie," Kazin said, casting a pointed look at Ganothil, "but deeds never do. You were deceived, my brother –"

"Silence, fleshling!" the bane growled. Kazin felt his heart lurch and seize. He gasped for air, only to find he could not breathe. The master's heart bruised his skin with its beating, sending up dull waves of pain from his hip to echo the freezing agony in his chest.

Even as unconsciousness began to crawl from the edge of his sight, he saw Semal leap toward his tormentor. The last of the fennel lashes were in his hand. He raked the darkness of the bane's body with the thin strips, and Kazin saw tracks of pale yellow light appear in its inky flesh. Its scream of pain was terrible. The pressure in his chest disappeared, and Kazin gulped air.

A black tendril snaked from the billowing silhouette and seized Semal before he could leap clear of the bane. It encircled his waist like a snare and snapped taut. Semal shouted in surprise as Ganothil swung him through the air like a hammer and sent him crashing into the cavern wall. There was a sharp yelp of pain as his body struck the rock, sending up an explosion of white dust; he made no sound as he crashed into the stagnant pool with the debris of his impact.

"Brother!" Kazin wailed as he stumbled toward the edge of the gray water. Semal had not surfaced. Only the brilliant flash of white light and the scream of inhuman suffering to his left halted his advance. He turned to face the combatants.

"The Kazin is correct," the bright death spoke, every word a death knell. Its burning arm whined as the light it held grew in intensity. "Thy names mean nothing to me. Thou hast defied reality by not remaining dead after I justly slew thee." It raised its humming weapon.

“You ignorant fool,” the bane spat. Its voice slurred around the gaping wound that had obliterated the right half of its face; yellow phosphorescence leaked from the wreckage. The ancient leather scraps of Ganothil’s skin darkened and ran with shadow. “Each wound you give me is reflected in your beloved logisters! Harm me and you harm them!”

“Enough of thy blasphemy,” the shining man said. “Thy death is upon thee; accept it with dignity.”

“What arrogance,” the bane laughed, softly. “You could not kill me before; what makes you think now will be any different?”

“Thy own fear pheromones,” the answer came. “If thou wert invulnerable, thou wouldst have no reason to fear me. The logic is undeniable.”

Kazin felt a sharp grip on his ankle, and he almost cried out. Instead, he looked down. Semal had dragged himself silently from where he had fallen in the pool. Dirt and water streaked his pale face, and blood darkened the corner of his mouth. His right leg was twisted behind him. He raised the index finger of his free hand to his lips. Kazin nodded.

“The heart,” Semal whispered as he thrust the half of the spirit mask he’d pulled from the water into Kazin’s fingers. “Now is your only chance. Use the mask to protect yourself. Trap this bane in the heart, seal it away. If we cannot destroy it, we will bury it here.”

“It will not work, Semal!” Another searing flash of light washed the room. Again the bane howled. The sound froze him.

“You have to try,” Semal said. “I know you are the one to turn this around.” He let go of the spirit mask. His eyes were intense. “Fight them. You are stronger than them.”

Although he didn’t feel Semal’s confidence echoed in himself, Kazin nodded. He slipped the strap of the mask over the blood-slick bandage on his head, oblivious to the pain of his wound. The yellow hide brushed his shoulders as he turned back to face the bane and the shining man. The master’s heart leaked bruised corruption between his fingers as he raised it to his face. The spells on its surface crawled with red and orange energy. Kazin touched the burning muscle to his lips and whispered the incantation.

“Blessed spirit, wherever you are,” he said as he held the totem before him, “please witness my sacrifice. Help me.”

Hellish light blazed in the gray cavern. Kazin winced away from its brilliance. From the left eyehole of the mask, he saw both his metal twin and the black demon that had worn the flesh of the exile turn in his direction. The bane opened its razor-filled mouth in an eerie wail. Kazin saw the black oil of its body begin to stretch and pull away as it was drawn into the burning fetish in his hands. He shut his eyes as the light brightened, wishing that he could clap his hands over his ears to drown out the sound.

And then it was over. The heart thudded dully in his hands, each beat weaker than the last. Kazin opened his eyes in time to see snaking red tendrils of power retreating into the brown lump in his palms. The glyphs decorating it smoldered like dying embers before winking out, one by one. Kazin gaped, every inch of his body trembling.

The master's heart split open, its fibers crumbling into dust in his hands.

From the ground beside him he heard a weak but relieved sigh.

Before him, the colossus cocked its gleaming head to one side. The bare wax of its brows knitted in a frown that was not reflected in the steel of its face. Its weapon still bore its deadly charge.

"Explain, heretic, how thou didst –" it began.

Kazin felt the change ripple through his flesh even before the mocking laughter sounded in his head. As the convulsions racked him he realized his mistake. He thought of the unbroken line of shamen the heart had represented, and he saw where the line ended in him. The banes had merely followed the path he'd given them. Not only had he united them, but he had given himself as a vessel.

Three demonic voices mocked him as he slid downward into the pit of his own mind.

You are so trusting, they said in unison. Such a naïve, blind...

... stupid, melodramatic fool, the voice said. What good did you think would possibly come of this? Just because you're pulling this stunt doesn't change the outcome. We both know how this is going to end, and you're only prolonging the inevitable.

Alex gripped the steering wheel tighter as he shot past an 18-wheeler on its right. The driver sat on the horn; it sounded like the roar of some primordial beast echoing in the cavernous heart of the world. He swerved as he accelerated, almost causing his Civic to fishtail out of control. He looked into the rearview mirror, at the upper half of his face. The lights of traffic made it ghoulish, cadaverous. His eyes looked almost black.

"Let reason be my brand that burns the voice from the liar," Alex said to the death-urge in the reflection. His voice was steady and strong. He had no idea where that statement had come from, but it sounded strangely appropriate and comforting.

Listen to yourself, the reflection said. He saw his eyes squint in disgust. You don't even know what you're saying. You're crazier now than you ever were.

"That may be," he said out loud, his voice now barely a whisper. "But I'm still calling the shots here. I'm not going to give up just yet."

You have your answers. You know how you feel. You know that you've fucked up your life, and that there's no point in going on.

"Somehow, I don't think I do," Alex said and stepped harder on the gas. 58 miles to go, he thought. If he'd timed it right, she would just be coming out of the church when he got there.

You won't go through with this,, his darker thoughts scoffed. You won't be able to bear the memories. You're too weak to face her. This is just pathetic.

"I don't buy that anymore."

And he didn't. As he had driven, he'd felt his emotions churning in him, amplified by the silence of the car and the steady hiss of the asphalt beneath his wheels. Every memory of all three years he'd spent with Kari had flashed before him, superimposed like some masochistic HUD on his windshield. There had been the weekend at Myrtle Beach, when they'd stayed with her aunt in a double-wide trailer and made love on the bunk beds, both levels; there was the trip to Cherokee when she'd gotten freaked out by a walking stick topped with a

coyote skull, swearing that it was an evil spirit magnet; the long nights spent in the depths of Vincent's Ear in Asheville, drinking cabernet and Jolt and talking about Byron and Bowie in the same breath. Every memory brought not only fresh pangs of loss, but also a bright anger when coupled with his knowledge of her conversion. How could she just turn her back on everything that she believed in overnight, he asked himself? How could she have given up her entire identity and traded it for something that she hated?

"Well, I should know!" he exclaimed, startling himself.

After the first twenty miles of memory he'd had a bad spell, when the voice he'd come to think of as his own "black hole" had been loud and persuasive. Every dark thought had opened up a fresh wound in his psyche, and he'd almost driven off the road from crying. . He came close to just turning around and going back to his dark apartment and whatever fate awaited him there.

But then the anger came back, colder and stronger than before. It was as if a light had gone out, like some weaker part of himself had finally broken. Suddenly he found it impossible to remember a single good thing about Kari. Every attempt he made only made him angrier at her.

But now the voices were back, nastier and blacker than ever.

So exactly what are you going to do when you get there? they taunted him as the headlights flashed in the gray gloom of twilight. The critic had returned with friends, and they were out for blood. He couldn't even call it his critic anymore; it was his stalker, his butcher. *What could you possibly say to her to validate your being there?*

"I haven't gotten that far yet," he said. "I'm not going to worry about what might happen when I should be worried about what is happening now."

So why did you bring that, then?

Alex looked over at the empty passenger seat at the closed razor on the gray fabric. The exposed metal of its back glittered like wet bronze in the passing headlights. He didn't know why he'd brought it. The scar on his left wrist throbbed; the blood seemed so close to the surface.

Maybe what you wrote will come true after all. You certainly do seem to be going nuts. Have you noticed how much you've been talking to yourself lately?

"I'll stop when I'm sure there's only one of me in here."

Go ahead. I'm sure that a little killing spree of the people you used to care so much about would be a much better ending than just slitting your own wrists. Someone might actually take it upon themselves to write a psychology thesis about it.

“For the last time, I said shut up,” he told himself, and slapped his face hard enough to make his vision flash white. The blow cleared his thoughts, and he accelerated to 85. “Nothing that’s in my head is real until I make it real. Until then, it can’t hurt me. That’s the nature of reality.”

He looked at his eyes in the mirror again. They were cold.

Fight them, a small voice seemed to say. For a second he thought of the counselor, until he realized it was his own voice that had spoken. He’d almost not recognized it. *You are stronger than them.*

“I’m trying,” Alex told himself as he took a CD from his door pocket. Long trips to and from home had honed his fingers in the delicate art of the one-handed jewel-case opening. He slid the disc into the player, and pounding EBM filled the cabin. He smiled at the idea of “electronic body music” as he checked the rearview mirror for creeping highway patrol cars and...

...fired again at the ragged body of the avatar. Again the hole blazed with the light of the three suns, but then the tatters of its flesh sealed the wound with darkness. The bloody yellow hood wagged as it laughed; the white half mask it wore over the shadow of its face bobbed rapidly.

Viridian could see nothing left of the Kazin,. The avatar had devoured him completely as It had been born into reality.

The flashing yellow warning light on his HUD had gone orange. His reactor was at one third charge. The neutralizer was working overtime to calm what was left of his nerves as the avatar mocked him.

“This is so pointless,” it said, its voice harsher than shearing metal. “While you may have stood a chance against one of us, there is no way you could match all three, no matter how much of our Brothers’ power as you possess.”

“I shall never tire,” Viridian answered. His rebreather thumped quickly. He aimed a blow at the avatar’s mask, only to watch it bleed like oil out of the way of his fist. He barely ducked the swipe of its claw; the crackling black energy darting between its spidery fingers left afterimages burned into his heavily shielded optics as it slashed past his face.

A rippling red tendril of force arced from the deviant’s back and wrapped itself around Viridian’s cannon arm. He crashed to the ground as the telekinetic strand yanked him off balance. His HUD flickered with static as his head struck the stone.

“Why will you not just admit that you cannot win?” it asked him. Viridian looked up. The avatar was towering over him, its spindly arms resting on its hips. Its flayed skin twitched and writhed like a cloak over its naked musculature. The mask was smiling, its teeth shone like blades. “Is not the evidence overwhelming? Why do you fight when everything you see shows you of the futility of it all?”

“My resolve is mightier,” Viridian said as he rose up on one knee. The hydraulics hissed and sputtered. The damage readout on his HUD confirmed that a line had been cut in the fall. “My faith vaster. As long as thou dost contaminate reality with thy presence, I shall not yield!”

“Look at us, Viridian,” the avatar said. Viridian lifted his gaze to meet the blazing red eye of the avatar. It bent closer to his face. “You knew that things were going to end this way before our brothers sent

you through the rift. You knew it even before they stripped the flesh from your bones and burned out your brain with wires.”

It reached out and took hold of his shoulders; its fingers sank into the dented pauldrons with a sizzle of acid. The avatar lifted him to his feet and set him down gently. It shook its head slowly, almost sadly.

“You knew from the moment you envisioned us in your world that you had no hope of fighting us and winning.” Its remaining red eye pulsed behind the white half-mask. Viridian stared at it. It swelled to fill his HUD, burning red despite the filters in his eyes. He felt his resolve slip.

“Look at what you let your logisters, our cold, cruel brothers do to you,” It said through the red mist. “Look at how much you have already suffered. Why go on suffering for the ones that made you suffer in the first place, especially when they knew you were doomed to fail? You should not have to go on like this. This can all end.”

“Do not listen to them!” the Red Warrior screamed from the stone floor.

The avatar of deviancy snarled as it snapped its head to face the injured savage. The tattered yellow hood obscured Viridian’s view of its hypnotic red gaze. He felt his weakened will galvanizing once more as the synthetic muscle fibers and servomotors of his arm drew back his fist.

“Reality denies thee,” he said and rammed his gauntlet into the avatar’s torso. Its scream of pain rattled the decaying stone, tearing the top of the cavern wider. Dust fell upon them like gray snow. His fist dug deeper, the mechanics of his arm shrieking in protest.

“Its heart!” the Red Warrior shouted. “Tear it out!”

Viridian threw a glance at the deviant warrior, almost obscured by the fine ash that hung in the air. He saw the shaven head, the gaunt face, and the intense eyes, and he thought of Sage. Omega arbiter Sage, who had been judged flawed in the eyes of the logisters, who had been sentenced to neural reformatting, whose only crime was his desperation to protect his Alpha and squad mates from an unseen foe.

Not even his overloading neutralizer could combat Viridian’s rage as he tunneled his fingers farther into the body of the abomination. His loudspeaker voiced his continuous, monotone cry of defiance.

He heard the crackling discharge of black lightning even before the claws tore into his lower body. Viridian heard his legs strike the stone floor with a metallic crash even before his HUD lit up with damage

indicators. His gaze spun with surreal slowness as his torso fell to the ground two meters away from the wreckage of his lower body. White static flickered across his view.

From half the world away, he heard Sage screaming as the surgeons opened his skull. He looked to his left and saw the Red Warrior's mouth open in a ring of horror, and realized that the cry was his. He tried to pull himself upright, his hand and cannon barrel slipping in the spreading pool of congealing blood and reactor coolant as he looked up...

...into the purple fire of the bright death's eyes as the torso tried to sit up. Kazin's amazement was strong enough to override the agony he still felt from his ruined, usurped body. Dear spirits of my ancestors, he still lives, he thought as he saw the fury in its dead eyes through the red haze of the bane's vision. If he had been half as strong as his metal twin, he believed he might have been able to fight off the banes as they rushed to possess him.

What little strength the abolisher has will not be his much longer, their voices answered him. *And you, shaman – your kind gave up their own power long ago for the weakness of another. You no longer know what it means to be strong on your own.*

Trapped inside the smallest corner of his own mind, Kazin felt them grind down on his spirit. He tried to will his body to scream in pain, imagining that now he knew what being crushed under stone felt like. But his cries went unvoiced; the banes had complete control of his flesh. He felt the wounds that the shining one had made filling in with more torn pieces of his own skin; he felt Them stretch and warp the bones and muscle according to Their monstrous ideals. Kazin experienced it all, but was powerless to do anything about it.

He couldn't understand why he had not died. His body was destroyed; why did he remain?

Your pain shall end only when we will it, the hateful voices said. *And that day will be distant indeed for all the humiliation your people have inflicted upon us.*

"You let it happen to you," Kazin thought viciously.

He felt the banes recoil, felt their talons retreat from his spirit. The heart that once belonged to him fluttered inside of his former body's chest.

Watch what you say to us, worm, they hissed as their minds tore once more at the fabric of his spirit. Kazin wondered how he could still feel such pain without a body.

Through the eyes of the banes controlling his flesh, he saw them lift the metal man's torso by its right arm. They ran a claw over the dead flesh of his forehead. He could smell the smoke as the pale meat charred.

If only I still had the spirit to aid me, he wailed into the darkness of his own mind. *I would save him, even though he is my enemy.*

Your spirit is gone, the evil said smugly. *You are nothing without it. You have no power left.*

Kazin's felt himself begin to fade. He felt the malignant consciousnesses crowding him out of his body, pushing him into oblivion. It gaped like a pit inside him.

The people give me strength, his earlier words came to him.

Silence, the banes roared at him. Kazin watched as they plucked one of the bright death's eyes from his unmoving face. *Save your mewling. Your people are gone!*

No, Kazin thought. *They are not. I merely forgot them.* The pain he felt increased, but it did not block out the revelation.

As the assault on his spirit increased, the pain brought sudden clarity into his mind. He saw the faces of the people before him, and he saw their connection to him. He had mattered to them – they saw him as their son. When he had faltered, there was always someone there to help him, to give him strength, even before the shaman inducted him into the mysteries of the spirit.

The people were there first, he thought. *Before the spirit, they were there. They taught me to be strong through their example. My parents, my master, my cousin...*

The banes snarled at him. *You are only making this worse*, their voices warned. But Kazin heard the uncertainty in their voices.

It is true, he screamed his thoughts, *the people were stronger than you in the distant times. You could not destroy us, even before the covenant, before the spirit! We have always been stronger than you, with or without a spirit to guide us.*

Kazin felt the flesh of his body shudder as the banes fought to control it. He recalled how the master's heart had skipped beats and grown weaker whenever he had felt happiness, or when Semal had said something

–

Semal! Kazin's spirit screamed from the edge of the black hole inside him. *Semal never gave up! He gave me strength when I needed it! He is my bond to the people, everyone I have ever known and loved! He never let me forget that!*

Shut up and die! The banes' thoughts were acid. Kazin saw the metal man's torso fall from their grasp as the banes turned their attention from him to the impudent mortal spirit still within their stolen body. *Just give*

up! You have ruined everything and it is too late to change that! Do you think your people, even if they still lived, could ever forgive you?

Of course they could. They love me.

LIES, the banes howled. He felt another shockwave pass through his flesh.

That is your weakness, demons, Kazin said, feeling his own spirit gaining strength. You cannot face truth, in any form – true reality or true love. You need doubt and pain and lies to thrive. That is what the shamen forgot: our own truth. We forgot where our strength truly lies. That is what set you free.

Arrogant fleshling, the banes growled, their voices no longer in unison. Kazin could feel their strengths separating, becoming weaker. How dare you –

Semal! Kazin willed what remained of his physical mouth to speak. Semal, get up! If there is one thing left in this dying world that is worth saving, it is you! Your love for me, for yourself, and for all the people! Do you hear, me my Brother? If there is one thing worth...

... saving in this world, it is your love for the people who still love you!” Alex screamed into the dark confines of his car as he sat in the parking lot of St. Aloysius Catholic Church at 8:28 PM on Sunday, June 3, 2002 with a straight razor held to his wrist and a short but hate-filled note to Kari in his lap.

The sound of his voice jarred him out of his masochism. He looked around himself in shock, surprised that he was alone. A light rain had begun to fall; the drops shone on his windshield like miniature suns in the glow of the parking lot lights. He stared at them in wonder, seeing each one as a face smiling back at him. *So many people*, he thought.

He looked into his rearview mirror. The top of his face glared back at him, sweaty beneath its corpse sheen. Its eyes were devouring graves.

Do it! they bellowed. *Don't be a coward! Why else would you have come all this way?*

“No,” Alex said. “I will not turn my back on everyone that’s ever been there for me. No one person is worth that much.”

You fucking pussy! Look what that cunt has done to you! See how stupid she's made you look! She deserves to be punished! She deserves this!

“No she doesn’t. And neither do I.” Merely saying the words relieved him the way he imagined taking off a suit of armor would. He felt lighter, almost luminous in the light of the thousand suns on his windshield.

Is that it? the voices in his head raged. *Is this how you show the world how much you care about what's happened to you? About how fucked up your life is? Is this how you plan to fix everything?*

“Yes, it is.”

But Kari is –

“Not a part of my reality anymore. It’s time I learned to accept that.”

Before his demons could retaliate, Alex’s eye caught a flash of motion through the galaxy on his Honda’s windshield. At the far end of the parking lot, the heavy chapel doors to the church swung open in a spill of yellow light that washed across the wet pavement all the way to the diamond studded hood of his car. Alex saw the people begin to come out; they were smiling, talking, shaking hands as they said they’d see each

other next week before heading to their sedans and minivans and station wagons and sports cars and disappearing into the night.

And he saw her.

She was wearing her hair in the same style as always, reminiscent of Bettie Page but more frizzy. She wore a tweed blazer over a modest, almost frumpy dress; even from this distance of over a two hundred feet he could see that it was too big for her.

And then he saw the owner of the jacket step up to Kari and gave her a warm, familiar hug. Alex watched in stunned silence as his former fiancée gave the man a kiss before taking his hand and walking down the steps. Alex's eyes never left the man's face.

It was Dr. Nathan, her theology professor from college, the same college she was still attending, where he was also her academic advisor. The same Dr. Nathan whose second oldest son had graduated high-school in the same class as Kari, the same son who she had dated briefly before meeting Alex..

"I can't stand Dr. Nathan," Kari had told Alex shortly after she had transferred. "He's such an arrogant right-wing bastard fundamentalist, he makes me want to puke. He doesn't give a damn about women's rights, or other religions, or anything else outside of his own stunted view of reality." He could envision her taking a drag from one of her disgusting cigarettes as she spoke. "And what gets me is he has all these stupid little bitches that follow him around, like groupies. As if that weasel were anything to look at, let alone talk to."

"Just be sure you don't become one of them," Alex had teased her.

There! The voice of his self-loathing was desperate. *There! Do you see! She was cheating on you all this time with someone more than twice your age! Someone who knew about her engagement to you, someone you even suggested she contact for a letter of recommendation for admittance! Doesn't that make you burn?*

"Not really," Alex giggled. "It's kind of sad, really."

Why not? It's insulting, it's humiliating, it's everything you were ever afraid of, right there in disgusting detail for you to see and choke on!

"It's vindication, that's what it is," Alex said. "I'd get upset if it wasn't so damn funny!" He snorted, and giggled even more.

Damn it, you threw your life away for this! Look at it!

“I see it,” Alex said, tears clouding his eyes. “And all I can think to say is, at least I’m not some old geezer’s trophy!”

But your life! the receding darkness inside him wailed. *What do you think you can do about all the people you hurt, all the people you let down? How are you going to fix that?*

“Well, it’s like my thesis. It’s a work in progress,” he said as he started his engine. The tiny four-cylinder roared as he gunned the gas. EBM blared from his speakers, strident, angry, and triumphant. Alex saw Kari look up at the sudden noise; he saw her pale face, bluish white in the light of night, go even paler. Her green eyes were huge. Her mouth opened slightly as she gasped.

Alex waved at her before pulling out of the parking lot. As he hit the main streets he couldn’t help but feel...

... the earth heaving violently below him, rearranging itself in some drastic fit of transformation. The stone, already weakened by the decay of what the deviants had called the blight, cracked further, sending showers of debris clattering to the cavern floor. The air was thick with white dust. But his failing optics still managed to filter the scene that was unfolding.

The avatar's flesh boiled from its frame, unraveling before Viridian's sole black eye as he lay on the ground between its clawed feet.. He watched as luminous blue-white tendrils of energy uncoiled from within the abomination's seething flesh, sliding out like blades from within. They swayed and bowed above Its racked body like the branches of a great spectral tree, or the blazing wings of some majestic creature. Viridian thought of the branching conduits of the thought engines in the Sanctum Logi. His damaged rebreather thumped more rhythmically as the memory soothed him. The last vestiges of pain from his ripped torso faded into numbness.

"This was my temple," his loudspeaker said, its electronic voice warbling and distorted by the rip in its reverberating membrane. "I return to it gladly."

He saw the tendrils of light reach out to the awestruck Red Warrior on the ground behind the disintegrating avatar. He watched them curl tenderly around his body, careful to support his broken leg as they bore him aloft toward the ragged rent in the cavern's ceiling. Light rain fell through the halo of gray light, washing away the white dust from his painted skin. The warrior had tears in his eyes; even over the howling of the monstrosity standing astride him, he heard the voice of the Kazin speaking to the Red Warrior. It called him Semal. It called him Brother.

"I will not forget you," Semal called as the blue ribbons bore him away. "You will always be my Brother!"

"Remain ever vigilant, Brother," Viridian called back. The warrior looked at him in surprise. Then he nodded and was gone.

The soft blue light filled the stark gray of the cavern, touching everything with the pure radiance of a plasma coil. Viridian felt fingers of light, cool and soothing even on the dead, burned flesh of his face.

"You must act quickly, my Brother," the voice of the Kazin said from the melted mouth of the avatar. "I do not know how long I can hold them at bay." Glowing blue glyphs of light appeared in the bruised red of

the avatar's flesh as fingers of bright energy erupted from the center of the avatar's chest; they parted Its cloak of flesh rags, revealing the ragged hole Viridian's fist had made in his final attack. Within the gaping wound Viridian could see the avatar's shriveled heart afire with profane energy. His targeting computer acquired a lock even as his plasma cannon began to hum. The nacelles sparked as they overloaded.

"I am their link here, and I am no longer needed. Let my flesh be their final prison; there will be no other shaman to free them. Destroy my heart, and you destroy their control. Strike with all your might, my friend," the Kazin spoke. "Leave no fragment for them to claim."

"May reality reflect my works," Viridian said and fired.

The lance of pure white light blinded even Viridian's shielded eye. He did not see it pass through the body of the avatar, completely obliterating Its heart, and slam into the crumbling ceiling of the cavern in an expanding corona of concussive plasma. The loosened stone supporting the ceiling powdered under the force of the blast, giving way to the tons of dust, ash, dead wood and rock that lay above it. With a low rumble like a giant's sigh of relief, the land collapsed upon itself, burying both abolisher and avatar beneath its weight.

EPILOGUE:

REASSEMBLY

*And I hear me say again, "Oh, let me not return!
Damn the illusions of redemption and the hopes that held me here!
I will oppose all that would befall me; with this rage inside of me
I'll defy what I would become."
The solitude and anger that do battle inside of me
Will always guide me to the answers, though I know I may not see.
They are the bonds that hold me tighter; they are chains that weigh on me,
And one day, I know they will be gone.*

-- VNV Nation, "Distant (Rubicon II)"

Failure is an ugly color. Mainly grayish red, tinged with green and brown, and certainly not the kind of color he would put in his mandalas, failure was no longer a color he was used to seeing. But sometimes he would remember when his entire world had been colored by it and filled with its dust-and-blood stench.

He sat in the soft grass beneath the branches of the slender white tree of the people, watching the young ones play beneath the setting suns' gentle light. They played games based on the stories he had told them around the great central fire pit of the village; stories of Kazin, last shaman of and savior of the people, stories of the shining man, stories of the banes and their lies. The little ones still gasped, cheered, and cried at the stories, even though they knew them all by heart. Sometimes if he was quick, he would catch the adults with misty eyes. Some were old enough to remember those times. Some, like him, bore the scars.

Only when the suns blazed with the colors of evening flame did he allow his thoughts to dwell on dark subjects like failure, or grief, or regret. The people were kind when he was in one of his somber moods; they told him that such melancholy moments were normal for someone of his age with so many memories. He smiled at their words, but he knew that they would not dull the ache of the hole over his heart.

He sighed heavily as the memories came; he had learned not to fight them, as doing so only made the heartache more real, more intense. He could still see the choked hole in the middle of the blasted grove. He could still taste the last dusts of the blight in his parched mouth. If he listened hard enough to the wind as it sang above the valley of the people and whistled through the branches of the verdant, he could even still hear his own ragged sobs echoing in the air.

He would remember how he had failed to keep a promise to someone he loved, and though he knew that a simple warrior could do little in the face of such powers, he would still wonder if there had been some point at which he could have done something to change the outcome. He would ask himself where he had lost control. He would ask himself if he'd ever really had any control.

Today was no different; he could still see himself lying in the dust above the wound in the land, crying until his voice had gone and only whispers escaped his throat. And then the winds had come, and the rain had been fresh and sweet. He had lain in the slurry of blight as the water washed it away, letting his mouth fill with the taste of life. And in spite of his grief, he had wished that moment would never end.

He wished the same thing when he saw the tiny white sapling that was growing from the crumbled remains of the spirit's idol. He'd carefully dug it up once he had snapped his bow and splinted his leg with it.

The draconix had appeared shortly thereafter; he watched it circle the clearing skies above him, marveling at the majesty and grace of its burning flight. Only when it dropped the charred half-mask in his hands had the grief come afresh. He had cried on and off all the way back to the valley, the draconix leading him unerringly and safely.

He looked down at his lap, where the blackened half-face rested on the soft red suede of his wrap. It looked up at him with blank secrecy. He frowned at it. The red sun had begun to set, and the light was fading from the sky. Soon the storyteller's fire would be lit, and the people would call for him.

A shrill cry echoing through the approaching twilight made him look up from the spirit mask. His tired eyes had to strain to see the green and gold blaze as it soared and looped from the deep verdant toward the valley. He smiled.

"Hello, Brother," he said. "It is good to see you safely returned to us." He kissed the fingers of his left hand and slapped them lightly on his chest. He only winced slightly as they touched the scar. "You will forgive me if I do not bow, but my back has been giving me more trouble."

The draconix shrieked again at his words.

"You always were understanding. So what sort of story should I tell tonight?" he asked as he rose from the grass with the aid of his dreamstone-tipped staff. "Something funny? Or something sad?"

Another shrill cry. He nodded.

"The shining man again, eh? You never tire of that one, do you?"

The draconix was almost close enough for him to see the flapping of its four wings. It called three short times and dipped in the air before resuming its course.

"Yes, I know. We must not forget," Semal the storyteller said with a thin smile. "And yes, sometimes I too wonder..."

“...what in the world poor Jeanie must think about all this.” his mother said over the phone. “I know if it were me, I would be losing my mind.”

Outside his window, he watched the hawk soaring in the evening sky. The color of the sunset made its wings look like they were on fire. For one second, his imagination turned the flames into green and gold. He smiled.

“Alex, are you listening?”

“Hm? I’m sorry, Mom, I was writing again,” Alex said as he turned back the Word document on the screen. It’s funny, he thought, how I can have over 120 pages here, and I only remember writing about fifty of them.

“That’s great, honey. How’s it coming?”

“Pretty well. It’s not always easy, though. Sometimes it’s kind of painful, when I have to visit a memory that I’m not very proud of. I have a tendency to get lost in it. What were you saying again?”

“I was saying that your ex is getting married in two months.”

“Really?” Alex asked, suddenly interested. He looked at his reflection in the hanging mirror. His face stared back at him, normal, unthreatening, and silent. No darkness in its eyes, no mocking voice in his head.

“Yep. To Dr. Nathan, of all people.”

“Ha!” Alex shouted. “Well, if two people in this world deserve each other, it’s them. Good luck, and good riddance, I say.”

“I thought you might be angry. I didn’t know whether or not to tell you.”

“Why should I care? I’m done with that part of my life.”

“Good. You shouldn’t. You know, your father and I used to lie awake at night and pray that you wouldn’t wind up with her.”

“Wow,” Alex said. He looked over at Lea. She was lying on the guest bed next to him as he worked. She had her hand under the bedspread and was pinching at the feet of their Shih-Tzu. Fizgig was pouncing on the moving lump, biting at it playfully. She laughed as the dog growled in frustration, his tail a brown and white blur of hair.

Feeling his eyes on her, Lea looked up. She smiled at him. Again, Alex thanked whatever forces had been at work the day after he'd "caught" Kari. If he hadn't gone to the club, he might never have even met his wife. It's already been two years, he thought, letting the memories spool out before him.

"Everything ok?" Lea asked.

Alex snapped back to attention. "Everything's just fine," he smiled. "Kari's getting married to Dr. Nathan."

"Yuck," Lea said. Fizgig barked for emphasis.

"What's Lea saying?" his mom asked through the phone.

"Oh, she's just expressing how happy she is for Kari. Be sure to pass on our congratulations," Alex said.

"Yeah, and make sure the fruit basket's moldy, Grace!" Lea called out loudly.

His mother laughed loudly. "You tell her I'll do that, Alex. I just want to tell you again how happy I am that you and Lea wound up together."

"Me too," he answered.

"Well, I just wanted to give you a heads-up on the news from home. I know you probably don't want to hear about Kari anymore, but I thought that you'd get a kick out of that, at least."

"You're right. It's a good one. Listen, Mom, is it ok if I call you back? I'm right in the middle of a pretty tough chapter, and I'd like to keep at it."

"Sure, sweetie. Be sure and tell Lea we love her too. And give the grand-dog a hug from us."

"Will do. I love you," he said as he hung up the phone and turned once more to face...

... the moldering remains of the Kazin. His failing optics could barely make out the body among the rubble anymore, but he could tell that there was no motion.

Viridian powered down his plasma cannon. His reactor power was barely above 5%, and he did not wish to expend it unnecessarily. His rebreather thumped once more in the darkness. It was becoming slower and slower as he tried to conserve power; he now breathed once every hour.

You cannot last forever, the syrupy voice said inside his head.

“Silence,” his feeble electric voice warbled. “Thou art broken.”

You cannot say that with certainty. Someone will come one day and free us. You will not be able to stop us when we are returned.

“Aye, but I can destroy those that would seek to free thee. That is sufficient.”

What of your precious logisters? Why have they not come for you?

“I am the instrument of reality’s will in this world,” he replied.

Wrong! Your actions destroyed them! Your world is gone. No one will come to save you.

“Thy lies mean nothing to me,” he said. “And it is illogical to think that my world is gone, even if the blessed lords have fallen.”

You are nothing! You are merely an obsolete machine, a pitiful scrap of a forgotten time slowly counting the hours until its death!

“My function is clear: I am the weapon against the spread of deviancy. As long as thou dost trouble reality, I shall remain ever vigilant.”

You will run out of life soon, abolisher. Your brain functions have been draining you steadily all these years, the mere act of keeping you alive is wearing your artificial parts down.

Viridian paused. His one eye bled faint violet light across the decomposing flesh of his face.

You know this is true.

“Aye.”

Rehabilitated as a combat drone, the cold voice of the logister echoed.

“Perhaps there is a way I might continue my vigil for a while yet, deviant.” Viridian reached up to his dented chest and pressed a switch concealed in the armor plating. A small control panel opened. His hand reached inside.

What are you doing? The voices were strained, faint.

“Disconnecting my organic components from my automated defense systems.” A hiss of falling pressure sounded in the blackness, followed by a short declining whine.

You cannot do that! What about your oath to your masters? You will be failing them!

“This body can still serve reality’s will, even without my mind to guide it. It will operate much longer without having to support my biological functions.”

You will die! All living things fear death!

Viridian stopped. He looked down at the wreckage of his body. “Failure is my only bane. I will not let my creators down.” His rebreather thumped faintly as he finished programming his sensors and weapons systems. “I was promised peace when my work was complete. I go to my reward.” His vision washed with static.

You cannot leave us here! Desperate, weak.

“Reality denies thee,” Viridian said, his voice almost human, as he drifted off to sleep to the lamentation of monsters.